Inseparable

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by UnderAnon

Summary

The ultimate save-Azzy fic from FFN gets a place on AO3! Donald Trump is the President and Papyrus is a lawyer in this post-Pacifist fic. Yes, this is the Undertale fanfic that memed President Trump into existence. You're welcome, kids.
"Don't you have anything better to do?"

"What? Asriel, I came down here to save you. I thought I did SAVE you, way back there! I understand why I can't, and if you don't want your parents to see you turn into Flowey again, I understand, but I'm not going to walk away and let you die all by yourself! These are your final moments as not-an-evil-flower! No, I don't have anything better to do!"

Asriel chuckled, softly. "Okay, then. But when I do turn back... promise to just walk away, all right?"

"I don't want..."

"Promise me!"

"Fine. I promise that when you turn into Flowey again... I'll just walk away."

"Okay. I'll try to let you know... when it starts."

For a brief moment, Frisk considered breaking their soul in half and offering the other half to Asriel. No, that wouldn't work, not in this universe. Maybe if... but that would just be... they couldn't ask Asgore and Toriel to create another SOUL, because that would be a new child entirely... They slumped down, defeated and nearly out of DETERMINATION. It didn't help that they'd only been taking very short, healing catnaps for the past several hours. Dodging a marathon of attacks was exhausting. They could at least rest their eyes for a little while, because they didn't need to see Asriel to be with him, right? Asriel looked pretty tired, too, so it'd be all right, they could just lie down together with their eyes closed. They'd still be alert, they were still listening, right? That was enough, they didn't need to...

"HEY, DID YOU TWO FALL ASLEEP ON A DATE?"

Frisk awoke with a jolt and a groan. How long had they been asleep? They first turned to Asriel, who was also just waking up, to make sure he hadn't transformed into an evil flower possessed by a transdimensional demon, then turned to the innocently grinning skeleton.

"Papyrus, what are you doing all the way out here?" Frisk asked.

"WELL MY PHONE RAN OUT OF BATTERIES BUT THE LAB WAS CLOSED, SO I'M LOOKING FOR A CHARGER! HAVE YOU SEEN ONE?"

"No..." One-word answers were the only way that Frisk knew to get Papyrus to stop talking. They weren't about to discuss how many chargers Papyrus must have skipped on the way over here.

"Please, just.. go away..." Asriel groaned.

"WOW! HEY, YOU LOOK JUST LIKE ASGORE AND HIS CLONE! WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"It's Asriel, just get out of..."

"REALLY? HEY, THAT WAS THE NAME OF ASGORE'S SON! HAVE YOU EVER MET HIM?" He reached for his phone, but of course it was still out of batteries. "HEY FRISK DOES
YOUR PHONE DO PICTURES? YOU SHOULD TOTALLY SEND ASGORE A PICTURE OF CLONE KID HERE! HEY... ARE YOU ASGORE'S CLONE'S SON?"

For the first time in a very long while, Asriel innocently laughed, long and loud, until he choked up with tears. He almost said that his mom was not, in fact, his dad's clone, but that might have led to Papyrus asking how he knew who he was talking about, which would have led to a bad time. "Papyrus, that must have been someone else, my dad doesn't have" -BRRRING-

"Hey, uh..." Frisk started, looking at the caller ID with dread. They couldn't call her "Mom" in front of Asriel, and they didn't want to say "Toriel"...

"My child, are you unwell? It has been some time, is anything wrong?"

"HEY NOT ASGORE'S CLONE! NOT YOUR SON IS HERE!" Both Frisk and Asriel gave him looks full of blame. "I DON'T THINK I WAS SUPPOSED TO TELL YOU THAT?"

"Oh, Frisk, are you saying you're a girl? I was never really clear..." A brief moment of silence.

"WELL FRISK DEFINITELY DOESN'T LOOK LIKE YOU. NOT LIKE THIS BOY SITTING IN THE FLOWER PATCH DOES. AND NOW STANDING IN THE FLOWER PATCH. AND CLENCHING HIS FISTS. WITH AN ACCUSING LOOK OF PURE RAGE IN HIS EYES. I AM LEAVING NOW. QUICKLY." He left puffs of dust in his wake.

"Frisk... is Asriel with you?" Toriel asked, very, very quietly.

Completely out of options, Frisk pointed the phone towards Asriel. "Don't come here, Mom! Just stay away!" Frisk just shook their head. The odds of Toriel actually doing that were nil, and she'd already hung up instead of staying on the line. Using a phone and walking at the same time was not a skill she had mastered.

Asriel sat back down onto the flowers. He didn't want her to see Flowey, not after purging everyone's memories, but the last thing he wanted in the world was to have her meet her long-lost son again right before his form dissolved in her arms, leaving only a soulless husk. "Come on! Just finish it already! Why is this taking so long?"

"Asriel... she's your mom. Even though I called her that. Make the most of it."

"You called her your mom? Why?"

"Well, she keeps calling me 'my child', so I figured, if she was going to... if it weren't for the dreams telling me to go, I would have stayed with her in the ruins forever. Better than my real parents."

"Heh. Just like Chara and the others. Nobody with a happy family ever climbs Mt. Ebbot."

"I was hoping to have one here, but Mahh.. Toriel isn't getting back together with Asgore. And.. I guess, I almost had a brother, but..."

"Is that why you came down here to save me?"

"I wanted to save everyone. But.. yeah, it'd have been nice to have a brother."

Asriel smiled in spite of himself. "What do siblings even do? I mean, I was an only child, and Chara wasn't really..."
"I don't know, either. Play games? Talk? Ruffle each other's hair?" Asriel playfully ruffled Frisk's dark hair. "Now you're just giving me reasons to miss you."

"Oh. Sorry."

"No, it's okay.. oh, hey, someone's coming." Heavy, hooved footfalls rounding the corner in an outright gallop, heading straight at Asriel at maximum speed. Frisk was used to dodging Toriel, so jumped out of the way; Asriel was swept up like a bird in a hurricane.

"Mom, don't!" She hugged him anyway, lifting him off the ground in a deep embrace. "No, you have to go before I turn back into Flowey, and of course you don't remember who that is because I wiped everyone's memories right before I stopped being God so please just go away!" She kept right on hugging.

"...Son?" Oh no. Not him. Not Dad. No, no, Mom was bad enough, but this... "Is that really you?"

"Yes it's really me, but you can't stay here-" But Asgore wasn't possibly going to listen and Asriel was hugged by both his parents at once, hopeless trying to explain what had happened to him and why they had to leave.

Sans wasn't too far behind. "hey, frisk. howzabout we give 'em some time, eh? as long as they got." Frisk nodded and started walking away with the skeleton. Now that he wasn't abandoned and alone, they weren't too keen on watching Asriel transform, either. "sides, i gotta ask you somethin'. why ain't he-" Sans was interrupted by a scream behind him, and Frisk immediately ran back before they realized what they were doing.

"Frisk, you promised to walk away! I'm going to.. no.. it felt like I was, and now it feels like I'm not! What's wrong with me? Why doesn't this just end?!"

"wait a minnit. i think i get it. you ain't got no SOUL of your own, asriel. and of all the SOULs in this room, whose do you think is enough to keep you from turnin?"

Silence. All eyes in the room slowly went to Frisk.

"For how long, Sans?" Asriel asked before his parents could.

"mebbe a day. mebbe a week. hey frisk, you feel anything doin' this?"

"No, I don't feel any different."

"mebbe forever."
The Royal Family

Dead, complete silence. Frisk wasn't the type to speak first and kept their small mouth shut. Asriel looked like he was going to say something, opened his mouth, then looked like he had swallowed a bug. Loosing himself from his shocked parents, he slowly walked over to Frisk.

Asgore broke the ice. "Why don't we talk about this over a nice cup of tea?" Everyone agreed at once. Asriel offered his hand to Frisk, and Frisk hesitantly took it, Asriel tightly clenching his hand all the way through the empty Ruins and Snowdin, on the ferry, and through the hotel and the elevators that led the way to the palace. Nearly everyone had already left to explore the human world, and this made the place scarier than the first time Frisk had gone through it, even with everyone trying to kill them.

Asgore unfolded a large table on the garden and set out five places, he and his ex-wife kneeling at opposite sides of the table and Sans sitting opposite Asriel, who was sitting very, very close to Frisk. "Let's see, I've got goldenflower tea... no, bad choice? Okay, Earl Grey it is then. I'd like to meet the earl who makes it." Asgore went to put on the kettle.

"I don't think you need to be sitting this close," Frisk whispered to Asriel.

"Oh. Sorry." Asriel scooted over a bit. "I'm just... really scared. I'd given up, and now, I've... un-given up." His face scrunched up, as if he wasn't sure whether to continue. "Chara would have loved this," he said quietly. "There's nothing they liked more than being in control." He didn't keep going with that, and he didn't need to. Chara would have bullied him, made him beg, made him chase them, made him do anything Chara said, just to stay alive. Frisk found the concept utterly repulsive.

"Okay," Asgore began, pouring tea. We have..." He choked up. "We have our son back... but.."

"But, if your son gets too far away from Frisk, he turns back into a flower demon who only exists to hurt people," Asriel said. "You don't remember what I did... because I wanted everyone to forget."

"i don't forget. anything."

"Yeah. I know."

"Azzy." Mom called me Azzy in front of everybody, I'd like to be a flower again please "It doesn't matter what you did. What matters is that you're here. And no matter what happens, I'll always love you. Frisk, I know this is a burden, but can you stay with him? At least for a little while?"

Frisk would normally have just answered 'yes' but the question was too absurd. "A little while?" Frisk sputtered, offended and almost spilling their tea. They drank the rest of it in one gulp (it tasted awful and was barely warm), while Toriel and Asgore looked on in desperation, wondering what they were going to say next. "A little while?! I'm not going to let him turn back into that thing, ever! Asri.. Azzy." Oh no, not them too! "We'll find a way to fix this. Or this is just our future. I determined that I was going to save everyone and that's what I'm going to do. I don't give up on friends." Their voice went very low, just loud enough for everyone at the table to hear them. "And I really don't give up on brothers." Asriel drank his tea, using the teacup to hide his emotions.

"not sure you've quite thought it out, kid. don't matter if you're takin' a shower, or doing that weird human thing you do with food when you're done with it, or somethin' that you're too young for
right now, you two are going to have to be almost like siamese twins, no matter how bad things get. inseparable."

"TITLE DROP!" Where did he come from?

"yeah, i think i know some things about annoying brothers."

"Sans. I just spent hours upon hours being attacked and not hitting back." Frisk didn't mention how easy they found dodging most of them, nor how easy it was to convince the monsters to quit or leave. Asgore was the only one in the Underground who had posed a sliver of real challenge to them, and they doubted Sans' claims of strength. "You know me. I don't quit. That's not who I am. Besides, if things get tough, he's... we've still got his Mom and Dad." Inspiration struck. "Both of them. Right?"

"Dear..."

"Don't call me that. I'll stay with you, you horrible man. But for the children. Not for you. And your tea is very old." Oh. Frisk didn't know that tea wasn't supposed to taste bad. "My children, being stuck with someone you dislike is a horrible thing. I hope neither of you does anything... anything else, I suppose... to cause it." Asgore was slumped at his seat in shame. "Come on... honey. Let's all go see the sun together." Together, as a family, they walked past what used to be the barrier and out into the sunshine.
Stumped

They had been the last ones out, and they squinted their eyes at the vista, a wondrous view of trees and noonday sunlight. All the other monsters were having conversations with humans, some of whom were wearing intimidating-looking suits and dark glasses having an animated conversation with Undyne, others of whom were wearing white lab coats and striking up a friendly conversation with Alphys. There was a lot of government presence, but no weapons were drawn. Asgore, as a king, noticed it immediately: someone important had handed down an order not to hurt them. *The humans have forgiven us?*

"That's them, that's the royal family!" Ice Cap yelled. *Royal family? I'm royalty now? 'Highness Frisk.'* Not something they looked forward to. They turned to Asriel, who was just as embarrassed as they were, and the two of them started chuckling.

One of the men in dark glasses approached them, with consummate professionalism hiding his utter disbelief. "Am I speaking with King Asgore?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Please come this way, sir. Our nation's leader has requested an audience with you personally. Your family may join you." The man led them down the side of the mountain to a large helicopter in a clearing. On its side was emblazoned the seal of the President of the United States.

"Inside here?" Asgore said, ducking his head to enter.

"He is at home, sir. We'll be in Washington within the hour."

"Washington? Is that.. a city?" Asgore asked, as his family filed in behind him. He should have asked for his Royal Guard to be present, he realized as the helicopter took off, but he doubted Undyne could help him against humans, especially humans who had built powerful, loud flying machines like this. For not the first time in his life, he felt fear, for himself and for his people. Frying pans and fires...

"Yes, our nation's capital."

"Why did the King move from London?"

"The **king**- Sir, the United States of America revolted against the British throne more than two centuries ago to form a democratic republic." Asgore had been sent underground many decades before the Founding Fathers were ever born, and Frisk regarded Asriel with a bit of horror. How old was their brother, really? Not even counting the endless reverts and resets? How long had Chara's malevolence been festering down there, in subjective time? Millennia? And, Frisk slowly realized, if anything ever managed to permanently happen to them, they'd be dead and Asriel would be Flowey **much, much longer than that.**

"Wait, a democracy? You elected your leader like.. a mayor? How could you possibly grow doing that? Wouldn't you fall apart?" Asgore asked.

"Sir? Look out the window," the agent said, with no small amount of American pride.

Asgore did, as did the rest of them. Asriel turned from the window in fear- they were **so high up!**- and Frisk comforted him while their parents looked on with wonderment. The humans had become
so numerous, so great! There, that was a city- and that was another one! There, farmland, great heaping swaths of it! The monsters couldn't even recognize the industry they saw. "C'mon honey. Take a look." Asriel hesitantly looked out the window, trying not to be scared. This was the outside, a place he'd been only once and had never seen in such splendor. This was the whole world in front of him! Freedom to roam, to explore! Well, except for one small thing.

Farmland and forests gave way to endless urbanity, and in the center was a great park with a large obelisk that the monsters took for a magical sigil. The copter landed on the White House lawn, and being on the grounds of the historic building filled Frisk with DETERMINATION.

They stepped out. "Mom! Dad! Do you hear it all!!", Asriel yelled. The city! The cars, the conversations, the people! Asriel's huge ears weren't just for show, and Toriel and Asgore heard so much, too. So much activity, so many humans, so many vacationers out there. And every single one of them, without exception, able to earn Execution Points.

"This way, please." Hurried inside, past a pair of confused-looking men in suits, down the hall, and finally to a large, elliptical room where someone on a swivel chair sat with his back to the group.

"Thank you, Agent Jenkins. Leave the room."

"Sir, you said they shouldn't be screened at all, but there might be some security-"

"I said, leave the room. I don't care how tough they look, they can't hurt me," he said without even turning around. Nonplussed, the agent closed the door behind him on his way out.

"Strange," Asriel said. "I can't hear the city anymore."

The figure in the chair behind him slowly, slowly turned around. A large man with characteristic blond hair faced them, a small grin creeping up on his face as he sized them up. He seemed more concerned about Frisk than the adults.

"Oh, yeah. I got this room soundproofed early on. Not gonna let what happened to Bill happen to me, eh?" Two things on the desk caught Frisk's eye: A large, red button and a very old book labeled 'Precautions to Take if the Monsters Return'. "Like this book? It's been handed down since colonial times. It's funny, because I didn't even know the Appalachians had a Mt. Ebbot, but it all happened just as the book said it might." He looked at the group. "Asgore, and Toriel, isn't it? You two Boss Monsters are older than this country?"

"Yes. Do humans still hate us up here?" Toriel asked.

"Hate you? Naawww. I LOVE ya. But see... there's a problem. We can't have monsters running loose in this country, or we don't have a country anymore. And what are you still using for money? Gold coins? Yeah, we're gonna have to build a new wall, one with a great big door, one that lets us dig up whatever minerals you've got down there. And you're going to pay for it."

"What?! Why would we pay for that?!" Asgore shouted.

"Why? Because I'm The Donald, and I'm the one with the military, that's why. And that's funny, because... this book really talks a lot about how weak and slow monsters really are. How just one guy with determination can win against all of ya and get some lifelong benefits if he kills ya personally." Suddenly, the orders not to hurt any monsters made a lot more sense... "At the same time, you're dangerous if you get someone's soul, like.. that kid's there. So... you're all great guys. But..." The Donald began, rising from his chair as the NXT song stomped from unseen speakers, "YOU HAVE TO GO BACK." Asgore pulled out his spear and lunged at The Donald's chest, but
the large man grabbed it with one hand and easily flung it and its bearer against the wall, laughing at how easy it was.

"Frisk! Watch out! He's like Chara!" Asriel warned. Jumping off the Oval Office desk, The Donald frogsplashed onto the space where Frisk was a split second ago.

Frisk considered their actions. Taunting might work... "Hey Donald! The Battle of the Billionaires was the worst excuse for a wrestling show I ever watched!"

"You're fired!" The Donald yelled, and Frisk rolled out of the way of the clothesline. After turning around for the next attack, he had his back to Asriel, but he didn't have a switch on his back, were there any flaws, was there any way to- of course!

"Azzy, grab his hair!" Asriel leaped onto The Donald's back and peeled off his toupee with one yank.

"No! Get offa me, ya little twerp! Do you know how much that stuff costs?!" Asriel jumped off as The Donald fell backwards, trying to squash him into dust.

"Quick! Mom, take a picture!" Frisk yelled, and Toriel frantically started taking snapshots of The Donald's bald head as he sat up.

"Woah! Stop! If anyone sees that...! I give up, just tell me what you want!" The stumped Trump's music petered out, and Asriel gently dropped his toupee in his lap.

Frisk thought fast. "You have to build a community for monsters! With big houses! And outdoor pools! And free public wi-fi! And a nice park! And protection from people like you! And you have to name it after yourself so your ego won't let you ever tear it down!"

"God damn it- I'll do it. And I'll even sign an executive order making Mt. Ebbot a reservation. That means you're still king of the Underground," he told Asgore, who was ponderously getting up, "and that makes all, err... intelligent monsters from there American citizens. If I'm not going to get EXP from you, no one is."

"Why did you want it so bad?" Frisk asked.

"Why did I want it? Are you kidding me? Don't you know what it is, even if you've never read this book? It's strength. It's ability. It's supernatural. It's enough to keep a man like me alive for a few more decades, at least."

"You'd really kill innocent people? For that?!"

"People? They're not people. I can say that they're people in a public pronouncement, but then again I say that a lot of other subhumans are people. You're a person, which is why I was just trying to knock you out." Yeah. Right. "Don't you know anything, kid? How long have you been down there? Up here, it's kill or be killed. I'll make an exception for ya. If you want to take their EXP right now, I'm not stopping ya."

"You're awful. Don't you have any children of your own? Any parents?" Toriel accused.

"My dad told me how to be successful. Not how to be maudlin. Get out of my office before I press this button and have your whole species nuked. And I'll warn you. In the long run, I never lose."

Asgore shot him a scowl full of contempt as they walked out, back to the helicopter on the White House lawn, where the ignorant, dispassionate Agent Jenkins waited for them. "Here, Mom, we
gotta get these pictures somewhere else," he whispered to her. "Let me show you how cloud storage works."

"Cloud storage? But what if it rains?"
"Is something wrong, Your Majesty?" Agent Jenkins asked, as Frisk showed Toriel how to store vital blackmail images where few people could get at them. Pretty much every kid in their class knew how to do that by the third grade.

"Absolutely not. We had a productive and fruitful discussion," Asgore answered immediately, before anyone else could say anything, shooting a quick glare to his family to make sure they understood. Of course the agent hadn't been told about the fight, and no one could ever tell him or anyone else anything, because that might lead to EXP and LOVE becoming public knowledge. Having one man jealously guarding the secret in the hope of one day killing them all himself was a problem, but the secret getting leaked would have Charas from all over the world tripping over each other in an effort to hunt every last monster down, just to gain a little bit of otherworldly strength, just to be a little more resistant to harm. Frisk suddenly understood why so many monsters anticipated violence. It wasn't just about taking their human SOUL. It was because many of them expected any human to try to take theirs. Monsters were prey.

Asriel was looking away, trying to hide how upset he was.

"Well, it looks like we'll be seeing a lot more of each other. The President has assigned me as your liaison. So, if there's anything I can help you with..."

"I need to get back to my people," Asgore said. "Someone has to teach them how to live up here, to avoid.. misunderstandings."

"If it is safe... I would like to go shopping. Explore your world a bit, make purchases rather than scavenging. I do not have any of your money, will I have to sell some gold?"

"Ma'am. You are foreign dignitaries from a country" The agent carefully did not say 'beings' or 'reality', but everyone heard them all the same. "we didn't even know existed. The discretionary budget is in the mid-seven figures, and I could get eight if I asked. All of your needs will be taken care of. Our team moves with you. Your safety is assured." The Donald would not permit kill stealing.

It doesn't matter what he assures, Frisk thought. If anything happens to Mom, Dad, Azzy, or any of my other friends, I'm just gonna LOAD. But they really weren't about to tell this guy that they could do that.

"Go with your mother," Asgore said. "Should things go awry, I want you far from Mt. Ebbot." Should things go awry, you might not remember it. "Agent Jenkins. When you are assigned to protect someone, do you value that person's protection above all else?"

"In this country, we can't be bought," he said, solemnly.

"If you have to make a choice, make the right one. As Frisk did." He offered nothing more, and the agent was too professional to pry.

They returned to a hot mess. Undyne and the burly Royal Guardsmen were trying to keep order, working with human policemen. Monsters were besieged by wall-to-wall press and gawkers, and as Asgore stepped out of the helicopter he was rushed at once by a gaggle of reporters, Jenkins' bodyguards keeping them off.
"Hey! You guys left without me!" Undyne ran towards the king, peering inside the helicopter and jumping in before anyone could stop her. Jenkins reached for his service weapon but did not pull it. "Hello! Royal Guard here, keeping them safe is my job! Why didn't you-" She stopped. Stared. "Asriel?"

"Yeah, yeah... they brought me back." Undyne said nothing. Nothing at all. She looked like she was going to say something and then she said nothing. She made a sweeping gesture in Frisk's direction (and they had no idea what she meant) and then sat down.

The helicopter took off again, and this time the ride was much briefer, leading to a private airfield and a waiting SUV. Asriel found the car much less disturbing than a flying machine that he couldn't hear anything from, and at Toriel's instruction Jenkins started driving to an upscale mall. This time, Asriel stared out the window in wonderment, straining against the seatbelt and peering through the tinted window. There was so much to see, up close now! Buildings! People! Stop lights! Cars, so many engines of cars! Tall buildings in the distance, suburbs up close! Things that humans took for granted overwhelmed Asriel's senses. Music- good music, bad music, in between! A far-away siren, a dog barking, a live performance! And, in a far less crowded area...

"Hey," Asriel asked after a few minutes, "is that a playground?!" It was nestled behind some trees and looked large and inviting.

"Stop there. We shall give the children some time to play," Toriel instructed.

"Ma'am, I really wouldn't advise that."

"Agent Jenkins, if there is no room on the surface for children to be children, why did we come here?"

"I'll go with them," Undyne said. "It is my duty as Royal Guard!" Asriel and Frisk looked at each other- don't remind us!- and started laughing. "You don't take my duties seriously?" She turned to Jenkins. "You take me seriously, right?"

"I assure you, ma'am, I take you very seriously indeed." The agent did not state the reason why. "I'll get a couple of agents to-"

"No, we'll be fine," Frisk said. "More than safe with just the three of us."

"Let them play," Toriel said. "We shall return soon."

"This is entirely your prerogative, Your Majesty." God, Jenkins hated it when protected dignitaries did this stuff, and they were human. Toriel chuckled.

"Just as long as you do come back for us," Frisk said. "You know, unlike last time?"

"Do not worry. There are no dogs nearby to steal my phone." The SUV pulled into the parking lot, and the kids jumped out with Undyne. Toriel gave them a loving wave as it pulled away.

"Hey, Azzy, if you've never seen one, how did you know what a playground is?"

"One of the six children told me... told Flowey about them. Why's nobody here?"

"They're probably all inside playing video games," Frisk guessed. They'd been on playgrounds alone many times before. They thought it was nice that they wouldn't be alone on one again, at least not any time soon, and then felt guilty for thinking that. It didn't count if your friend had to be with you, did it?
"Yeah, I can hear a couple of people doing that."

"You can hear them?"

Asriel waggled his large ears. "They're not just for show."

"Yeah, but don't you hear from the inside of your ear?"

"No, that's a human thing." Asriel lifted up his floppy ear, and there was no hole beneath it. It surprised Frisk just as much as it had surprised Chara... "I can hear your heart beating, Frisk. I can hear the wind on the grass. I can hear cars, and people, and animals. I can hear wheels coming up the path." Asriel retreated, looking for somewhere to hide.

"C'mon, Azzy. This is the human world, full of humans. You can't be hurt anymore, I'm determined not to let it happen. If it happens I'll unhappen it."

"You still have that?"

"Yeah, so don't worry."

The wheels coming up the path belonged to a woman on a bicycle, with two preschool-aged children in a carrier on the back. She slowly came up to a stop, looking carefully at Asriel and not noticing Undyne at all, despite her children pointing at the monster.

"I know who you are! You're one of those creatures Trump's building a home for." Oh no, of course she watched the news! Before Asriel could react, she took one of his ears in her hand, feeling its texture. "It's so light! Is your mother on Etsy? Tell her she is an excellent seamstress. Well, I have to be home with the kids, but don't ruin your costume. Your mother obviously took a great amount of care in making it." She pedaled away. Frisk shot a quick glance at Undyne, who was trying her best not to laugh. Once the woman and her children were out of human earshot, Undyne burst into rolling, ground-pounding, weird-faced laughter, and it was infectious to Frisk.

"Neither of you can ever tell anyone about that," Asriel demanded.

Undyne gave a dramatic bow, going on one knee with the haft of her spear against the ground. "As the prince commands."

"Frisk, can you unhappen that? All of that?"

"If I wanted, but, Azzy, just roll with this stuff. Besides, she's right. Your ears are really light and cuddly," Frisk said, gently petting them.

"And sensitive! Besides, everything about us is light. Remember when that guy threw Dad against the wall?"

"What?" Undyne asked.

"Short version," Frisk said. "The President wants to kill all the monsters himself, so he can gain LOVE. But, we beat him, and now we have pictures of him bald. Don't tell anyone, because then other evil people would try to do it."

"That coward! Is that why he's so committed to protecting us?"

"Yeah. When someone says she's committed to protecting you, you have to ask why." Asriel didn't notice the 'she', and Undyne looked into Frisk's face and could guess who they meant, and it
definitely wasn't her, Toriel, or any other monster. "Anyway, let's try this. Az, want to sit on my shoulders?" Frisk was prepared for an at least somewhat heavy load, but when Asriel climbed up on them, they barely noticed it. They'd worn backpacks heavier than him! But Asriel was mostly made of simple things, like magic and dreams. Frisk was made of strange stuff, like cells, proteins, quarks, and electrons. " Weird! Undyne, I know you were stomping around, and I know Mom's heavy..."

"The power of monsters is the power of their magic. She appears heavy because she wants to! I can lift boulders, I can land with force! I can cook like no monster has cooked before!" Oh boy, here we go... "All because my magic is strong! You, Frisk! You become strong through different means. Get your exercise here, to become like me!"

"Do the first, not the second," Asriel advised.

"First, the overhead bars!"

"Are we really doing this?" Frisk muttered.

"First, the overhead bars! One hand after the other! Go!" To their surprise, both Frisk and Asriel were able to do it easily, not pausing for a moment.

"Second, the swings!" Undyne jumped onto a swing with both feet and managed to get it going that way. "Higher than this! Higher!" And then she slipped and slung herself high into the air, flying off the playground and onto the grass face-first.

"Are you all right?"

"You are the expert on this equipment, Frisk," she said, talking through the grass. "I think I shall let you decide how to use it."

The kids chuckled. "You don't stand on it. Sit down, Azzy." Asriel sat, but couldn't propel himself.

"Well, kick out your legs, and basically you have to pull while pushing..." He tried but got nowhere. "I can't explain it, it's just something you learn how to do. Here, I'll push you." Frisk gave him a few easy pushes, then when Asriel started laughing, they pushed him higher, and with one good solid heave Asriel was flung off the swing and into the air.

But he fell into Frisk's arms like a pillow. Frisk smiled at him, not needing to say it. Of course I'd catch you. Come on.

"All right, my turn. You have to do it like this. Back and forth. Pull with the arms and push with the legs." They got fairly high.

And then Asriel started to push, as hard as he could. Frisk went high up, higher than the top bar, but held on to the swing even as their butt left the rubber. "Woah, woah! Too high! Azzy, I'm mostly water. If I land too hard, the water comes out. And, err, uh, speaking of which..." Frisk was feeling a gurgling in their guts. Swinging had shaken something loose. "Uh, you know that weird human thing with food Sans was talking about? I need to go to the bathroom."

"This is gonna be awkward, isn't it?"

"Extremely." But at least no one else was around, and at least having Asriel attached to them didn't leave any doubt as to which of these dingy, concrete edifices to use. At least it actually had plumbing and not just a pit.
"How do... you..."

"I go into this stall here, and then I close the door," they said, closing it very slowly. Asriel felt his connection getting weaker, which was not pleasant at all. "Then I'll put my feet up? It helps sometimes."

"Woaah, dizzy," Asriel said. Frisk put their feet back down and doubled over, clutching their stomach. They had been eating nothing but junk food. A donut made by spiders. Hot dogs and hot cats. Burgers made out of mysterious substances that probably had nothing to do with meat. And very old tea, which really, really wasn't agreeing with their guts and made the whole sticky mess want to come out now. Frisk gave a mighty clench. Pff-bllaart! "What's that smell?! Are you dying?!

"No, it's.. argh.. don't say anything, I'm trying to..." Splloorrrrrggh! Silence. Splut-splut-splorrererrrrrgsssssh! Plop, ploooooooooosh blaaaaart. Frisk breathed a huge sigh of relief, and gagged on the smell. It took effort not to puke. They turned to the toilet paper dispensers and there wasn't anything in either of them. "No! Aww, no! Azzy! Are there any paper towels? Brown paper, from a dispenser." They'd LOAD but they didn't want to go through that again.

"No, there's a sink, a trash can, a big thing with a nozzle that says 'dryer' on it..."

"Aww, no! No!" Frisk tried to think back to the last time they SAVEd, was it before they fought...

"Is this what you're looking for?" Asriel went into the stall next door, pulled out several pre-cut sheets, pulled out several more because whatever happened in there could not have been clean, and handed them to Frisk under the barrier.

"Oh my God. Azzy, you are not just my brother, you are my very best friend in the world and I love you so much." They finished up and opened the door. "I'd hug you, but wait." Frisk meticulously cleaned their hands, and used the dryer. Asriel put his face under it, feeling the hot air. "Okay. Now I can hug you." They did, deeply.

"Hey, can we get one of those?"

"The ones you can get move around. It's, like, you hold it," they said, walking out.

"There's something that you can buy, that you can point anywhere, and it blows hot air?!"

"Yeah, it's called a hair dryer. You never had anything like that?"

"No! Mom would always have to use fire magic. She'd have to hold it away from me, but it wasn't all that hot, so..." He shook his head, his ears swaying. "Chara tried to get me to do it myself. He thought it was funny when I got burned. Mom got a fireplace I could curl up in, but that got kind of cramped. You couldn't have that kind of fireplace at your house, right?"

"Azzy, do me a favor. Let's just pretend I didn't have a house. You're my brother, Asgore's my dad, Toriel's my mom. Anything before that? Don't care. Didn't happen. Okay?"

"Okay... your highness," Asriel said, before sticking out his tongue and running towards the playground.

"You- Get back here, you furry ball of free EXP!" Frisk chased after him.

"Come and get me, miserable little pile of secrets!"
"Overgrown goatrabbit!"

"Poop machine!"

All of the comebacks Frisk could come back with were too hurtful (calling their brother a parasite was not on their to-do list), so they just chased after Asriel, who was always a few steps ahead despite Frisk's speed. Undyne laughed, shouting encouragement, as they ducked and weaved under slides, between poles, back and forth between the swings. Frisk ran out of stamina within a few minutes, and Asriel stood in front of him, smiling.

"You know I could have just **not chased after you**?" Frisk asked between heavy breaths.

"You wouldn't."

"I wouldn't."

"How'd I get so fast, anyway? I mean, I jumped on The Donald's back, no problem, I did the monkey bars as quick as you, I pushed you on the swing- I can't **push you**, Frisk! You weigh, like, ten times me! I'm just me, I'm not Undyne, I don't have the magical strength to..." This was Frisk's turn to stare at him and smile. "I'm **not** just me." Asriel conjured up a ball of fire in his hand. And made it bigger. And hotter. And like an actual fireball, the kind someone might throw if he really wanted to...

"I'm still really tired!" Frisk shouted, and Asriel extinguished it. Of course that's where the power came from. "Besides, you shouldn't do that. Not out here, people might freak out. Okay, even more, but they've seen you and Undyne on the news, they haven't seen **that** on the news."

"Yeah, everyone's seen us, all those-" A raindrop fell on his head, and he gasped in surprise. A couple more followed. "Let's get out of the rain, up in there." Asriel and Frisk climbed onto a platform covered by a large, conic roof. "What do you think would've happened if I told that lady, 'Hi, I really am the monster Asriel Dreemurr, pleased to meet you?'"

Frisk sat on the metal flooring next to their brother, idly playing with his ears. "Well... she seemed nice, so I'm guessing she probably would have wanted to take a picture with you. She probably would have told her friends. Who would have told their friends. And then we wouldn't be sitting here, we'd be in the middle of a huge crowd." Which might contain someone crazy. "And then whatever that guy's team is would probably be all over us, just to keep us safe, and then we'd be treated like royalty and thrown off the playground, and then I don't think we'd be able to go on playgrounds any more."

"If that ever happens, **LOAD**." Frisk gave a slight nod.

"Doo dooda doodeloodoo, dooda doodeloo doodeelooda..." Who was singing? The kids looked at Undyne, who had her spear out and was prancing around in the grass.

"Whaaaat..." Asriel asked.

"I'm siiiiiing'in in the rain! Just siiiiing'in in the rain! What a glorious feeeling, I'm haaaaappy again!"

"Frisk, **what** is she doing?"

"How should I know?! I've gotta record this." They pulled out their phone and recorded Undyne, who was doing a fantastic Gene Kelly impression, using her spear rather than an umbrella and
doing moves the actual actor could never have pulled off. In lieu of tap shoes, her feet slapped loudly against the grass with magical force. "I want people to get used to having monsters around. For monsters to be just, like, there instead of targets for weirdoes or people thinking you're dangerous."

"So, is this helping or the opposite?"

"I don't even know what to say about this."

"I'm daaaaaaancing in the rain..." She did the whole song, start to finish, and when she was finally done, she laid back in the wet grass, and Asriel and Frisk gave her a huge round of applause.
Asriel chuckled, looking embarrassed, leaning against the railing, looking outwards at the world. "I never thought I could ever see that. I was all 'Rarrgh, you have to let me win so you'll have to stay with me down there forever because if you don't, you'll leave without me and I'll get bored!' I thought that doing the same things over and over again would be fun, if I could just have a friend with me. Golly! What kind of loser wants to play the same game over and over again?" He turned to Frisk with the biggest smile he could make. "You didn't let me win, so I have to stay with you up here forever instead, and now we're doing the opposite of the same things. And in just these last few hours, we've watched Undyne dance, and we've played on a playground- I am standing on an actual playground right now- and we've flown through the air, and driven in a car, and met people we've never met before, and been rained on with actual rain and winded on with actual wind..."

"And we're blackmailing the President."

"And we're blackmailing the President, yes! What did he mean by keeping himself alive for a few more decades, anyway? Is there something wrong with him?"

"No, he's just human."

The drumbeat of the rain on the plastic roof increased. A gust of wind blew water all over Asriel's back, and he huddled closer to Frisk. A loud KRA-KOW of thunder hit far too close for comfort, and Asriel winced against the loud noise. Shivering, he looked into Frisk's eyes. "Humans are more powerful than Boss Monsters, Frisk. Did... did he have children, is that why..."

"That doesn't matter for us. Humans usually live... maybe eighty years? Ninety, if we're lucky? And then we die. That's just how long we live. I'm sorry."

"Ninety years? Is that it? That's all I've got? No matter what, even if a human never kills me? Frisk, can you reset, still?"

"No, I can only LOAD my most recent SAVE. I can't True Reset, not here. So nobody will kill you, I won't let them. But I can't not get old! None of us can."

The wind died down slightly, but the rain continued to pour down. Undyne was lying on her back with her mouth open, happily catching it.

"I thought you knew. Make the most of the time we have, I guess. That felt like a weak thing to say.

"That's not good enough! For me or for you!" But how could Frisk save people from that? Asriel read their expression and calmed down a bit. "I don't ever want to go back to being Flowey. So, right before getting old is going to-

"Don't you say it, Azzy! I wouldn't even kill Sans' brother, remember? Not even when he was trying to capture me with everything he had. Don't ask me to kill my own!"

"Then don't interfere when I tell someone else that I'm a furry ball of free EXP."

"I was just teasing."

"But would you? Not interfere?"

"I'll be old then. Maybe we'll have figured something else out. Maybe I'll be able to give you my SOUL." Frisk tried to muster up the DETERMINATION to SAVE before saying something they
figured they might regret, but their heart wasn't in it and they decided to say it anyway. "By the way, I almost called you something worse." Asriel didn't reply. "I almost called you a parasite."

Asriel started to chuckle again. "I guess I kind of am now. Flowey was right, even you can be mean." Another gust of wind hit him in the back, and Frisk caught him as he toppled forward.

"Anyone can be mean, Azzy. I just don't want to. You're soaked, let's get you under that dryer again."

"Or we can get into the car with Mom," Asriel suggested.

"Huh?" Frisk looked out and couldn't see anyone. Oh, that was the SUV coming down the road. Beeeep!

Mom's face peered out of the back window. "My children, over here!"

"Or we can get into the car with Mom!" Frisk agreed, as they hurried to the open doors. Jenkins looked on in alarm. Cripes those kids were quick. "Come on, Undyne!" Undyne reluctantly walked in their direction.

"You're both so wet! I apologize." She leaned in. "Is the cloud storage okay?"

Frisk rolled their eyes. "Our family photos are not stored on actual clouds, Mom. They're just called that."

"Oh. Okay. Well, I got you some clothes and shoes. Asriel, I apologize, they didn't have anything in your size." Asriel gave a Really, Mom? look. His feet were large, puffy, and padded, and he went barefoot all his life.

"Shoes? Mom, you should have said you were buying shoes! What if they don't fit?" Frisk asked.

"I know your size. If they are imperfect, I shall make them fit." She waggled her fingers, and a few bright sparks came out. Monsters had been magically altering human trash to serve their needs for a long time.

"Did anything happen when you were there? Anyone freak out at you?"

"Some people were scared, and some people were curious, but most of them were more afraid of Mr. Jenkins than me," she said.

"Well, if I would have been there, the reactions would have been somewhat different!" Undyne said, getting into the front passenger seat. "Why didn't you tell me that rain was actually real water falling from the sky?"

"Real water? What did you think it was?" Frisk asked.

"Fake water! That they just sprayed out of a hose!"

"But that's still real water!"

"What?! They spray real water for rain?! Then who was spraying all that?!"

"Nobody sprays actual rain, it comes from clouds!"

"Then what was I being sprayed with?" Asriel was giggling. Even Jenkins was starting to crack.
"Water!"

"Fake or real?"

"Real! There is no fake water!"

"Then who was spraying it?!"

"Okay, wait, stop, just stop. You were right the first time, it's just real water falling from the sky. That's just something that happens here."

"You mean I can be sprayed with water at any time, and it happens by itself?"

"When there's rain clouds, yeah."

"Thank you, rain clouds!" Undyne shouted, and Jenkins almost lost it. He drove them to the largest hotel in town (with a water slide poking out of it!), led them past many spectators, and took them up an elevator after inserting a keycard. And up, and up, and up. He handed each of them keycards.

"The elevator won't go to your suite without this, so don't lose them."

"Does the room have a large bath?" Toriel asked, carrying her own bags. "The children need one."

"Suite. Not room." But what suite needed a keycard in an elevator? The doors opened to the penthouse. Of course. Asriel barely understood where he was. Frisk's travel experiences involved dingy motels and a lot of screaming, and they looked around the spacious, well-furnished penthouse (was that a full-sized Jacuzzi in that room? Yes, it was!) and realized I really am royalty now. When they first gained their power, they considered doing 'the casino thing,' but there weren't any casinos in the Underground and they didn't want to rip any monsters off. Now they knew they'd never have to.

"I've arranged suites for... your royal guard... and myself under yours. If there is anything I can get you, please let me know." He took the elevator back down with Undyne.

"We shall be fine," Toriel said. She'd never been in a place like this either.

"Did you enjoy yourselves?" a familiar voice asked. Asgore came around the corner, wearing a large bathrobe and a smile. "I suppose we have time together now. Together again. My son..." He hugged Asriel deeply. "And his savior. Our savior. My... Frisk, I don't know how to ask you this?"

"I am not sure, either," Toriel added. "I bought you matching T-shirts, but I do not know if they are correct..." She pulled two of them out of a bag. One T-shirt said 'Don't blame me, blame my brother!', with a hand pointing to the wearer's right. Its counterpart said 'sister', and the hand pointed left.

Frisk took a deep breath. "I'm going to have to do this, aren't I? No way around it." They started to muster up DETERMINATION but really didn't want to. "I'm not gonna SAVE here. Even if it goes badly I don't want to do this more than once."

"What do you mean, my child?"

"Mom, you never knew I can SAVE, and go back and redo things with a LOAD? Dad knows. Sans can tell you all about it. But that's not what I wanted to show you. Actually... no, that's what makes me me. My DETERMINATION. That's Frisk. This, right here, is just the way I was born." Frisk took off their pants and underwear in one motion. "I don't know how much you know about humans, but either this part should be bigger and that part should be gone, or that part should be
bigger and this part should be gone." Frisk looked aside for a moment. Asriel was trying so hard not to act weirded out, to protect Frisk's feelings, but what he was seeing was gross and wrong, and everyone knew it. "I was the only kindergartener in my class who knew what 'chimerism' meant. Then I had teachers asking me what I 'identify' as. I don't identify! At all, as anything, especially not that weird stuff on the Internet. So, Mom, if you want to buy me stuff that says 'cutest brother' or 'best sister', it's okay. Because it's from you."

"Your birth parents did not accept you very well, did they?" Asgore realized.

Frisk restrained themself from yelling something relating to Sherlock Obvious. "Hey Az! Please tell Dad what I don't talk about," they said instead.

"They really don't want to. Can we just take that bath now? Frisk, when you get upset, it affects me too. I'm sorry if that's selfish..."

"I don't want to spread this feeling to anyone. Especially not you."

"Frisk, if there is anything you need from me, I am here for you," Toriel said, getting on one knee to look her child in the face.

"You can wash this twice. Or maybe just chuck it? Because people have been throwing magical fireballs and spears and things like that at it all day." Both their parents looked away. "and I don't know if that'll come out with Tide," Frisk said, peeling off their striped shirt. That thing reeked of decaying spiderwebs, crusty, unidentifiable slime, dog slobber, industrial chemicals, and Frisk didn't even remember what was producing that one particular vile funk. Maybe that was just them. They'd worn that into the Oval Office? Well, given who was behind the desk...

"And I've been wearing this stuff, well, it was kind of not there, but it's been not-there for a very, very long time," Asriel said. His clothes came off more easily. "Frisk, mine is normal, I think..."

"I'm just looking at how fluffy you are. Mom, did the hotel give us enough shampoo for this guy? Do we need to go to a pet store?"

"Shut up, Frisk!" Asriel said between giggles.

"I'm just saying, we have enough money for a professional groomer..."

"Is there such a person? I would like to meet them." Toriel said. Asriel and Asgore both cracked up.

Frisk contained their laughter. "Yeah, there actually is, but they... okay, let's get into that Jacuzzi now. Azzy, you ever been in one?"

"No."

"Cool. Me neither." They went to get the water going.

"My child, if you ever want to tell me about anything..."

"I never want to talk about this. If you and Dad and Azzy can accept me for who and what I am, then that's enough. Come on, Mom, aren't we a little old and full of supernatural powers for you to be watching us in the bath?" Embarrassed, she walked out and closed the door behind her.

The tub filled up quickly, and Frisk found the bubble button. "This is awesome!" Asriel shouted, and pressed his back against a nozzle. "O-h-h-h-h h-y-e-e-a-a-a-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h-h."
"Ohhhhhh, I need this," Frisk said, relaxing. "Azzy, I've been wondering. You've been down there all that time, but you're still, like, my age."

"I couldn't grow up. I mean, I remember, I think I do, but it wasn't me for most of it, I was just kind of stuck. You've unstuck me. Can we leave it there? You've got stuff you don't want to talk about."

"Yeah. Okay."

Asriel leaned all the way back, keeping his face just out of the water, letting the bubbles tickle his ears. "I was so stupid. I even made you promise. If you had walked away..."

"I'll still keep that promise. If you turn back forever, I'll walk away." Asriel heard their words warbling under the constant hum of the bubbles.

"But it's never forever, not as long as you're here." Frisk gave their biggest smile, which wasn't very big. Asriel found the shampoo, and in that small bottle there was enough; Frisk helped him get the crud out of his back fur (without asking how old some of it was), and in return Asriel gave Frisk's back a good scrub with a loofah. Frisk closed their eyes, almost falling asleep, until Dad knocked on the door and asked when it'd be their turn.

"Them in the tub together?" Frisk whispered to Asriel.

"I heard that!" Asgore shouted. Frisk laughed, and the kids let their parents enjoy each other's company in the tub. Whether their parents would start doing adult stuff in there wasn't their concern, but both of them kind of hoped they would, because that was the kind of stuff that kept parents together, wasn't it?

"C'mere, I'll dry you off," Frisk said as Asriel reached for some towels.

"Frisk, is that a gun?" VRRRR "Oh, that's a... aaaaahhhhhhh." Asriel made soft bleating noises as Frisk dried his fur. Asriel found drying Frisk's hair much easier.

"Hey, what's that pink light?" Asriel asked when they were done. He'd seen it through the hole far overhead back in the Underground, but he'd never seen its source.

"That's a sunset. Wanna go see it?" Frisk gestured to the luxurious patio.

"Yeah!" The two of them put on matching pants, and Frisk put on their 'Blame my brother!' T-shirt while Asriel struggled with his counterpart. "Aah, my ears!"

"No, here, put your ears through first. There you go." Frisk gestured to his shirt. "Blame your sister." Asriel laughed, and they walked onto the patio, pulling two reclined plastic chairs next to each other.

"This is awesome. The sun does this every day?"

"Maybe not always like this, but yeah." The two watched the sky deepen in color for several minutes.

Asriel turned to Frisk. "I just can't stop thinking about it. Everyone in the world, everyone who isn't you, is one bad decision away from never seeing another sunset again. Or never seeing one to begin with. And it doesn't even need to be their decision."

"Well, think about it this way. If people make good decisions, then people get to keep seeing sunsets, right?"
"Yeah, I guess. Are there going to be stars?"

"Well, we're in the city, but we're way up high, so maybe a few?"

"Is that a star?" It was blinking, and moving, and red.

"That's an airplane."

Their parents came out to the patio some minutes later, pulling up other chairs to the siblings' sides, all of them looking up.

"Amazing, is it not? I made several speeches today. I conducted several interviews. I drew up a plan for monsters of all types. I made commands, issued dictates, dealt with many foreign leaders on behalf of the monsters appearing around the world, and"

"Wait, what?" Frisk interrupted, startled, their relaxation gone in an instant.

"No one told you? Oh. I suppose that is up to me. Frisk, when the barrier was placed, it wasn't just monsters that were sealed away. It was the concept of monsters." Frisk's mind worked furiously. Letting Trump believe that- that monsters had to be protected from others because they were in short supply- had saved many, many more monsters than Trump ever could have guessed. He had tricked himself into protecting them right before they became numerous.

"Remember back when you fought me with hope and healed yourself with dreams?" Asriel asked.
"That's what we are, Frisk. That's where we came from, originally. Sometimes, when humans dream, we appear. And if it's been held back for hundreds of years, it all comes out at once, doesn't it, Dad?" Frisk's mind was still going. Of course monsters had to come from somewhere! But what could Trump do now? Un-protect them? Declare the dreams coming from American minds to be of no value? He really had neatly checkmated himself, although he was sure to kill some of the less intelligent ones if they were truly prolific... but Frisk was too tired, and their train of thought derailed as their family talked.

"Yes. And it makes me a true king, for the first time in a very long while, because I must take charge of them all. Do not worry. I can do that." He smiled, a slow, sad smile. "But I can't make the truly important words come out. I can't say how much losing you broke me, how it made me a coward." He shook his large head. "I'm just so glad to have you back. Frisk. I am the King of Monsters. Whatever might make you different from other humans is of no concern to me. All I can say is thank you. For sparing us. For saving us. For my son. And... for the stars. I see one now."

"I see one," Toriel said. "Two. Three! Another one. They are so hard to see in all this light, but just knowing they are there..."

"In the cavern, we used to wish for things. But mostly, we just wished to escape. Now that we have real stars above us, all I can really wish for is peace," Asgore said. "For my people, and for myself. For you, my family. And for the things I did..."

"Dad, you can't beat yourself up over it. Mom, please don't beat him up over it either. There's only one person who can go back in time and change things, and even I can't go back that far."

"Did you hear them, too?" Asriel asked. "No, you didn't. That's what they were doing. Beating Dad up over it."

Toriel gently smiled. "We really cannot talk about anything with you around, can we? I remember,
we tried to keep things from you sometimes, but we had to go so far away..." She shook her head. "You are right. We cannot change the past. Only the future. Come along, children, off to bed. Your father and I have much to do tomorrow." She tucked them in next to each other, gave them both good-night kisses, turned off the light, and gently closed the door behind her.

"So what are we doing tomorrow?" Asriel asked, as he realized the words he had just spoken. "Gosh, that feels good to say. What are we doing tomorrow?"

"I dunno, Azzy. I mean, there's no school for us yet, Mom and Dad are going to be busy, and we can't be hurt, so, for the morning, I think we'll be doing anything we want, our afternoon schedule is anything we want, and for the evening I think we'll have our hands full doing anything we want." Asriel smiled the biggest grin. "Unless someone needs my power for something." But only their family and closest friends knew they had it.

Asriel rested his head on Frisk's chest. "Frisk, what will you dream of tonight? What monsters will you create?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"I think Mom only exists because some kids a long time ago really needed a mom. Maybe it's the same with Dad." His speech grew slower. "But they're not really Mom and Dad anymore, the way Boss Monsters work. I guess that makes me your dream, now."

"You're not my dream. We might be stuck together, but I don't own you," they said, gently hugging him. "I can't own my brother."

Asriel smiled and let Frisk's heartbeat coax him to sleep.
Fluffy

Frisk woke up slowly to early-morning sunlight. They'd had the weirdest night, they thought, but they couldn't remember their dreams. This bed was comfortable, more comfortable than any they'd slept on before. What had they been doing? Yes, they vaguely remembered having to dodge a lot, and save a lot of people, and they'd had to bring someone back with them? And then what else did they do? They remembered spending time with a loving Mom and Dad, but that couldn't be right, their parents were anything but. They started getting up to go pee, but there was something light on their chest that they'd been hugging all night, they didn't still have a stuffed animal ever since their mother threw it away, this one felt like one of those goats at the petting zoo...

It all came crashing back, and their very first coherent thought was *Cripes, if he hadn't been laying on me I might have walked out of the room without Azzy!* Followed swiftly by *Oh, I'd just LOAD.* Oh, woah, I can actually do that!

But they also needed to SAVE because replaying long sections of their life wasn't something they wanted to have to go through, even if it was enjoyable the first time. They mustered up the DETERMINATION and then stopped; what if someone important to them had been hurt last night? Mom had left their phone on the end table, and they stretched to reach it without disrupting their brother. She'd also left a note: she and Asgore had started the day very early and they wouldn't be back until mid-afternoon. She'd magicked the kids' striped shirts back into usability. And Frisk's new shoes were in the room, unpacked, laced, resized, and ready to go.

Frisk decided to call the skelebros first. Papyrus picked up on the second ring. "Hey, Papyrus, are you and your bro all right?"

"OH YEAH! WE'RE REALLY ENJOYING LIFE! WELL EXCEPT FOR THE PART WHERE PEOPLE HUM THAT ONE SPOOKY SCARY SONG WHEN WE'RE AROUND. BUT IT'S OKAY! UNDYNE SENT ME TO A CAREER COUNSELING CENTER SO I CAN GET A HUMAN JOB! YOU KNOW, AS COVER!" Frisk didn't know what Papyrus meant by 'cover' and didn't really want to. "AND GUESS WHAT? THEY SAID I WAS PERFECT FOR ONE!"

"What job is that?"

"A LAWYER!" Frisk felt deep pity for whoever would have Papyrus as their lawyer.

"Good luck, Papyrus. I might call you every day about now."

"BUT IF IT'S EVERY DAY HOW CAN IT BE NOW?"

"I mean, like, at this time of the morning."

"BUT WHAT IF I GET REALLY DRUNK AND HAVE A REALLY BAD HANGOVER?"

"Lawyers don't get really drunk! Not good lawyers!"

"BUT LAWYERS ARE EVIL, SO I SHOULD GET TOTALLY HAMMERED EVERY NIGHT!"

"Papyrus, talk to your brother before doing that. If he doesn't just encourage you, that is. Bye."

"BYE-BYE, NON-LAWYER!"

Who else? Did Alphys really deserve Frisk's protection? *But if it weren't for her, Asriel wouldn't be*
here... And denying protection for past sins wasn't something Frisk did. "Alphys! How goes it?"

"It goes, um, well, I suppose. I figured out that it's, um, you keeping Asriel from, um, isn't it?" She didn't complete the sentence. "I'd like to run some tests, if I could have your permission..." Asriel pulled his head off Frisk's chest long enough to mouth tests? with an uncomfortable look on his face.

"No tests. If he's not close enough it hurts him, Alphys. If anything solid gets between us it hurts him. And if anything goes wrong he turns back. I'm not going to put him through that. You're not doing more, what's that word, unethical research, are you?"

"No! Well, no. The research I'm doing is perfectly ethical. Distance bad, solid objects bad. That's about what I expected. Um. By the way. Undyne said you recorded something she did? Can I... can I have a copy?"

"Of her dancing? She told you about that? Well, if she told you about it, okay, here you go..." It didn't take long to send the file. "Be careful, all right? I'll LOAD if you do something really stupid, but just don't, okay?"

"I'll, um, I'll try." Alphys hung up.

"Okay, that's Papyrus and Sans, Alphys... think I should call Undyne?"

"I hear her snoring."

"From here? Your ears are good!"

"She's just really loud."

"All right. Oh, wait!" Couldn't forget to call Mom!

"Hello, my child. Did you read my note?"

"Yes, but I need to know, are you and Dad both okay? As of exactly right now?"

"Why do you ask? Oh, that! Yes, we're in the car together." Dad's voice: "Hi, Frisk!"

"Okay, just making sure. Good luck." After hanging up, Frisk put their arm around their brother, and it filled them with DETERMINATION. SAVED. "I gotta go pee."

"P? Is this some kind of letter game?"

"No, pee, as in bathroom."

"Oh. This isn't going to get less awkward, is it?"

"It will eventually. I hope." They hesitantly got out of bed and went to the bathroom. Frisk always had a shy bladder, but it didn't seem to apply to Asriel being there; they were able to sit down and do their business without much fuss, even with their brother turned around in front of them.

When Frisk started combing their hair, Asriel grasped the idea immediately and picked up a hairbrush, but it didn't make much difference; the cowlick on top of his head returned of its own accord, and Frisk giggled.

Asriel looked on in utter confusion as Frisk applied toothpaste to a toothbrush and then put it in their mouth. "Frisk... what are you doing?"
"Bruffin mah teef."

"Why?"

Frisk took the brush out of their mouth. "Because I really don't want to get cavities in my teeth. If I have to go to the dentist, I'll LOAD if they screw up, which means I'll have to go to the dentist again. I don't want to have to get my teeth filled even once."

Asriel stared at them, not understanding. "Azzy, if something happens to one of your teeth, or any part of you, what happens? Does it just come back after a while?" Frisk looked at their brother's teeth carefully. Two small canines poking out of what could have been an ordinary gumline, as part of what might have been a normal human kid's teeth, only not quite shaped the same way.

"Yeah, in a few minutes, depending on how big."

"Well, it's not like that for us. This is that slow decay stuff DETERMINATION can't stop." They finished brushing, and Asriel was even more surprised that they didn't want to swallow toothpaste.

"Hey, let me see," Asriel said. "You're trying to get that blue stuff all over your teeth while removing all the other stuff, right?"

"Yeah," Frisk said with their mouth open, and to their surprise Asriel gently stuck a soft forefinger inside. He started moving force around inside Frisk's mouth, scraping at angles totally impossible for even the best dental hygienist, removing plaque without even touching enamel. When it was done, Asriel levitated a very small but foul-smelling mass of bacteria at the tip of his finger.

"You missed some," he said, smiling and dunking it in the sink. Frisk added another step to their daily ritual, right after 'making sure all their friends don't die' and 'combing hair'. "Hey, the sky's turning pink again. Is that a sunrise?"

"Yeah, it is." Asriel started running towards the patio. Woah, bad idea, got a bit too far from Frisk doing that.

"Azzy, you can't see it from there!"

"Why not?"

"Because it's on the other side!"

"The other side?"

"Of the building, of... everything! The patio obviously faces west, we saw the sun set from it. If we want to see the sunrise, we have to look east! Maybe not exactly east, all the time, depending on the time of year..." Frisk was too young to grasp axial tilt. "but the sun's not gonna rise where it sets! The earth orbits the sun, and the earth rotates, and that's why we get sunrises and sunsets."

"The earth is rotating?!"

"Oh my God, we have got to start going to school." Asriel looked downcast. Frisk put an arm around him. "Oh, hey, I didn't mean to call you stupid..."

"No, it's just that every time there's something I don't know about your world, I remember I was - this- close to never having seen it."

"Then you're going to be remembering that a lot," Frisk said, leading him to an east-facing window. "Hey, come on. There's a lot I don't know, too. I mean, I don't know anything about how magic
works, or why different monsters are the way they are, or a lot of human world stuff. I mean, I
don't even know how the world's reacting to monsters." They snapped their fingers. "But I do know
how to find out. When you're ready." It took Asriel a while to stop watching the sunrise before the
kids hopped on the couch and made the mistake of turning on the TV.

"A poll taken shortly after the phenomenon has a full ninety percent of Japanese citizens professing
belief in Shintoism. Wow. Ninety percent. Can you give us an update on" *click* "and Saudi
Arabia. What you are about to see is not suitable for young" *click* "Change it, Frisk!" *click* "returning
to their home countries out of fear, but" *click* "riding a qilin. The Chinese government has issued
a statement that these monsters represent cultural heritage and has forbidden any, quote, hostile
activity, end quote," *click* "TO THE MTT NETWORK, WHERE IT'S ALL METTATON, ALL
THE TIME! TODAY WE HAVE A PRE-RECORDED LIVE INTERVIEW WITH KING
ASGORE" *click* "Live? But if Dad was just in the car, how fast did it start?" "No, pre-recorded live, it
means it was live then... TV is weird." *click* "rioting in Harare. Over two thousand people have
been" "Change it!" *click* "a shocking interview with a warlord who believes that killing monsters
can improve his force's fighting power, and intends to..." "Frisk..." "Aww, no, nooo." Asriel put his
hand over Frisk's, turning the TV off.

"Why did I do it? Just so we could be happy? I should have kept the barrier where it was! I knew
there were a lot of Floweys up here. Now everyone's in danger, forever. Humans and monsters.
And it's all because of me." He blinked away tears. "Now you're killing each other. I bet that's why
the war started, why we were sealed away, because the humans didn't want humans attacking each
other just for first dibs on EXP. That's happening again, isn't it? We'll be locked up, again. No
more sunsets or sunrises. I can't ask you to come down with us."

"Stop it, Azzy!"

"Frisk, you can't go back down there. You can't give up your own world for me. That'd be crazy,
even for you."

"I'm not going back down there with you, because you're not going back down there. Even if the
world's most powerful person one day tries. We don't live in that kind of world anymore, okay? Not
most of us. You're freaking out for nothing, and it's making me want to freak out. There are a lot of
evile people, and there's always going to be bad stuff on the news, but most humans aren't like that.
Most humans won't kill someone just to get stronger or live longer. And, hopefully, those humans
will stop the crazy and evil people from hurting anyone else. Besides, you're the Prince of
Monsters, you're not supposed to freak out."

"You're right. Sorry." He clenched his hands for a bit. "Someone's coming," he said, suppressing
his reflex to hide. The elevator door opened to reveal Sans, who was wearing a tracksuit and
waggling a cardkey, not saying who gave it to him.

"havin' fun, frisk?"

"I tried to. And then I watched the news. I'm sorry, Sans, I SAVED after I checked that you guys
were okay, I should have called you too and not just Papyrus..."

"you just can't enjoy your happy ending, can ya?"

"There's no such thing. Maybe for a story, but not for people. If you're happy, your friends are still
around and it hasn't ended, and if it's truly ended, somebody or everybody's dead and you're not
going to be happy. I still have DETERMINATION, why wouldn't I still try to help?"

"heh. y'know, i had a whole bunch of stuff i was gonna say if you did something bad. if you went
"Yeah, I was really trying not to hurt him."

"you're somethin' else, kid. listen. you ain't responsible for the whole world. if people wanna try to get power by killing monsters. well. they'll be judged too. usually by each other. can't murder dreams with no consequences. here. lemme cheer you up." Sans took the remote, turning it on and changing to a local news station.

"This video was taken a few hours after the original Mt. Ebbot release," the clearly amused newscaster said.

"She didn't..." Frisk started, watching their own video.

"She did!" Asriel finished, as Undyne belted out her rendition of the iconic 1950s showtune. 

**And, in the video, Frisk's recorded voice:** "'I want people to get used to having monsters around. For monsters to be just, like, there instead of targets for weirdoes or people thinking you're dangerous.'"

"'So, is this helping or the opposite?''

"'I don't even know what to say about this.'"

They didn't play the whole thing. "Wow. Megan, that's inspirational. 'I want people to get used to having monsters around.' Considering how many of them have appeared overnight, that might be some of the best advice we've heard yet. Remember. If you see a monster, do not approach it. Most monsters are harmless. Some are intelligent. Unless it is a threat to your safety, do **not** call the police. Emergency services across the city are overwhelmed by calls. We go now to Max Bloviator for his opinions on monsters. Max? What do you think about King Asgore's" *click*

"see, kid? you're still helpin'. even if you don't know it. now c'mon. let's go get some breakfast." Frisk's stomach leaped at the suggestion; they hadn't eaten in far too long and had been too worn out to notice. They ran to get the white-and-blue shoes Mom had left for them; she'd helpfully stuck a pair of bright blue socks in them and inserted the wheels: two each, both near the back. Frisk wasn't sure how to feel about them; couldn't they get seriously hurt if **oh wait**. Yeah, they'd enjoy these. Frisk caught a glimpse in the mirror: scraggly, bowl-cut hair, "Blame my brother!" t-shirt, dark pants, and now the stuff Mom left for them. Still just you, Frisk. The Dreemurr siblings went down the elevator with Sans.

"Sans, I've always wondered what it'd be like to fight you," Frisk asked on the way down. Sans' one blue eye glared at them. "I don't mean, for serious. I mean, like... what's that word for when you're just practicing or training?"

"Sparring?" Asriel suggested.

"Yeah, sparring. I wouldn't actually try to hurt you. And you could go all-out."

"yeah, but he'd have to go through it too. and i ain't prepared to start whackin' toriel's baby boy around." Frisk thought that was just an excuse but nodded anyway. Other people got into the elevator on their way down, some following elevator etiquette and pretending not to notice (one guy really didn't notice at all; he had a 9:00 at the Pru in Boston tomorrow morning and would not
be distracted); a couple got spooked and didn't.

It got worse once they came into the lobby and the dining room, the wheels in Frisk's new shoes clattering on the tiles as they rolled. Frisk, used to being ignored, was getting stared at by everyone from businessmen to families, and only one person didn't react in some way: a burly man casually reading the paper (Headline: "A Welcome for Monsters"). Frisk pegged him as one of Jenkins'. Whatever. Like it said on their shirt, blame their brother.

Who cared, anyway? They were getting continental breakfast. With a buffet of bacon, eggs, stale toast, those tiny little packages of butter and jelly, and- Frisk had always wanted to use one- a waffle machine. His not-parents' voices echoed in his head: 'No, stay away from it!' 'No, I won't make you any, we have to leave soon! Jesus, it's always something with this kid...' Frisk poured a slightly too generous amount of batter in the machine, and it squirted around the edges when they closed it.

"I got it," Asriel said, sticking out a surprisingly long tongue (how did he-?!?) and licking the batter off the sides.

"Azzy! Don't lick things in public!" Frisk hissed, looking around for phones pointed in their direction. (There weren't any. Even with monsters running around, pointing a camera at a kid you don't know is one of those things that gets you asked to have a seat over there.) "Here, you can have this one. You might want to put stuff on it." By the time Frisk sat down at the table (bacon, eggs, syrupy waffle, buttered toast, coffee because their not-parents never let them have any), Asriel had put syrup and three packets of jelly on his waffle, grabbed probably too much bacon, and had a pint of milk; he magicked open the carton and chugged the entire thing in one gulp. Sans had nothing but a tall glass of orange juice, which he also chugged in one gulp. Frisk looked, but still couldn't figure out exactly how a skeleton did that.

"so how is it?"

Asriel was too busy eating to answer. "Tastes like sugar-coated rubber, with a hint of cardboard," Frisk replied. They gobbled it down anyway. "You're made of bones, shouldn't you be drinking milk?"

"eh. milk doesn't always agree with my ribs. i like tibia guy who drinks ulna-tural juice." It took Frisk a moment to start groaning. "hey. they got a water slide, and for some reason you aren't on it." Sans pulled out three nearly identical pairs of striped swimming trunks. Where did he get...?

But Frisk knew better than to ask Sans questions like that, and they started heading to change instead. One of the businessmen watched them leave, keeping well back.

Frisk was acutely aware that they were committing a gender no-no. Their brother's shirt identified them as a girl, and they were about to walk into the men's locker room to change into boys' swimwear. Then they smiled; the brother in question was a goat and they were accompanied by a skeleton. Who was going to mess with them? Other than the rampaging fish heading their way with a spear forming in her hand and a deep scowl on her face, that is.

"FRISK! YOU FILTHY LIAR!"

"Woah! Calm down, Undyne! What'd I say?!!"

"You said there was no such thing as fake water! I just swam in it," she said, gesturing to the pool with her spear. "And it burns."

"That's not fake water, that's just pool water! It's still water!"
"Then why does it burn, Frisk?"

"Um... oh, they put chlorine in it."

"Why do they put chlorine in it, Frisk?"

"To kill all the human germs!"

"And who do these 'human germs' infect, Frisk?!"

"Humans!" Undyne was still scowling at them. "People can spread disease to each other. That's a big problem for us."

"Well, this chlorine is a big problem for me. If it wasn't my job to protect you, I would go jump in a lake." Asriel snickered. "Instead, I am taking a shower. And it better be with real water!"

"Wait, that's the men's..." Frisk started, half-heartedly, as Undyne kicked open the door.

"Think we should tell her what little kids do in the pool?"

"Probably not the best time." The businessman still holding his coffee took a sip to keep from spilling it.

Fortunately, they got in just as everyone was leaving, except for Undyne singing in the shower (which was why everyone was leaving) and changed quickly. There were other kids there, and all of them stared. Frisk looked around, you could only go down one at a time on a water slide- but yes, they had double-tubes! "Hey, Az. You want to be splashed in the face?"

"No!"

"Okay, then I'll go up front." Embarrassingly, everyone got out of their way as they walked up the stairs. The unflappable lifeguard waved them forwards, and both of them screamed gleefully all the way down, Asriel tightly clutching Frisk around the midsection.

"Aah! Cold!" Asriel shouted when the splash hit. "But it doesn't burn like Undyne said." This part of the pool was shallow enough for both of them to stand up. "I do want to be splashed in the face."

"Just don't get too much in your eyes," Frisk replied, realizing that they had no idea if that mattered to him.

On the next run down a different slide, Asriel went first, and he leaned too far back and got water up his nose. Coughing and spluttering, he climbed out of the pool first, a little girl waiting for him. "Hi!" she shouted, too loud, making his ears ring down their length.

"Um. Hi," Asriel replied. All eyes were on him. He had to make a good impression. "I'm Asriel. What's your name?"

"Becky! I'm five." Asriel didn't state his age. "Are you a real prince?" Asriel blinked back confusion- of all the questions, she asked that?

"Yes, my dad's a king, so I'm a real prince." She held out her hand for a shake, and Asriel shook it- if he couldn't borrow Frisk's energy, she would have been stronger than him! "I got a handshake from a real prince!" she crowed. "Want to kiss me?"

"What? No! Why would you- your mom and dad would be upset! Where are they?" A haggard-
looking woman came running out onto the pool floor in business attire. "Becky! I said we had to go- ohmigod. Don't... don't..."

"Don't be afraid," Asriel said. "I'm just a monster." Wordlessly, hesitantly, the woman took her daughter by the hand and left.

"This stuff takes time, Azzy," Frisk said quietly. "C'mon. We still haven't done the speed slides yet. There's two, so it should work if we go at the same time." They did, holding their arms out for a better connection and swapping sides for the next run. Eventually, they forgot that they were being watched, splashing and playing while Undyne and Sans swapped jokes poolside.

"All right, I'm done," Frisk said, worn out.

"Back upstairs for the hair dryer?" Asriel suggested.

"Wait, actually, there's a big dryer in the locker room. You step in, and it dries your whole body." Asriel stared at them, bug-eyed, and headed for it, the others close behind. He stepped in with Frisk and let the whirling air dry him off, the smell of chlorine permeating the room.

"Ohhhh that felt good. Frisk, why are you laughing?" Frisk was laughing too hard to reply and could only gesture.

"Undyne! Why is Frisk laughing?" She turned away from changing to face him, and her face broke out in a smirk, and finally she broke out in a cackle, pointing.

"Sans! Why is Undyne laughing?"

"i guess you could say.. you're asrielly fluffy."

"What?" He looked down at his arms and stomach. The dryer had made him look like an unshorn poodle, each hair separated from the others. "Aaaaahhhhh!"
"Just put on your clothes, Azzy," Frisk said. Asriel did, being careful to put his ears through first this time, and putting his arms through the sleeves smoothed them down some. Some gentle movements from Frisk smoothed his ears and arms down more.

"Hey, something's going on up front," Asriel said when Frisk got their clothes on. "I think there's a monster up there." The group hurried, Frisk's roller shoes clattering loudly. There was, indeed, a monster; a moldsmal had taken up temporary residence inside a revolving door. The group also saw Jenkins talking to some policemen out front. Asriel overheard some things but had no idea what they were talking about.

Frisk approached and considered how to deal with the moldsmal before it or anyone got hurt. They considered just picking it up, but that seemed like a very bad idea; it gave off a faint smell of battery acid, rotten eggs, powerful solvents, and other things that they really didn't want to be touching with their bare hands. That, and it looked so placid that they feared it would go off as soon as anything touched it. Maybe it was a moldbygg in disguise...

"Hey, greedy!" a kid yelled from behind them. Frisk turned around. The kid was about a year younger than them and was pointing with an accusing look. "Quit being so selfish! Tell me how to catch it!"

Confused, Frisk just said, "You can't catch it."

"I can't catch it while you've got threelegendaries?! You're a douche!" Undyne smiled at being called legendary. Sans just stood there with his trademark grin. Asriel stared at Frisk and the kid in utter confusion.

"This isn't- you can't catch monsters! They're here because they want to be!" Except for that one thing, but Frisk wasn't about to tell some random kid about that. And didn't anyone read shirts anymore? Then again, that kid's was "Gotta catch 'em all!"

"So how do you make them want to be?" the kid asked, innocently. The disbelief and puzzlement were crowding Asriel's face.

"You can't make people want to be your friends." Frisk almost asked if the kid had any human friends but suspected that the answer was no. "And I'm not going to take this little one with me either," they continued, turning away. Frisk considered how to encourage it to leave. Lying down only pacified monsters of this type, letting people walk right past; perhaps if they flirted, and made it chase them...

"You shouldn't be here," Asriel told it, walking into the revolving door alongside it. "We both know this isn't where you belong. There's nothing to eat up here, at least nothing you want." Frisk barely remembered to get into the same revolving door slot before Asriel walked out the other side, the moldsmal close behind, gawkers watching the display. "That's where the water goes, isn't it?" he continued, gesturing to a nearby storm drain. "Carrying all the yummy stuff the humans leave behind. I know, you were curious. And now you know. Down." It obediently oozed its way into the gap, falling with a plop. A few people clapped, and then, being Americans, they all did. Frisk looked at Asriel with some shock, shivering against the nippy day, and Asriel looked smug as could be. "You said who I am earlier. Did you forget?" he asked quietly.

"Prince of Monsters," Frisk acknowledged. "I still kind of wanted to show how humans should do
"We ought to put a show about that on TV. You're cold?" Frisk nodded. It wasn't Snowdin, but it was chilly. (Which reminded them, they had a never-melting snowball at some point... where'd that thing go? They didn't lose it in the Underground...) "Mom got us some sweaters." They went through the freshly emptied revolving door, which still smelled of janitorial chemicals.

"Frisk," Agent Jenkins said, hurrying with a professional jog. "Can we talk for a moment? Just the two of us."

"The three of us," Frisk countered with. Undyne looked mildly concerned; Sans did not. The three entered the elevator together, Frisk inserting the cardkey. "Is something going on with Mom and Dad?"

"No, they're fine, but Frisk, why do you consider them your mother and father?" Jenkins asked.

"Well, Mom took care of me when I fell past the barrier." There was no way they were going to tell him what really happened down there.

"And then Mom got back together with Asgore, so that makes him my Dad, and Asriel is their son, which makes him my brother."

"And your birth parents?"

"You're like the third or fourth person- I don't talk about them. I don't want to talk about them." They're the only people in the whole world I'd never even try to save, Frisk almost said, but didn't want to let on too much about their determination, either. "They're bad, okay? If they're asking to talk to me, tell them to go away."

"You've made your wishes clear. Thank you. I just needed to make sure something else wasn't going on." Frisk just shook their head. Couldn't this guy recognize a loving family when he saw one?

The elevator reached the top floor, and Asriel and Frisk hunted through the dresser drawers. "Hey, Frisk, what's a 'diplomatic incident'?"

"It's when something bad happens between leaders or countries? Maybe ambassadors? Or maybe just some diplomat does something bad in a foreign country?" That reminded them, The Revenge of Dr. No was in the theater. They'd managed to smuggle a viewing of not-dad's S.P.E.C.T.R.E. Blu-ray a few months back.

"Oh, that makes sense. I heard Jenkins also say something about 'summons', so maybe someone accused Dad of summoning monsters."

"Yeah, someone needs to tell them not to blame him. This one works," Frisk said, picking out a bright red and extremely comfortable sweater.

"I guess this shirt doesn't match..." Asriel started, about to change.

"No, leave it on, I'll just do this." Frisk put their T-shirt on above the sweater. Asriel couldn't believe he didn't think of that.

"Hey, what was that kid even talking about?" Asriel asked on their way back. "With the catching monsters?"

"There's a lot of games about monsters up here. But they're not about you. Most of them are 'fight
the monsters" Frisk wasn't about to even mention the concept of EXP in front of Jenkins. "but there's one real popular one that lets players catch them, and then use them to do stuff, like fight other monsters and ride around and have tournaments. He thought that was real."

"And this game's real popular?"

"Yep. Sorry."

"So when they see us, they all think that..." Asriel trailed off.

"It's why I like wearing this T-shirt," Frisk replied.

"...so, yeah, actually trying to catch 'em all isn't very smart," Sans was telling the kid as the elevator opened. "how would you even feed 'em all?"

The kid looked sheepish. "In the games and the show, there's these little balls that hold them until the player's ready to choose." Suddenly, Undyne was quite glad that anime was not, in fact, real.

"Wow. Portable solitary confinement for your gladiator slaves. For little kids to play games and watch cartoons about. Hey Frisk, why didn't you warn us the surface was so messed up?" Undyne was glaring at Frisk with her one eye. The kid finally decided it was a good time to scram, as did almost all of the gawkers.

"Alphys's a big anime fan, ask her why she didn't warn you."

"Oh, I will," Undyne said, cracking her knuckles ominously. "In person."

_Maybe I shouldn't have deflected that one._ "Anyway, you guys want to catch a movie?" Frisk asked, changing the subject. "The new James Bond's out. We can get the seats that shake like an amusement park."

"Sure, I got time. Gotta be at the dum-vee later with my bro, though." Everyone looked confused. "You know, for our learners' permits." Sans was learning to drive? Papyrus was learning to drive?!

Frisk could only think of one outcome to that, and it rhymed with blisted bleckage of blangled bletal. Would the rescue crew even bother using the Jaws of Life if the driver was already a skeleton? Sans read their expression. "C'mon Frisk, give 'im some credit." _Yeah, and maybe a couple of LOADs, too._

For the moment, at least, they had a driver who knew what he was doing. "Hey, Frisk," Asriel asked as he closed the door to the SUV, not wanting to ask yet another embarrassing question in public. "What's an amusement park?"

This time, it was Frisk's turn to flinch at how close Asriel was to never knowing things. A kid who didn't know what an amusement park was? Wasn't that against the Geneva Conventions? "It's a place where you go on fast, scary roller coasters and hit bumper cars together and eat cotton candy. But in that order, if you do it the other way around you throw up." Well, Frisk would. And did, once. And then- but they didn't think about that. "It's not amusement park season, though, they only open in the summer." Frisk suddenly recoiled. They'd been thinking too small. They tumbled the thought around in their head. _I can go to a Six Flags where the weather's warm. I can go to Disney World if I want. And I can use DETERMINATION to guarantee a good time._

"What?" Asriel asked.

"My world's a lot bigger now, too," Frisk replied, still trying to mentally reconcile Disney World
and if I want. "Okay, take brother to amusement park, that's on the list. And an aquarium. And a lot of other places."

"well, you've finally become determined to enjoy life. I guess you could say you're feeling... frisky." All the monsters laughed, but Frisk didn't. "dish it out, but can't take it?"

"No, Sans, it's a great pun by itself... but don't tell anyone this, any of you." Sans made a lips-zipped gesture, which came out weird as he didn't have any lips. "My not-parents had one name they were going to use if I were a boy and another if I were a girl. But I came out like this, so they named me after a brand of cat food." They clenched their left fist tightly at their side. "I hated that cat when I was little. But it wasn't the cat's fault." Frisk almost brought up the idea of changing their name but remembered the last time something tried to do that. "See why I don't talk about them? Oh yeah, don't talk in the theater, and turn your phones off, too."

Undyne looked at them strangely. "Do things... happen... in these theaters, Frisk?"

"I don't know what you're thinking, and I don't want to. It's just so we don't disturb everyone else. Oh, and if anyone else's phone rings, I think you're allowed to stab them with your spear. Hey, Jenkins, can she get away with that?"

"If it doesn't put them in the hospital, I'll get it swept under the rug."

"So is this a kind of anime?" Asriel asked.

"No, it's a movie with live actors. Humans pretend to be movie characters, and then they use cameras and special effects to make it look like they're doing things they're not actually doing, but it's all pictures of stuff that happened in front of a camera. It's all fake, it's just... real-fake, not cartoon-fake." But then there was CGI... "Most of it, anyway."

"That must be horrible, pretending to be a movie character. That's a job Alphys built a robot for. Who'd want to do that?" Asriel asked. Frisk laughed and explained how many people wanted to become big stars and how much they got paid when they did, and then Asriel asked more questions about how real-fake worked, and Asriel and Undyne almost understood what they were in for by the time they went into the theater. (Sans never needed anything explained, which Frisk found increasingly weird. That skeleton simply knew things...)

The movie was full of plot holes, incredible leaps of logic, implausible stunts, and Daniel Craig acting like a badass, and Asriel almost got shaken right out of his seat, and nobody's phone rang, and the kids loved every second of it, despite its long runtime. Except for the weird adult parts and some fairly gruesome scenes that might have disturbed kids who weren't used to being attacked or turned into flowers.

Sans slipped away once the credits rolled, heading to the DMV, and Jenkins led the other three out past a crowd of gawkers and a couple of paparazzi (seriously? We have paparazzi on us now?! to a limousine with enough headroom for Asgore and Toriel, and Frisk was surprised they made limos that tall. "Mom! Dad! We just saw James Bond kick everyone's ass!" Asriel gushed before realizing how little that made him sound.

Toriel might have said something relating to violence and children if she had completely different children. Instead, she said, "I'm glad you had fun. We're going to have a nice supper today. As a family." The last part was directed to Asgore.

Frisk surprisingly found themselves looking forward to it. Being dragged along to dinner with their not-parents was always a nightmare, but with Mom... Dad didn't seem too enthused, though. "Dad,
"It's not what I want to be doing. You should have told me that there are more than 200 countries in the world." Oh no, now Dad's expecting me to tell him basic stuff that I wouldn't know is important! "All of which have monsters in them now, and all of which have leaders that want to talk to me." He shook his head. "Some of these leaders should not be leaders," he said, quietly. "And your mother is right. I also have duties as a father." He turned to his son. "But how can I teach you anything about the world when I, myself, know nothing about it?"

"Frisk's been helping, but they say we need school, and I don't know how that works."

Toriel chuckled. "School is what I wanted to talk to Frisk about. After supper." She sighed, thinking. "Frisk, I do not like to say this about your species. So many humans profess love and practice hate. I wish I understood why."

"Mom, I don't know what happened today to make you ask that, and I'm not sure I want to." She didn't answer.

"Your Majesty, if anyone said anything harsh to you-" Undyne began.

"Not to me. Never to my face." She gently waggled an ear, and everyone understood.

"I did a lot of videoconferencing today," Asgore said, pronouncing the unfamiliar word carefully. "Having tea in the morning with a man eating dinner in the evening. There's a lot of tyrants in the world, and they usually think that I'll agree with them, just because I'm a king. What happened to you, that kings became evil and that your advanced countries, what are they called... yes, you First Worlders decided to elect your leaders?"

"That's something you'll have to learn from a history book," Frisk said. "But I think that human kings were always kind of bad. Being able to do things to people and get away with it gets to people's heads." Frisk didn't think that their power could corrupt them. They only had the power to undo things, not to do things, at least not to humans. Then again, Chara and Flowey...

"Yet another reason to worry," Toriel said.

Frisk leaned in, making sure the driver, who wasn't Jenkins, couldn't hear them. No, there was thick glass and a push-button intercom between driver and passengers. "You have nothing to worry about, remember?"

"I am not worried for myself," she replied. "Not even for monsters. I am worried for all of you. For your future."

"You've got me here, Mom," Frisk reminded her. "If you want, I won't SAVE after today. So if anything really bad happens a month or two months from now, it can always be taken back. All the way back."

"My child, that is your ability. Yours to use."

"Don't do it, Frisk," Asriel said in a low voice. "If you keep looking for every possible solution, every possible reality, you'll end up like Flowey. We're having an awesome day today. You know what would make it less awesome? Doing it over, and over, and over, and over, and over-" He stopped. "Mom, if you're worried about something in particular, maybe we can stop it. Not from Frisk's DETERMINATION, just from actually stopping it." She shook her head.
"My burden," Asgore said. "Not yours. Never yours, I suppose. When you were... when you were alive, I had dreamed of passing on peacefully, and leaving the Underground to you. But that cannot happen." He turned to Frisk. "And I cannot even pass on any other way. So you will always be a prince, and never a king."

"Always," Asriel replied, "until old age takes Frisk away."

"Azzy, are you really sure you don't want me to keep an old SAVE? There's no time limit. Even after that ninety years, I can just LOAD back."

"I'm sure. You'd go crazy, Frisk. Eventually you wouldn't remember what you'd done and what you hadn't. And then, not remembering, you'd just keep going back over and over..."

"Highnesses, Majesties." Undyne interrupted. "The way forward is forward, boldly forward, always onward! To greater ideals and higher challenges! Frisk, erase bad events if you must! But don't stop going forward just to erase your past!"

"Oh, I'd love to erase my past," Frisk replied. "But that was before I got this power." The limo pulled to the side of a swanky-looking building. "A French restaurant?" It clicked immediately. "Oh my God, Mom, you came for the snails! Okay, Azzy, you win the argument. I am not doing this over again!"

Of course they had reservations, and of course Mom ordered an escargot platter for all of them. The kids were still in their T-shirts, but nobody in their right mind really expected children to be dressed up, and there were no dress codes for monsters, especially not royal monsters. The general snootiness of the place was slightly disturbing to Frisk, who was used to associating it with their not-parents fussing over every last thing they did, but when Dad was gobbling down literal handfuls of snails, shells and all (Who would stop him? That's what 'king' means), and Undyne was spearing them with her fork one at a time, they didn't really worry about things like that. And the escargot was surprisingly good. They didn't even mind being called "Mademoiselle" by the waiter.

"Wait," Frisk said when they were about to leave. "I know this stuff's getting paid for, but you're supposed to leave a tip for the waiter. A little bit of money, for the service."

"I suppose one of these will do," Toriel said, leaving a one-ounce gold coin where the snails used to be.

"Okay, Mom," Frisk started on their way out, popping an after-dinner peppermint candy in their mouth, "what's this school stuff you wanted to talk to me about?"

"The paperwork is in our suite, but there are so many terms and names and ideas I have never heard of. What is Common Core?"
Frisk realized that they should have expected questions like that. They tried to remember what they'd overheard from the teachers' lounge and came up empty. "It's a bunch of tests, I think. But we stopped getting those tests a couple years ago? A lot of people liked to complain about it, I think?" It had been too long, and Frisk had been too young. "Just show me when we get home. By the way, we're gonna get mauled by people with cameras, but I've got just the thing," they said, reaching for their phone.

Half an hour later, the limousine pulled up to the hotel's front entrance to a crowd of paparazzi and spectators. People had told their friends, who told their friends- the Royal Family of Monsters was staying here! At this very hotel, in their town, even! They were all goats, and the kid goat was really cute, and they had a human kid with them, too! Undyne got out first ("There's the singing fish lady!"), waved to the crowd, and opened a door. To shouts of "King Asgore, can you..." "Queen Toriel, what is..." "Prince Asriel, are you..." a long, shapely leg poked out.

"WELL HELLO MY DEARS! I AM SO GLAD YOU ALL CAME TO SEE ME!" Mettaton EX shouted, reveling in the camera flashes. "ARE YOU HERE TO TALK ABOUT MY UPCOMING THEATRICAL DEBUT? MY TELEVISION SERIES? MY FLIP BOOKS? OR DO YOU WANT ME ON YOUR TALK SHOW? BUT ONLY IF IT DOESN'T GET HIGHER RATINGS THAN MY OWN, 'A TON OF METTATON', AIRING THREE TIMES A DAY ON THE MTT NETWORK! WAIT, WHERE ARE YOU ALL GOING?"

Meanwhile, in the lowest level of the basement parking garage, Jenkins was hustling the royal family out of a van and into an elevator. "Nice trick, Frisk," he said warmly, sticking in the cardkey. "Right out of the playbook."

"Thanks. Will they ever go away?"

"If you stay out of the spotlight, they will once the novelty runs out."

"Agent Jenkins," Toriel said formally, "I know that this is just a career for you, but I have not yet formally thanked you for what you've done for us. It must be a burden."

Jenkins' professionalism, weakened by familiarity, dropped entirely. "No thanks are necessary. I've been a bodyguard to people from all over the world, but never to a royal family from another time, another world. In the last couple of days I've seen things that shouldn't be possible. This isn't a burden for me, this is an adventure. I've already got so much to tell my kids."

"You've got kids?" Asriel asked.

"Not yet. But that will change," he said with a nod. He paused for a moment. "Everything that's been delivered has been opened for security. Toys, mail, books, all of it." He looked at Asgore and Toriel. "Do you want to read the threats and the hate yourself, or should I dispose of it?" Toriel answered him with a gesture towards the children, and Jenkins understood at once. There wasn't too much, and most of it was probably trolling, but all of it would go to the FBI.

"If it's about us, shouldn't we read it?" Frisk protested.

"No," Toriel's voice was firm. "I am putting my foot down." She did, physically, and her soft, padded foot hit the elevator floor like a hard hoof. "You have had quite enough of people hating you. Both of you." Frisk backed down, an appreciative smile growing on their face, and Jenkins did
Once the Dreemurrs were alone, Toriel asked her children, "How long have you been wearing those clothes?"

"Since yesterday except for this sweater. You tucked us in with them last night," Frisk answered.

"That was neglectful of me. We are not in the Underground any more! Bathtub, both of you, and then we can see to your education."

As Frisk took off their sweater, they saw the white hairs embedded in it. "Azzy! You got fur all over me!"

"You're the one telling me I'm fluffy! What did you think was going to happen?"

"I shall deal with this. I have long experience with it," Toriel said, looking at Asgore, who shied away. "I did not call him King Fluffybuns without a reason." He gently cupped her face, and she closed her eyes for the kiss. The kids quickly went into the tub to get away from watching it, luxuriating in the fact that they got to have a bubble-massage bath every day, and they found matching green-and-white pajamas, and fuzzy socks for Frisk, waiting for them after they finished drying each other's hair.

"Are you ready?" Toriel asked, having changed clothes herself into a modest nightgown, her husband in a kingly robe. "There was so much sent to me, by so many groups, but I am having trouble discerning what is of educational value and what is not."

Frisk glanced at the boxes of books, DVD cases, and packets, reading some of the names. "Well, it's all of educational value, Mom. We can use it to learn stuff in school, or Azzy can use it to practice his fire magic." There wasn't a fireplace in the penthouse, but there was a large grill on the patio.

"Asriel, you've learned how to cast?" Asgore asked. "And you have the strength to burn paper?"

"Yeah, Dad. I've got a really big fuel tank," he said, smiling and pointing to Frisk, who smiled back. The Dreemurr parents looked at each other and at their children, understanding.

"That reminds me," Frisk said. "All of this stuff is about human topics. What about stuff like, the differences between monsters, or how to cast other kinds of spells, or how magic works in general? There was a couple books like that in the Librarby, but those weren't teacher or student books."

Toriel smiled. "Then we'll just have to write some."

"So, what did they send you?" Frisk asked. Their mother started taking out books and reading titles while Frisk made judgments as best they could. "Okay, earth science, we're going to need that. English... I remember that book! That's the same one we used last year. Okay, all the stuff from this publisher is good. The math... I remember now! That's what everyone was complaining about, the math stuff. It's basically 'how to move numbers around', and most kids got it but some adults were too stupid. Ooh, history, that might be weird, because you're not from here. I mean, you wouldn't know what Valentine's Day or Fourth of July or Thanksgiving are, and you celebrate Christmas weird."

"Thanksgiving, I could tell you about that." The kids looked at their father. "I wasn't there for the very first one. That started in the northeast, as I recall. But the Xualae and the English, and later the Cherokee," Asgore did not pronounce 'Cherokee' the same way Americans did. "would celebrate together after every harvest season." They weren't always friendly with one another, but what
humans ever were? "Children playing outside before the weather got too cold, people giving what they had, storing up for the long, cold winter. Sometimes, the children would see me seeing them, and they'd either scream or chase me. Once, one got lost in the snow, and he thought I was going to eat him instead of bringing him home..." Asgore sighed, wistfully. If he had taken the kid's SOUL rather than showing mercy, everything would have been different. "It was a simpler time. No penthouses, no limousines, no videoconferences or planet-wide news." His phone started to ring, and he held it up, chuckling deeply. "None of this." He answered it, and waved to his family as he went towards the elevator.

"I like penthouses and limousines, though." Asriel said.

"Me too," Frisk said. "Well, I didn't like them that much before, but I wasn't in them before." Asriel laughed. "Okay, what else?"

"Critical Race Theory for Grade Schoolers..."

Frisk's face screwed up. They couldn't remember where they've heard that before. Not-dad's favorite news channel? "Let me see." They paged through it. "Wow, this book really hates white people." Frisk was roughly half white in total, from great-grandparents on different sides of the family tree, although they were told they looked a lot like their Chinese grandfather. They started laughing, wondering what whoever wrote this pile would write about monsters. "There's a word for this, but it's not 'belief' or 'religion', it's an idea, maybe?"

"Is the word 'ideology'?" Toriel asked.

"Thanks, Mom. Ideology. Any books that do ideology are bad." Frisk put it aside for fire magic practice.

"Claws, Jaws, and... Dinno-saurs? by Kent... Hoe-vined? Huhvinned? I do not know how to pronounce all of this."

"Dinosaurs? Let me see." Something about it didn't look right, and Frisk flipped through it, laughing. "Wow. This is completely bogus. This one's for the grill." Frisk really did not want to read what this person would have to write about monsters.

"Veggie Tales... Is there a Vegetoid in this?"

Frisk laughed. "I wish. It's not what you think it is, Mom." They'd been subjected to it when they were little, and looking at it again was unpleasant. "Burn this one hot, Azzy."

"Exploring the Gender Spectrum, Challenging Gender Assumptions..."

Frisk's stomach dropped. "Oh, no, no!"

"You really don't want..." their mother started.

"I don't want to be treated special, I don't want to have to explain it, and I don't want anyone else in my class looking at me funny. This stuff shouldn't even be in school. It's all more ideology. Burn it. All of it." Frisk was wearing the same expression they'd had when they first left the ruins, and Toriel relented. "Here, let me just see the pile again." They started taking out books, looking at names, dividing the wheat from the chaff. "Focus on the Family? This isn't even a textbook, this can focus on the fire. Okay, the rest of this is actual books and programs, some of it is for high schoolers. Chemistry, biology, some advanced social studies... wow, they really sent you everything. It's good, but I don't know if you want to have it in our school."
"Why would I not?"

"It's for older teenagers," Frisk replied. "You're not going to put all ages in one school, are you? Nobody does that here." Frisk had no idea why, though.

"I can, and I will. You will stay in the same school until you go to college." Toriel suddenly laughed. "That is what human mothers worry about, is it not? Their children, going to college? A child I found, and a child I thought I had lost. And now here I am, talking about sending them out into the world."

"Together," Asriel added.

"Hey, Az, we'll figure something out before then. There's these girls who are basically two heads on one body, and I think they manage to live all right."

"I didn't mean it like... well, maybe I did." He was going to say something else, but it was embarrassing.

Frisk smiled and put an arm around him, cheering both of them up. He was impossibly, magically cuddly. "You feel normal now, Mom?" She nodded, slowly. "I've got time-reversing power, my whole family is goat monsters, I'm attached to my brother, and I feel more like a normal person than I ever have. Except my mom's going to be the principal. That's weird. When are we going there?"

"I was told that it would be built in two weeks because of 'prefabricated modules' and 'around the clock construction', but I am not seeing a clock on this picture..." Toriel found the floor plan and unfolded it on the floor. Most of the stuff Frisk recognized immediately, like classrooms, offices, and bathrooms, but some of it seemed out of place. Gates on an exterior fence? Designated student pick-up lanes? Security checkpoints with metal detectors? Cameras everywhere?

"Wow, Mom!" Frisk shouted, laughing. "All this needs are some sentry guns on the playground. Any kid stays too late at recess, t-t-t-t-t-t-t-t!" Frisk made a machinegun noise with their tongue and teeth.

"And a moat!" Asriel suggested with a wide grin. "With crocodiles and a big drawbridge, so anyone who's late has to throw a grappling hook over it!"

"Or we can get that big tentacle monster, what was her name?"

"Onion-san! Yeah, we can feed her the kids who flunk out!"

"And the fence should be electrified! With spikes on top!" Everyone knew that kids loved spikes, and Frisk was no exception.

"And, what's that stuff called, that other fence with the spikes on it?" Asriel asked. "It's like a rope?"

"Barbed wire? Razor wire?"

"Yeah, barbed razor wire! Put that stuff on everything! On the desks, on the buses, on the doors... on the teachers!" Both of them broke up laughing.

Even Toriel started to chuckle. "You two are incorrigible."

Asgore came back up the elevator, exasperated. "Interviewing the regular Mettaton was bad, but
the EX was far worse. I'm not sure if it was interviewing me or if it expected me to interview it. He didn't go into detail, instead looking at what his family was doing. "Building a jail? Is this a homework assignment?"

"Dear! It's supposed to be a school!"

Frisk pointed at the blueprints, laughing. "That's not what this is!"

"Fire magic?" Asriel suggested.

"Fire magic," Frisk agreed. Asriel folded up the diagram and put it on the crap pile. "Hey, Mom, did these people send you anything else?"

"Well, yes, there's something on resource officers... and active shooter drills..." Toriel wasn't sure what the students were being drilled to actively shoot. "and bullying prevention..."

"Oooh, bullying prevention!" Frisk spat out with extra sarcasm. "Hey Az, guess what that actually creates."

"More bullying?"

"Wow! My brother's a psychic!" Frisk shouted, taking the packet from their mother's hands and slamming it on the burn-it pile. "And nobody's going to shoot up the school, either," they continued, grabbing the other packets from the same organization. "Even if they could do it without me undoing it, it's too rare to turn a school into a concentration camp. Don't do any of the other stuff, either, like 'Line up to go to the next class, we might lose you!'" That quote was said in a maximum-doofus voice. "Even for fifth graders. Please don't let our school end up like that, Mom." Everyone was staring at them. "I'm sorry, it makes me mad."

"When you say 'shoot up the school', do you mean with rifles?" Asgore asked. He had been shot with flintlocks a few times during the war, once in the head, but the bullets had passed right through him and the holes had healed rapidly. It was nearly impossible for humans to kill monsters with those. Killing other humans, however...

"Or pistols, or shotguns, or pipe bombs, or anything, really." Their family was staring even more. "I probably shouldn't even have told you. It's super rare, but the news likes to talk about it."

Toriel looked at her child intensely, her expression softening. "I thought that this would be so much easier. In every respect."

"You thought that you could just teach kids? Yeah." Frisk looked up at their parents. "Simpler time. You still can, Mom. You're the Queen of Monsters opening up the first school for your own kind, who's going to tell you what you can't do? And we can enjoy a nice, warm fire," they continued, carrying out the burn-it pile to the grill, their family close behind. Frisk packed the loose papers and some of the horrible books in and closed the bottom up. Fueled by Frisk's scorn, Asriel's magic took the paper at once, and the two of them held their hands up to it, enjoying the contrast between the chilly winds and the heat as burning, fluttering bits of paper floated out, and they leaned back against the reek of burning plastic.

"So what's it like going to school?" Asriel asked, and Frisk turned to him. "We're going to be in a room full of people our age? That seems a little bit..."

"Scary? Strange?" Asriel nodded, his ears wobbling. "It'll be fine. A lot better than my old school. We'll just be there learning stuff. Anything to worry about can't happen to us." Frisk had used a
sure-fire strategy to avoid being picked on: be smart, be unnoticed, and be quick. Being out of the way served them so well in school that they weren't sure how not to be, even with options like 'LOAD', 'Mom's the principal', 'fireballs', and the really effective one that they hoped Mom would use, 'don't let bad kids in the school at all'.

"Children, we also had some people send toys. Would you like to see them?"

"Mom, I saw the toys you had before. They weren't very good," Frisk said. They felt a little bit old for toys.

"These are brand new." Shrugging, Frisk followed their mother inside, Asriel close behind.

"Why are they sending us free toys?" Asriel asked.

"For the same reason they're sending Mom free books," Frisk said. "They want us to use them, and they want us to tell the world we're using them, because we're popular. Toys are pretty cheap to make. Advertising is expensive." They looked at the boxes their mother was unpacking. "Oh, it's all Lego!" A castle, a dinosaur, a series of robots, a big tub of multicolored bits. "I... never actually owned these," they said, and then felt bad for saying it, because when was the last time their brother had the chance to play with something like this? If ever?

"Which one do you want to do first?" Asriel asked.

"We don't need to do what it says on the box. We can build anything."

"Like what?" Asriel asked, and then they were both stuck with too many options. "I know! Let's do that fortress school we were talking about!"

"Yeah!" They set to work immediately, cannibalizing playsets to establish an outer structure while their mother unpacked a tablet that someone had sent her. Asriel made his moat out of loose blue pieces while Frisk built a sentrygun-equipped playground in the back and dragooned castle guard and technician figures to serve as students and teachers. Frisk put the dinosaur's head on a large pillar while Asriel built a very good Onion-san out of white pieces. Too good, in fact, and the surrounding moat was made of blocks connected together at the sides, which Legos didn't do. "Az, that's awesome! But we won't be able to use them again."

"Yes we will," Asriel beamed, holding up two blue pieces, connecting them at the sides, and then disconnecting them. Frisk couldn't even tell what he was doing, exactly. The only smell of melted plastic was coming from the still-smoldering grill.

Asgore looked at what his children were doing, paying particularly close attention to the physical alterations. "Wow, Asriel. I was never able to do anything like that at your age."


"It's more than just power. It's finesse, and I don't think I had that either. Of course, all we had then was wood. Not plastic." He looked down at what they had made, making alterations so that things more resembled what they were pretending to be. Faces on figures were changed, walls looked like walls, blocks looked like desks, and Frisk's sentryguns were turned into things altogether strange.

"Careful, Dad," Asriel warned. "We have to take it apart when we're done so we can use it later."

"Use it later? You can do that?" Asgore took two small pieces in his large hands, putting them together and taking them apart the normal way, fascinated. He looked at Frisk with a smile. "Humans can never stop inventing things. I suppose that's just how it is. Now you have something
That makes you almost like us."

"I still don't get what you're doing," Frisk said.

"Do you know what the difference is between a solid object and two solid objects made of the same material?" Asgore asked Frisk, and they shook their head. "Not much. It's only the tiny little outside layer that's different. We just change it to be the same. It doesn't take a lot of energy, and even less for plastic." Frisk had always wondered how Papyrus made a snow sculpture that impressive. Asgore kissed both his children on the top of the head. "Now don't burn too much of your sibling's fuel tank, Asriel. Although we are refilling it soon," he said, mischievously.

"With what?" Frisk asked, before getting a whiff of cinnamon and butterscotch. "Oh!" The kids finished quickly, and Frisk took a few pictures of the project with their phone before helping their brother disassemble the blocks.

The penthouse's dining table was just large enough for the four of them, and Toriel cut the finished pie into four equal parts with judiciously applied magic. Frisk had almost forgotten how incredibly good it was. There wasn't a lot of sugar in it; the tang of butterscotch mixed with the bite of cinnamon did it all. A quarter of such a large pie filled them up nicely.

Tears were running down Asriel's face as he chewed bite after bite, only pausing for water.

"Why are you crying, my child?" Toriel asked.

"I don't know. I shouldn't be. I'm happy. I'm just so happy to be alive..." He chomped the last bite, crust and all. "This is the best thing I have ever eaten."

She smiled, a wide, gentle smile. "Then I suppose I have two reasons to be proud of myself today." Her family looked at her. "I managed to get this working without any help," she said triumphantly, holding up her new tablet. "And even connected to the Internet! You can use it tomorrow if you want. Now, it is time for bed." Her children went without a word of protest, and she tucked them in with goodnight kisses again as they snuggled next to each other. Frisk could hear her talking through the closed door.

"Hey Az, what's she saying?"

"She's just telling Dad how she's going to look for pictures of herself on Google."

Frisk sat bolt upright, face twisted in pure horror, startling their brother. "AAAAAAH! MOM! WAIT!"
Fishbones

Frisk bolted out of bed like Undyne was after them, and Asriel managed to follow them out, confused.

"What is wrong, my child?" Toriel asked, concerned.

"Don't Google yourself," Frisk warned, their voice wavering. "Don't look at the pictures, don't even read the words. Don't use that one devious art site, don't go to Fur-aficionado or whatever it's called, and above all, never, ever, visit any site that ends in 'chan.' Frisk's not-parents had never allowed them to use the computer at home, but they weren't always home and didn't really understand computer security or browser history, and Frisk had discovered many things before their not-mother had lost her job, stopped leaving the house, gained weight, and became even more insufferable.

"Oh my! Do you think some of the pictures will be unflattering?" Frisk's dear, naive mother asked.

"No, Mom, they'll be flattering, but..." Frisk gave their dad a desperate 'please understand what I'm talking about' look.

Asgore smiled. "I suppose I'll have to look at some of them. They sound like they might be interesting." He started to look concerned and kneeled down next to Frisk. "She isn't drawn naked in these pictures, is she?"

Frisk burst out laughing, then looked into their father's concerned face and laughed some more. "Dad, I can't explain it. Just don't. If you do, you'll regret it."

"Perhaps we should look for pictures of our son instead?" Toriel suggested, typing.

"Mom, I think you should listen to Frisk..." Asriel started to say.

"Well, this site cannot be too bad, it has 'heal' in the name... Good gravy! Delete! Delete! How do I delete?!"

"That's foul!" Asgore shouted, enraged and aghast. Asriel looked, and covered up his eyes with his ears to keep from seeing what he thought he just saw.

"I told you you'd regret it!" Frisk shouted, interfering before their parents could break the computer. After a brief but informative session on the realities of the Internet, the ability of people to post whatever they want, and the limits (or lack thereof) of human depravity, Toriel once more tucked her children in, giving them deep hugs and tender good-night kisses and a promise never, ever to do that again. The kids fell asleep slowly, Asriel shuddering as he put his nose to Frisk's chest.

"Mornin', Frisk," Asriel woke them up with. Frisk didn't remember anything from their dreams except a feeling of deep contentment.

"Mornin', Az," they replied, reaching for their phone. Alphys had sent them a text marked 'Please come and see me today' and an app named 'Checkup', which let them know the status of all their friends. Papyrus was listed as 'Do Not Disturb - taking bar exam', and Frisk wondered if he was being tested on getting drunk. Frisk pressed "Check" for Sans, Alphys, and Undyne, who came back 'OK' in moments, and even Frisk could hear their parents in the other room. "Good time to
SAVE?" Asriel nodded, and giving their brother a warm hug, as always, filled Frisk with DETERMINATION. "Bathroom." Their morning ritual commenced.

"Cripes, how do you shed this much?!!" Frisk asked, getting out large swaths of fur with each stroke of the brush.

"You poop, I don't," Asriel reminded them.

"I'm brushing your poop?!!"

"If my hair's poop, so's yours!" Frisk tacitly acknowledged the point and finished their brother's fur before starting on their teeth, and Asriel was able to floss out much less plaque than last time.

They went to get dressed. "Heh. Mom really did fix this thing," Asriel said, looking at his old striped shirt.

"Brings back bad memories?"

"Yeah. But happier ones, too. Mom got me and Chara matching shirts... but this is also what I wore when I met you," he said, putting it and pants on, and Frisk put on their striped shirt, pants, and socks, which felt perfectly tailored and brand new.

"Good morning, children," Asgore said, a bright pink 'Mr. Dad Guy' T-shirt on his enormous frame, sitting at the table with his wife. "Tea?"

"Sure, Dad," Frisk said, sitting down alongside their brother. The tea was excellent and not a variety Frisk had tasted before. Nor, they suspected, had their father. "I want to take Az to Disney World until school starts. Maybe stop over at SeaWorld, go some other places too." Their family looked at them, Asriel taking a large gulp of warm tea. "The first is the biggest amusement park in the world, and the second is the biggest aquarium. I think. We can bring Undyne, she'll like it."

"Even with her, will everything be okay?" Toriel asked.

"We've got that app Alphys sent us. I'll make sure I LOAD and not SAVE if something's happened to you."

"I see my children in front of me, and I want to protect them," Asgore said. "I don't think I'll ever get used to the other way around."

Toriel chuckled. "It seems your father and I do have something in common. But you have to be ready for school. That means eating right, staying healthy, and getting plenty of sleep. And I want you back in the morning, a full day before school starts, so we can prepare."

"Yes, Mom," Frisk and Asriel said together.

There was a ding as the elevator came up, and the Dreemurrs turned to face it. "Excuse me, King Asgore Dreemurr?" a man wearing a suit and an inordinate amount of hair gel asked. Another, smaller, man was with him, and Jenkins was behind the both of them, his face lined in a deep scowl. Frisk knew that look. It was the look of someone bringing bad news who wasn't responsible for it.

"I am having tea with my family," Asgore rumbled. "Is this important?"

"I'm afraid it is, Your Majesty. Fathoms Sharpvalue, Attorney-at-Law. Please read these legal documents carefully, as they outline your options." He handed a large brown envelope to a
confused Asgore and looked down at Frisk. "Frisk Sholeas?"

*Oh, no. This can't be what I think it is. You have got to be kidding me. Wake me up, Azzy, I am having a very bad dream.*

Even through Frisk's shock and outrage, their hair-trigger reflexes kicked in. "There's no one by that name living here," they said quickly, too quickly. "I'm Frisk Dreemurr. You must be talking about someone else." Their tone of voice made the situation clear, and Asriel felt an alarming wave of rage coming out of Frisk's SOUL, like someone had turned the wrong valve in a boiler room.

Fathoms considered his next words carefully. "I am obligated to request that you come home with me. Your parents are-"

"And I'm obligated to tell you to put honey on your dick, put chocolate syrup on your balls, and shove them down an anthill! Full of fire ants!" Frisk shouted. Fathoms looked at the monsters and their bodyguard, and decided it would be a good idea to end the conversation there. As the two men descended, Frisk entertained fantasies of using Asriel's magic to cut the elevator cable, sending the lawyer somewhat farther down than he anticipated and exactly as far as he belonged.

"That was a very discourteous and inappropriate thing to say, my child," Toriel said in disapproval. "I'm sorry, Mom. But what he just gave Dad is discourteous and inappropriate."

Asgore had opened up the envelope and was looking over the papers, trying to make sense of them. "Court summons? Ordered to appear? Custody hearing? Expedited... that's next week? Judge Judith Saibancho, Presiding? What does all this mean?"

"It means they want me back," Frisk snapped, slamming the side of their fist into the wall. "It means they just flushed our vacation plans down the toilet. It means they won't go away!"

"Jenkins, did the President have a role in this?" Asgore asked, his face darkening.

"That's not how things work in this country, Your Majesty," Jenkins replied. "This is entirely the responsibility of Frisk's..." Frisk stared at him, hard. "...the Sholeas family."

"He's right, Dad," Frisk said. "But, hey, Jenkins? Is there any way to send American citizens to Guantanamo?"

Jenkins shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Why don't you go and get some breakfast while I tell your parents how the justice system works?" The emphasis on 'your parents' was reassuring. Frisk put on their roller shoes, and the Dreemurr kids went to the stairs rather than the elevator, which was near the bottom floor and surely contaminated with lawyer germs.

"They can't actually get you back, can they?" Asriel asked.

"Of course not," Frisk replied, a c'mon, bro look on their face. Their DETERMINATION would make sure of that even if they had to LOAD several dozen times in a row. As long as Frisk had any chance, their not-parents had no chance at all.

"Then you shouldn't get so mad."

"You're right. I was kind of acting like Chara, wasn't I?"

"Not at all," Asriel replied, smiling. "You're burning where Chara was frozen. Chara never got mad. Chara got even. Usually more than even." He paused for a moment. "Someone's coming."
Frisk heard it in a few moments: someone struggling to breathe was running up the stairs, panting. The kids looked down to see Undyne, in full armor with water dripping out of it, running up the stairs, putting foot after foot down. "Undyne, what's wrong?" Frisk asked.

"Just... training," she panted.

"I thought you said monsters didn't get stronger like that?"

"We... don't. But I need... discipline." She continued running past the kids. "I will join you... shortly." Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, shrugging, and continued. Frisk held the railing and bumpety-bumped their roller shoes down the stairs a few times.

"I don't know why they want me back," they said suddenly when they were halfway down, turning to their brother. "They never loved me, so it's not that. Maybe they just don't want me to be happy? But they're too cheap to hire a lawyer out of spite."

"Or maybe they just don't want to let go, even if they do hate you," Asriel suggested, and then smiled. "Of course, sometimes, not wanting to let go is a good thing, if you're doing it for the right reasons."

"Azzy, this is going to sound weird, and maybe it's because of Chara somehow or maybe it's just because of Mom, but the moment I saw you, the real you, I thought of you as my brother. And the stuff we're doing together feels like the stuff we should have been doing all our lives. Same way for Mom and Dad, too. When I told Mom I felt normal now, I wasn't kidding. Of course I wasn't going to let go that easily. How could I?"

Asriel smiled. "I was going to say the same thing. Even when I woke up and found out you weren't really Chara, it didn't matter. And, Frisk..." He turned aside.

"If it's that embarrassing, you don't have to say it, Az," Frisk said, slowly walking down.

Asriel said it. "If we weren't stuck like this, I'd still want to stay by your side. Just not all the time."

"That's not embarrassing!"

"It's not?"

"No! Embarrassing would be, I don't really see the point in making you walk down all these stairs, even if you are a goat, because you're not made out of the same stuff I am and I can just carry you." Asriel could have said anything in response, that it obviously wasn't a problem for him or Frisk, but instead jumped up on Frisk's shoulders and let their roller shoes go bumpity-bump down the stairs.

"May-be this was-n't the best i-de-a, oi-yoi-yoi," Asriel said after bumping down a few flights. Frisk laughed and walked the rest, only rolling again in the lobby. There were only increasingly indifferent travelers and hotel security guards there; the hotel had thrown the news media out. Frisk and Asriel had syrupy waffles again and matching tall glasses of orange juice.

Undyne, out of her armor and cleaned up, started serving herself the same thing. "Hey, Asriel. Hey, Frisk. Your parents are not happy."

"Yeah, they're not happy," Asriel said, waiting for her to sit down. He leaned in. "If Frisk was as cheesed off down there as they were just now, I don't even think the trees would have been spared. I think they would have eaten the mice, burned down Snowdin, blown up the CORE, melted Alphys' lab into a pool of metal and bad anime..." Frisk started chuckling. "That reminds me, Frisk, wasn't there something from Alphys on your phone?"
"Oh, yeah. She wants us to go meet her at the lab, didn't say why."

"Perfect," Undyne said. "I'll find out why she's been avoiding me."

"You're not still mad at her about that show, are you?" Frisk asked.

"She should. Have warned. Me. I am not a water-type anything." Frisk started to laugh, and Asriel joined in. "What!"

"Well... err..." Frisk started.

"...you kind of are," Asriel finished.

"If you weren't the Royal Siblings, I swear..."

"hey. this doesn't seem like a joyous gathering."

"Oh, hey Sans," Asriel said as Sans sat down with the same food. The skeleton was actually eating this time. "Frisk's ex-parents are after them, and it feels like Undyne's just fishing for reasons to get mad." He didn't realize what he said until after he was done saying it.

"Yeah, Undyne, you really need to stop getting caught by that bait. The show's meant to reel kids in after they get hooked on the games," Frisk added, knowing exactly what they said.

"You two are the worst, you know that? The worst."

"you should know betta, halibut it's an easy ray to get cod."

"Sans, they're the Royal Siblings, but you..."

"you're carpin' on it now, but it'll all eel over eventually for a veteran grouper like you."

"You've got to run out of puns sometime!" Undyne yelled, annoyed.

"walleye really?"

"One day, Sans. One day. And in the moment of your punlessness, I shall strike, and I shall be victorious."

"well, before then, anywhere you guys want to go? i got a driving instructor i shouldn't keep waiting."

"Alphys' lab," Asriel said, and the group started going to the car. "I just hope I can go back down there without freaking out."

"Hey, the Underground's just another place now. There are no more wizards to seal the barrier back up," Frisk said. "Unless they came back too, but I think somebody would notice a wizard."

"You'd think somebody would notice someone who could reverse time, too," Asriel said, very, very quietly.

Apparently, human security on the royal siblings was rather light, because no one even tried to stop them from getting into a car marked STUDENT DRIVER with a particularly short skeleton behind the wheel, sitting on phone books (what else were they good for?) and using bone-shaped pedal extenders, and a particularly spooked driving instructor in the passenger's seat.
"Do you know how to.. how to back out?" the instructor asked. "If we're going to- yiiiipe!" Sans reversed hard, and did a quick turn of the wheel to get the car pointed in the right direction, then swiftly accelerated to get them out of the area. He drove exactly the speed limit, and despite his erratic movements and his jerky stops and starts, Frisk couldn't help but get the feeling that Sans would never, possibly could never, get into a wreck.

Frisk's phone started ringing. "Oh, hey, Mom! Oh, I'm just out with Sans, he's learning how to drive. Yes, we're fine. Yes, Undyne's here too."

They pointed the phone in Asriel's direction. "Hi, Mom!", Asriel said, having heard both sides of the conversation.

Frisk put the phone back to their own ear. "Okay, we'll be back before dinner. Of course I'll be good, Mom. Dad still angry? Did you tell him he doesn't have to worry? Good. Thanks, Mom. You too. Bye." They hung up and chuckled. "When am I going to get used to having a mom who cares?" No one answered them, and their brother looked out the windows all the way to Mt. Ebbot.

The new community was being built. Foundations were being laid, prefab units were being trucked in, and humans and a few monsters, mostly Woshuas and Aarons, swarmed over the work. Frisk swiftly realized how invaluable intelligent monsters with good control over their abilities could be on a construction site. *I wonder which one's ours?* The big one up high, probably. A fit place for a king, even if it didn't have its own breakfast buffet. *But we're buying a waffle machine.* The mountain itself had become something of a tourist attraction; onlookers walked around the area, talking to the assorted monsters who were scared to go too far into human territory. A gold-for-cash dealer had left their stall behind, probably after making out like a bandit. A human vendor was selling donuts at a stall marked 'All profits go to the ASPCS'. Frisk didn't get the acronym until they saw the eight-legged logo.

Sans parked at the human-guarded entrance with a slam on the brakes. "you three have fun. i gotta go get some more time in. you ready, mr. instructor?" The terrified man nodded, and Sans sped off, the wheels kicking up dirt.

Frisk had almost expected the humans to get in their way, but one look at Frisk's face and the guards waved them through. Asriel cringed as he started to pass where the barrier used to be, but he worked up his gumption and tried not to close his eyes. They passed through, silently regarding areas of interest, Frisk's shoes rolling along. There was where Frisk had fought their dad. There was New Home, dilapidated and empty. The CORE was still functional, but the hotel's elevator had finally been completely gutted, the people seeking room service finally gone. Fortunately, the Hotland elevators were still working, and Undyne banged on the door to Alphys' lab.

"Hey, let us go first," Frisk said. "Let's deal with whatever she called us down here for, and then you can get all hot-blooded angerfish." Undyne scowled.

Alphys answered the door. She seemed happy, a wide smile on her face and a few gizmos in her hands. As a natural introvert, she'd enjoyed the privacy the empty, guarded Underground gave her, giving her time to focus on her research and Mew Mew. She'd answered some questions from the few human scientists who had come down here, but they'd never seen her real work.

"Frisk! Prince Asriel! Undyne! Um, I'm sorry I didn't return your calls, I've just been so busy...

"Them first, kissy-face," Undyne told her.

"Oh, um, yes, of course. Asriel, your own phone," she said, handing it to him, "and, for the two of you, a pair of matching friendship bracelets! Waterproof, acidproof, and timeproof! You can even
spill vomit all over them and they'll be fine. Urm. That was entirely in a controlled testing environment, of course." The bracelets looked high-tech, made of etched, lightweight, shiny metal, with a small light on the inside of each wrist. Alphys held them out in front of her, nervous.

"Friendship braaaaaa...!" Asriel bleated, realizing what they must be for. "Gosh, Alphys! How far?"

"Through two meters of solid rock, or so. A few hundred meters outside if it's a really nice day, maybe." Okay, so he was still tethered to Frisk. At least now it was a long tether. The Dreemurr kids held out their left arms eagerly, and Alphys snapped them on. Despite being made of metal, they were mostly comfortable, except they felt like... A wrist shackle, like that genie in that old movie. Except this does the opposite. "I've got spares, in case anything happens to these."

"Alphys! If anything happens to these while we're wearing them, I'll have to LOAD! We should be wearing the spares, too."

"Oh. Good point. Here." The spares went on their right arms. Now we're just like that genie. Well, it beat the alternative. "The lights are on the bottom side. Green is good. Like eating your greens. Yellow is, um, not good. Yellow is actually pretty bad. Asriel, you won't like yellow. And, uh, Frisk, if the light turns red, LOAD. Charge them every day, charger port here, here are some adapters, just plug it in while you sleep. And if I can, um. Get something, maybe, in return?" The Dreemurr kids raised eyebrows, despite Asriel not really having any. "Can... can you ask your parents for my old job back? Because I really liked being Royal Scientist. I mean, okay, I was responsible for all that stuff before, but, you're you again, so it's all good, right?"

Asriel nodded, looking a bit unsure. "I'll ask," Frisk said, "but it's not up to me. No promises."

"And now," Undyne said, "there is something to discuss..."

"Oh, dear."

Frisk and Asriel quietly left them to do whatever they were going to do and whatever that would lead to.

"Well, at least now I don't have to jump out after you if you start running out of bed too quick," Asriel said. Oh. Frisk had done that when trying to warn Mom about the thirty-fourth rule, hadn't they? "And there's something we can do now," he continued, a huge smile on his face.

"Catch? Frisbee? Soccer, baseball, that stuff?"

"Well, those, yeah, but I was thinking..." Asriel poked Frisk gently in the chest. "...a better game of tag." And he was off like a shot.

Frisk ran-rolled close behind. "You screwed up this time, goat boy! I've got these on!"

"You still can't catch me, water-wrapped skeleton!"

"I'll just follow your trail of fur, shedmeister!"

"From a growing distance, squishguts!"

"A living plushie is calling me squishy?!"

They kept at it through the waterfall area, the ferryman having left with the rest of them. Asriel led Frisk to a large gap and cleared it in a single long jump. "What- there used to be a duck here!"
Frisk protested.

Asriel laughed, rounded a corner and the lights on Frisk's bracelets went yellowish-green. Asriel came back at once, shaking his head. "Bad idea. Ba-a-a-a-d idea." He looked across the gap, where Frisk was collapsed in a heap, panting.

"Okay, no more tag, ever," Frisk said between breaths. "We're not Undyne, we don't need to train. You win as long we we're like this. I can't catch you, it'd be like lifting a board I'm standing on." That wasn't quite accurate, but Frisk wouldn't even consider restricting Asriel's DETERMINATION supply. "C'mon back."

Asriel looked at the gap. "This is going to sound weird, but I'm not sure if I can."

"You can do it, Azzy," Frisk said, fueling their brother up through force of will, and Asriel hopped back over. "You want to keep going? The long way? Or head back?"

"Keep going, I guess. There's something I should probably check up on."

"Okay." They took a leisurely walk through the mushroom-lit path with a brief stopover at the dead-empty Tem Shop (perhaps, Frisk thought, she was finally attending colleg), the echo flowers, the water-dripping area (with no umbrellas, they had to hurry), past where Undyne had chased them. At least they didn't have to worry about Undyne killing them anymore- that was Alphys' problem now. Curious, Frisk looked at Checkup; Papyrus was available (with a message of "I PASSED!") and both Undyne and Alphys were marked 'Busy'. Frisk did not want to visualize what they were busy with.

The kids continued, through the cave of fake stars. "We should destroy this," Asriel said. "It's just so..."

"Pathetic? Kind of stupid?" Frisk asked.

"Yeah, it's like the inflatable girlfriend of stars."

"How do you even know what that is?! Wait, no, don't tell me, I'll go my life without knowing." They kept going into Snowdin, past the skelebros' old house. "'Grillby's will be open at its new location,'" Frisk said, reading aloud, "'check us on..." They checked their phone. "You've never eaten there, have you?" Asriel shook his head. "That's for the to-do list. Better if we go with Sans, although if he hands you a bottle of ketchup? Don't pour it. Oh! I almost forgot." They went north at the crossroads, meeting the snowman, who seemed very content.

"Why, hello!" the snowman gushed. "Thanks again for bringing that bit of me out."

"Actually, I have to ask... where is it? Because I, um... lost it," Frisk admitted.

"It's on a desk! Next to a bright red button. In the company of a man who talks about so many things! He says he's not just going to build a community for monsters, he's going to be building a farm! For Vegetoids, I believe."

Asriel and Frisk looked at each other, grasping it immediately. If Trump had found a way to breed monsters, he didn't need to go out hunting them. Would a farm full of Vegetoids keep giving EXP forever, or would they be too weak after a while? And if they were too weak, would he try to keep gaining EXP or would he just decide it wasn't worth it?

"It's in the best place it could be," Frisk said. "Try to remember what he says, okay? And, like, who comes in with him and who talks to him and that stuff."
"All sorts of wonderful people! Leaders, and businessmen, and scary-looking people with dark glasses. He's been such a great help to monsters. Promoting the King's ideals, looking for ways to give monsters jobs, just being a good friend to everybody. And using the word 'exploit' a lot, whatever that means, and worrying about something called an 'approval rating'."

"Well," Asriel said, shrugging, "a Vegetoid farm isn't the worst thing he could be doing." He considered it the rough equivalent of beef ranching.

"Giving monsters stuff to do isn't the worst, either," Frisk agreed. "It can't be, like, slavery, not if he's worried about his approval rating." Of course the man, and the government, had the money to pay monsters for their solid-altering abilities. "Thanks, snowman! We'll be back to visit sometime." For our spy on the President's desk.

They kept going back, snow getting packed around Frisk's wheels. Asriel winced at the entrance to the ruins, but kept going through anyway, and helped Frisk get the snow out of their shoes once they were inside. "Someone's in here," Asriel said, and the two crept slowly up the stairs of Toriel's old home.

A man and a woman wearing gear and backpacks were browsing, taking pictures, and generally being curious about the empty rooms and barren bookshelves, Toriel having found time to take all her possessions out. The woman had a paper notepad and was making sketches; the man was putting his phone at odd angles.

"I don't ever need to be afraid," Frisk remembered. "Excuse me. Who are you, and what are you doing here?" If these two got violent, they were in for very unexpected surprises, in this timeline or another.

Startled, the pair turned to the Dreemurrs. "Asriel, Frisk!" the woman shouted, recognizing them immediately. "I'm so sorry. I thought you'd completely abandoned this place."

"We're urban explorers, not looters," the man explained. "Record everything, take nothing."

Frisk laughed. "I wouldn't care if you did loot the place. We did abandon it, and we got all the important stuff out," they said, putting an arm around their brother. "Az, is there something that got left here?"

"No, nothing but memories." He motioned, and Frisk followed him past the dead tree and all the silly little puzzles; the urban explorers had helpfully left behind even more signs and taped a path through where they were supposed to walk, making the puzzles even easier.

They reached the place of the fallen child, a rope ladder going to the surface. Frisk laughed, and Asriel laughed with them. If only this thing had been here before! But the ladder hung just over the flowers, which had been trampled on by more than one set of boots.

"You know," Asriel said, "I guess these flowers really don't need to be taken care of after all." He nodded to the flowers and what was buried under them. "Goodbye, Chara." Chara was always the type to dance on other people's graves; it seemed fitting that people should walk over theirs. "If you're completely gone." He turned to Frisk. "Wanna climb up?"

"If we do, then the guards up front will think we never came out, and then someone will come down here and these people will get in trouble," Frisk said. As an ardent explorer, Frisk had no interest in getting people jailed for exploring. "But if we don't tell anyone, then somebody bad might come down here and mess with Alphys or the CORE, and I think that's what the guards are for. And Dad put them there, so we kind of have to. Don't call yet." Frisk and Asriel returned the
way they came, and the explorers had made it to the door to the snowy path, still documenting.

"Hey, guys?" Frisk approached them with. "Dad really can't just let people down here, so we're going to have to get that hole blocked off. It's all right, we never saw you," Frisk said, looking right at them. "We'll wait, like, fifteen minutes."

The two explorers looked at each other, and for a moment Frisk worried that they would do something stupid. "Thanks, Frisk," the woman said instead, and the pair left to go climb the ladder.

"You really can't not spare people, can you?" Asriel asked.

"Not unless they're really evil or something. I can think of only two people I wouldn't spare," Frisk said. "And..." they said, taking a deep breath, "I think we should at least try to go meet them and talk them out of this."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"No. I'm pretty sure it's not a good idea, and I don't want to," Frisk said. "I really, really don't want to. But it might work, and if it doesn't work, whatever. I can just undo it." They walked back the way they had came, past the lab (Undyne and Alphys' status: still busy), up the elevator, and out through New Home, through where the barrier used to be, and past the guards. Sans was there, a big grin on his face, standing next to a brand new car that notably did not have the words "STUDENT DRIVER" on it.

"Already, San?!!" Frisk asked.

"i guess you could say... i get things done at maxillar speed."

"And yet you still don't pick up your clothes, do you?" Sans just grinned. "There's a couple of places I want you to take us. Let's get the bad one out of the way first, and then we can go to Grillby's for lunch." Frisk really didn't like Sans' facial expression. "No pranks! Bad skeleton!"

"hey, frisk. you might be royalty, but don't go patellin' me what to do."

"Sorry. Sans, please take us to my not-parents' house, and then please take us to Grillby's. And please don't prank us. At least not a messy prank."

"you sure you don't wanna just skip that first one?"

"Same thing I told Azzy. I don't want to, I have to." Frisk remembered to call their dad in the car, telling him about the still-unplugged hole they'd originally fallen down.

Frisk's not-parents' house was a few miles away, in the middle of a very ordinary-looking suburb. Asriel was almost expecting some kind of ruined or obviously bad house; the lawn was manicured, and the car parked outside the garage was waxed, and it looked like a healthy place to grow up. On the outside. But once the door was open, Asriel could hear Frisk's not-parents talking, and although he didn't quite understand the words, he could detect a note of something in their voices that hinted at the problem.

"Come on," Frisk said, stepping out of the car and relishing this like a root canal. "Let's just get this over with." They pressed the button to check their friends' statuses (Undyne and Alphys weren't busy anymore, finally), held their brother tightly, mustered up enough grim DETERMINATION to SAVE, and reached for the doorbell.
It took Frisk even more determination to press the doorbell than it did to SAVE, even knowing they could just undo it.

"Oh, look who it is," their not-father said on opening the door. "Have you decided to come back to us, chimera?" Asriel blinked in surprise. That was how their not-father greeted them?

"No," Frisk replied. "I've come to tell you that you're wasting your time." Their not-father stared at them in anger. "Listen, I know you're not big on believing me, but believe me now. You can't win. It doesn't matter what you do. It's a royal family, don't you think we can win a legal battle?" It was all lost on him. "Okay, fine, don't believe me. Can you at least stop pretending to be my parents, and get out of my life?!" Their not-mother had turned the corner and was staring at them with a look of fury, then looking at Asriel with horror.

"Chimera, have you forgotten what I'll do to you if you don't show me respect?" their not-father asked, starting to take off his belt.

Frisk laughed with no joy. "What you'll do to me?!" Their not-father took a step forward, and Asriel felt the white-hot rage bubbling up from within Frisk's SOUL, and then he was not little Azzy anymore but ASRIEL DREAMURR, PRINCE OF MONSTERS, and in half an eyeblink he slammed Frisk's not-parents' heads together so hard that-

==LOAD==

Asriel's shocked face showed that he remembered it.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that could even happen," Frisk blurted quickly. The adrenaline, reverted out of their system, was quickly starting to come back.

"Even Chara couldn't do that." That's all he said, and that's all he needed to say, and it hurt. It doesn't matter if I unhappened it. I possessed him into killing people. Why didn't someone warn me I could do that?! Will he ever look at me the same way again? We were right- this was not a good idea!

"I told you I could be mean. I just really don't want to. Not to you, Azzy, never to you," Frisk said, voice and body shaking. Asriel was wiping away tears, and Frisk started doing the same. "You can forgive me if you want, but if you don't, I understand." Uncomfortable silence. "Let's try this again, okay? It's up to you."

"We have to," Asriel replied, and Frisk rang the doorbell for the first time again, wiping away the last few tears but knowing that their face showed extensive signs of crying.

Their not-father opened the door. "Oh, look who it is. Have you decided to come back to us, chimera?"

"Why would I? Didn't you always say that I should try to get ahead in life despite my 'condition'?" Frisk asked, wanting to steer the conversation far from the way it had originally gone. Their not-father scowled. "I'm a member of a royal family. The guy I call my father now is the king of another dimension. Why would you want to take me from that?"

"Those aren't your accomplishments," their not-father replied, and Frisk unconsciously clenched
their fist. *You have no idea what I accomplished.* "And if they were, why didn't you share them with your family?"

"Why do you think?! Can you think of any reason, just one, why I might not want to come back here?" Their not-father almost reached for his belt but stopped- there was something very wrong with the way Frisk was looking at him, and then there was that monster kid to deal with, too. He mentally reaffirmed his decision to win in court.

"Why did you let that demon in our house?!" their not-mother screamed as soon as she saw who was there. "Get it out! GET IT OUT!" Asriel took an unconscious step back. That had given birth to his sibling?

Their not-father walked to their mother, equally angered with her. "Grelod, stop it. Stop it right now."

"Richard! We cannot have that thing in our house! It defies the laws of God!"

"Asriel's my brother now," Frisk said, quietly. "Don't you ever call him a demon."

"Your brother? You call that your brother?! Lord, give me strength! You've always been a trial, Frisk. A trial like the trials of Job."

"Yeah, you've told me that before, so why do you want me back?!"

"Because I'm your mother!"

"Not anymore," Frisk said. "You've lost your kid to monsters, Grelod. And you drove them to it, so you have nobody else to blame. Neither of you do." Frisk's not-father turned to them in rage.

"I promise you, you little brat," she said, seething, "we're going to send you to a very special school, oh yes. You'll learn respect, and decorum, and you will stop worshipping abominations unto God!" she screamed, pointing at Frisk's brother, and Frisk's self-control made a cheap excuse and defenestrated itself.

"Would you like to see a GOD?! HERE I AM!" boomed *ASRIEL DREEMURR, GOD OF HYPERDEATH.*

This time, the other half of her head went-

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==LOAD==
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Asriel looked down at his fuzzy, soft hands, his eyes wide. From his perspective, they had been neither a second ago.

*How many LOADs is this going to take until I find the exact right words? How many more times is Azzy going to have to turn into that thing?* "Okay, no, we're not doing this! We're not going in there at all. I'm so sorry, Azzy. I just... I can't do it. Not without that happening. They *deserve* it, but you don't." Asriel dumbly nodded, looking at Frisk like they were something from another planet, and that hurt more than anything he could possibly have said. "C'mon, let's.. let's go around the side, so he'll come out without seeing us," they said, gently pushing their brother, who did not resist. *And so I won't see him.* "Oh, God, Azzy. I really hurt you, didn't I?"

"It didn't hurt," Asriel said. "It felt good. I felt like I was achieving something, like I was the hammer of maximum righteous hyperdeath justice. Both times. Why should it feel good to hurt
people?"

"It shouldn't. Even if they have it coming. Even if there really is no other way. And there is one. We're definitely going to court, so we need evidence, and clues, and that stuff."

Asriel nodded. "Maybe we can get Rebecca to help. Whoever that is."

Frisk shook their head. "I never even told you, did I? They had another child, a girl, five years before me."

"You had a sis-"

"Don't say sister. She won't call herself that, those two won't call her that, I won't call her that. To her I was always just this thing my parents had to deal with. She-"

Asriel put his finger over his lips. Frisk instantly shut up and heard their not-father leaving the house, trudging to his car, and driving away. Even Frisk could hear the irritation in the way he closed doors. They never loved each other, either.

"So yeah. I didn't even talk to her, at all. If I tried to go into her room she'd pick me up and throw me out. I couldn't even get her old clothes, my not-mom would give them away, said I shouldn't have stuff for boys or girls. I used to dream I had a sister or a brother. Then I'd wake up, and there'd only be my not-parents. And her."

One time, Frisk had watched an old, popular Internet video in which the narrator had talked about how his far older brother had helped him play primitive role-playing games. They'd cried sporadically for days after watching it. "I used to draw pictures of siblings I didn't have." They looked at Asriel. "Oh, no, I could never have imagined you. Anyway, my not-mom must have found my notebook, because one day it was just gone. She wouldn't like something for some stupid religious reason, and when I was away at school it'd just disappear, and she wouldn't tell me anything. So I stopped collecting anything."

Asriel was staring at them. "I wondered why you would ever climb a mountain like that. Now I guess I know."

"I wasn't trying to kill myself or anything like that," Frisk said. "I just wanted to get away. To live and explore somewhere else." They smiled. "I did, but... I wound up dragging the Prince of Monsters into my problems."

"Hey, your problems are my problems. And the other way around." He held up his arms, showing his bracelets, smiling a bit. "Still inseparable."

"Those have enough range for me to ask you to do something," Frisk said, and Asriel perked up. "She's home alone and she very rarely leaves her room. You can hear her coming and you have next to no footsteps. Sneak in and take pictures, but don't steal anything. Unless it's from the trash can, so you should visit that. If you get caught, just yell and I'll LOAD again. Only if you want to. Always only if you want to."

Asriel shook his head. "No, I have to. This is clues and evidence that we need, right? If I don't spy, we'll be right back here."

"So, how do you want to get in? Maybe if I throw you to a second-floor window, you can grab on..."

"The front door," Asriel said, smiling widely. "To us, a lock is just a polite way of saying not to come in, unless it's sealed with magic. I do your teeth every morning, remember?" Knowing that no
one was coming, Asriel grasped the knob, pushed the tumblers into place without needing to touch them, and silently opened the door.

It took all of Frisk's patience to sit at the side of the house, unseen, staring at their bracelets for color changes, needing to do nothing but trust their brother and wait. They didn't have Asriel's ears; they couldn't hear a thing as they huddled against the side of the house, their one shirt not enough against the cold. Five minutes? Ten? Their not-mother couldn't have stopped Asriel from shouting, surely? Or did they just not hear it? Oh, they did hear something: a very quiet front door.

"First try," Asriel said. Not wanting to alert their parents that someone had been inside, Frisk opened the door, locked it, and re-closed it. "I got some mail and receipts from the trash and took a lot of pictures. That closet was actually your room?" Frisk nodded slowly and Asriel sucked air between his teeth. "It had everything but a lock on the outside. If it had that, I'd have gone to Hogwarts instead of the Underground." "I tried to take pictures of your family photographs, I mean I did get pictures... but you weren't in any of them. Why would they take them down when you ran away?" Frisk just looked at him. "Frisk... they wouldn't even take pictures of you?" Frisk nodded and stared at their feet all the way back to the car, which was nicely heated.

"so. why didn't you go in and talk to them?" Sans asked, checking his phone for directions to Grillby's, which was in the neighborhood.

"Sans, please stop pretending you don't remember," Frisk said. "I wasn't going to do that a third time."

"that didn't seem much like talking to me, unless you were speaking loud-crack-e and those flashes of light were sign language. which'd be a pretty neat way to communicate."

"I tried to talk to them. But it didn't work, and I got mad," Frisk said.

"Don't make Frisk angry," Asriel added. "You wouldn't like me when they're angry."

"Sans, I had no idea I could do that," Frisk continued. "I really didn't."

"well, that's on you," Sans said. "you knew a monster with a human SOUL was dangerous, didn't ya? and it's not just any SOUL. it's yours, time traveller." Silence for a while, as Sans expertly navigated roads and traffic like he'd been driving for years. "so, why'd you LOAD?"

"What- you mean to stop him from having killed them?! I'm not going to turn my brother into a killer if I can help it! Besides, it'd be pretty obvious who did it! Or maybe they'd blame Dad! Sans, I've gotten this far without killing anyone. I don't plan on starting! Especially not by mind controlling my brother!"

"there's a reason you didn't give."

"Sans, just stop," Asriel said. "They're crazy and evil. I couldn't even grasp the true form of their meanness."

Sans parked the car near the front door with a single, expert turn. Grillby's had bought out a failing human business; it wasn't yet well-known that the old building was run by monsters. "so it's ok if they die, just not if you kill them?"

"Sans, if you're saying what I think you're saying... I can't patella you what to do, right?" Frisk asked. "Just don't take their SOULs. They're full of hate and misery. They'd probably do the opposite of what the souls in Flowey did."
"and miss the trial? naw." Sans turned around in the driver's seat with a downcast expression. "is this really the frisk i know?"

"It's weird, right? I don't want to hate anyone, and I never hated any monsters. Even when you were all trying to kill me, I never really felt threatened. Maybe it's because it was kinda easy, maybe because I could just LOAD, but... you didn't hate me, either. You all had your reasons. Sans, if you want to give me a bad time for wanting my not-parents dead, I'll take several bad times over one more minute with those two."

"that's your parents' job, not mine."

"We can't tell them!" Frisk shouted. "I'm not worried about getting in trouble! They'd be afraid of me!"

"still have a tough time giving people credit, don't ya? if they were gonna be afraid of you, they'd already be. same with your brother. asriel, are you afraid of frisk?"

At least you asked that while the doors were still closed! Asriel thought, blindsided by the question and deciding to answer honestly. "Once in a while. But not that they'll open their SOUL and turn me into a vengeful murdergod again." Frisk knew exactly where this was going and, mortified and upset, had to fight back the urge to LOAD to stop him from finishing it. "Sometimes I'm worried that they'll just get bored of me, or I'll do something annoying, and they'll close it. People get mad. People change. Mom and Dad did." Asriel had meant to tell Frisk that sometime, preferably in private, but kept putting it off.

"Sans, I think I know what you meant by giving people credit," Frisk said, struggling with their voice. They turned to their brother. "Asriel. Never. That's a promise. Not unless I'm dead and can't reverse it." That ninety years was looking shorter and shorter. "Haven't we cried enough for one day?" they asked, unbuckling their seatbelt and opening the door, and Asriel was glad to be able to exit through the door on his side without suffering, feeling a bit ashamed and more than a little childish. Yeah, Alphys probably deserved her old job back, and Frisk deserved credit. A lot of credit.

Grillby's really was the kind of place where everyone knows your name, but then again everyone knew Frisk and Asriel's names, including the few human patrons, who were the only ones not to loudly greet the three of them as they came in. Grillby hadn't yet hired more people; he was up front, talking and serving and doing everything himself.

Sans reached into his tracksuit pocket for the usual gold coins, and Grillby held out a hand to stop him when they clinked in his pocket. "Your money's no good here."

"oh, geez. thanks, grillby."

"I mean, your money is literally no good here," Grillby said. "We're an American business now, we use dollars." Sans reached into another pocket. "You qualify for the 100 percent discount, anyway." With no eyebrows to raise, Sans looked at his long-time friend. "The being with the kid who got us out of the Underground discount. What'll it be, the usual? Our menu's a little bit bigger, but we haven't printed it yet."

"Yeah, the usual. For old time's sake."

"Frisk?" Frisk heard both the professional bartender and the underlying voice, which had elements of 'Frisk, our savior' and 'Your Highness' in it.
"Well, it's Grillby's, so, can you grill chicken?" Frisk asked. "And a side of fries."

"One of our most popular items. Asriel?"

"Never had grilled chicken, I'll have some and fries too," Asriel said.

"If you want a booth, please seat yourself," Grillby said, handing each of them a glass of ice water. "Your food will be right out." The three of them decided 'booth' at once. They had the habit of talking about things they didn't want people to overhear. Frisk checked carefully for whoopee cushions before sitting down.

"frisk, i was afraid of you, too," Sans said in a serious voice, sitting on the other side of Asriel and Frisk, sipping his water. "afraid you'd reset everything, that we'd be in again as soon as we got out."

"Why would I ever do that, Sans?!" Frisk tried to keep their voice low. "I'm up here, with my brother and you and your brother and Mom and Dad, why would you ever think I'd want to send everyone back down there? What kind of sense would that even make?" Asriel looked embarrassed and Frisk remembered why.

"i dunno. some people would. because they can't ever be happy."

"I want to be happy," Frisk said, remembering credit. "I deserve to. And so does Azzy, and you, and everyone else in this place. Especially Grillby, who's doing almost everything himself. I think we can be. I mean, we can't lose this trial, Mom's going to make a good school, Trump's farming monsters instead of hunting them, and- what?" Sans was giving them the stink eye, which was orange instead of blue.

"farming, frisk?"

"Well, yeah. But if he's just growing what he kills, it's not that bad, is it?"

"They're Vegetoids," Asriel explained. "Isn't being farmed what they want?"

"that might be so," Sans said, "i never really talked to one. but that ain't the problem. problem is, how do you think they grow?" Grillby came by with their food just then, and it looked and smelled delicious. Sans picked up one of his fries, which was thickly cut and very unlike a fast-food fry. "see this? this used to be a potato. now, a potato grows in soil. you plant it, you grow it, and it don't cost nothin'. those chickens? same thing, a bird grows up and gets its neck cut. cycle of nature. but a vegetoid, asriel, you know where monsters come from, right?"

"Yeah, I told Frisk. We come from dreams," Asriel said. Frisk took a big bite of chicken, which was heavenly and a little bit spicy, and took another bite soon afterwards.

"that's right. every monster comes from a different dream, represents something. boss monsters are a little different, but same concept. now tell me, what do you think vegetoids represent?"

Asriel was too busy eating to reply. "Well, food," Frisk said, eating a bite of fries.

"mm-hmm. and who dreams of food?" Frisk almost choked on their fries and managed to swallow the bite instead of LOADING. Asriel didn't get it at first, and then he did, his eyes widening. He altered the food in his own throat to keep from choking on his chicken.

"So, what, does he keep, like a warehouse of hungry people..." Frisk wondered.

"naw, he probably just sends people to the hungry places in the world to collect 'em. easier. there's
"no way to get EXP without someone, somewhere, suffering. can't be done. sorry, kid."

"Well, then, what are we going to do about it?" Frisk asked.

"kid, i like you. i really do. soon as you realize there's a problem, next thing out of your mouth is what you're going to do about it. sometimes, you can handle stuff. other times, give people credit." Sans pulled his phone out of his pocket and explained the situation to their father, with a promise to call back later, as the kids savored their meals, feeling lucky that they had them. "this'll end. thanks for saying something." Sans never even asked how they knew, which both Frisk and Asriel found weird. "and remember. just because other people aren't happy doesn't mean you shouldn't be." He pulled two packets of hot sauce out of the usual wire container with salt, pepper, and sugar packets. "here. both of ya, try some hot sauce on your fries." It said 'Habanero', which the kids thought was a brand.

"This isn't one of your pranks, is it?" Asriel asked, and Frisk clearly shared the sentiment.

"no prank. just hot sauce."

They tried some, and lo and behold, it was really, burning spicy hot and both of them went for their water while Sans chuckled. He hadn't lied. It was just hot sauce. Before they could yell at him, his phone started ringing.

Even Frisk could hear Undyne's voice on the other end: "Sans, where are you?"

"grillby's."

"Did you forget something?!"

"eh. probably."

"Something blue? And with gills? And with a spear for your bony head?!"

"eh. can't say for sure."

"Well, come back and get me, or I'll make sure you remember!"

"ok." Undyne hung up first, and Sans finished his ketchup-laden fries in a few rapid handfuls while the kids finished their meals and water.

They were in the car before Asriel remembered what Frisk had said in the French restaurant. "Did you leave Grillby a tip?"

"oh yeah," Sans said. "i tipped twenty percent." Frisk and Asriel sighed as Sans started to pull away.

They found Undyne at the donut stall, another sale going to the ASPCS. The look on her face was doom for skeletons, and she opened the passenger door with venom clearly on her lips.

"No, Undyne," Asriel said before she could lay into him. "Frisk and I really don't want to listen to people yell at each other today."

"Did something happen?" she asked. "You didn't hear me and Alphys, did you?"

"It's not what happened, it's what unhappened," Frisk said. "Just... try to be happy."
"Oh, I was." She didn't explain, and nobody was dumb enough to ask her to. "So, off to another playground?"

"I just want to relax," Asriel said. "Let's just go back to the pool and float around. Yes, Undyne, the one with the fake water." She shuddered.

"You have the best ideas," Frisk agreed. Sans dropped the three of them off at the hotel before leaving to parts unknown.

They had to go up and down the elevator to get their swimming trunks this time, but it was just more time to relax. The pool wasn't very crowded, and they picked a double tube that would keep them together, leisurely floating as Undyne sat on a pool chair, kids played on the slides, and a few adults looked in their direction, quietly curious about the bracelets the kids wore. Alphys knew her business; they were, in fact, waterproof. Even fake waterproof. Please, let the novelty wear off, Frisk silently begged, noticing the looks. Please, let the media go back to talking about the Cardassians or whatever they're called and maybe Undyne won't feel the need to actually be around guarding us.

They did go down the slides a bunch of times (not needing to stick out their arms on the speed slides), just to do something, but mostly they just leisurely floated on the double tube, shoulders together.

"Maybe we should practice," Frisk quietly said, after having thought it over for too long and waiting until nobody could hear. "You transforming. Except without the whole vengeful murdergod thing. If you want."

"I was going to ask you," Asriel replied. "But I thought you wouldn't want me using up too much of your SOUL."

"My energy comes from potatoes and chickens. You're not using my SOUL up. There's only so much energy at a time, but it's not just mine. It's your SOUL too, we're sharing. And I need to practice controlling it, or that's going to happen again."

"Tomorrow," Asriel suggested. "While Mom and Dad aren't home. I think they really would be worried if they saw that."

"You do have the best ideas," Frisk agreed, smiling. They relaxed for a while longer; minutes and hours flowed together.

"Frisk, your phone." Undyne called, although Asriel's hearing meant she didn't need to. "Asriel, yours too." They reluctantly got out of the pool to answer. It was their parents, Mom calling Frisk and Dad calling Asriel, letting them know that they were upstairs and dinner was ready. Already? They had been relaxing a while, and they'd needed it. They went through the walk-in blow-dryer, and Frisk smoothed down Asriel's copious fluff again before they went up. Frisk took a deep breath, not wanting to admit things, trying to make themself remember that these were their parents and not their not-parents.

"Frisk? Is something wrong?" Toriel asked as soon as the elevator door opened, picking up on their shame immediately.

"I did something bad today," Frisk admitted.

"You didn't hurt Asriel, did you?" their father asked, and his disappointment almost broke Frisk's heart.
"No. I got mad, and I turned him into a vengeful murdergod and made him slaughter my not-parents. Twice."

"It was an accident, they didn't mean to," Asriel blurted. "And they LOADed, so it didn't really happen."

"That was still a very naughty thing to do, Frisk," Toriel admonished them. "Apologize."

"I already did..."

"Apologize again."

"Azzy, I'm sorry I turned you into a vengeful murdergod." Toriel was staring at them. "And made you slaughter my not-parents. And I'm sorry I did it twice."

"Do you accept his apology, Asriel?" his father asked.

"I forgive you, Frisk." Frisk smiled in response.

"That's good enough," Asgore rumbled, his disappointment lightening.

"We shall have no talk of this at the dinner table, my children," Toriel said. "We have company coming over, so get changed." The kids had matching button-down shirts and pants waiting for them, with yet another pair of fuzzy socks for Frisk.

"There is something I do need to talk about," Frisk said, sitting down at the table next to their brother. "About that Vegetoid farm. Dad, if you want me to help, I'm here. You don't need me to come along or anything like that. Just call me and tell me when to SAVE, LOAD, and remember stuff, and I'll do it. You get infinite tries, almost the same way I do."

"Sans called me back and said he would handle it," Asgore said. Frisk immediately reached for their phone as Asriel perked up. Frisk started calling, but the phone kept ringing. Asriel started laughing a little bit, and Frisk just looked at him, confused, until the elevator door opened and Sans' ringtone (doodoo-DIT-dah, doo-day-DAHH-doodahday...) came out of it until Frisk hung up, mystified.

"Sans, what'd you do?!" Frisk shouted to him.

"just a little impromptu gardening. put some parsniks in the vegetoid patch," he said, coming into the dining room with his brother, who was wearing a professionally tailored blue suit. Questions flooded Frisk's mind as they stared at Sans: How'd he even find the place? How'd he sneak in? How'd he get there and back so fast, it couldn't have been that close, could it? Why didn't he ask me for help? "most of the harvesters wound up buying the farm. heh." Frisk just nodded, awed, wondering at the real extent of Sans' abilities.

"Good evening, your majesties, your highnesses," Papyrus said in a voice that was distinctly not Papyrus. "DO YOU APPROVE? IT'S MY NEW LAWYER VOICE! SANS SAID I SHOULD USE IT. AND I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO CONSUME A LAWYER'S SOUL TO GET IT!"

"i didn't know they had those," Sans said before anyone else could.

"It is wonderful, Papyrus," Toriel said. "I am certain your courtroom performance will be excellent."

"Oh, that reminds me," Asriel said, digging in his pockets, "I got a whole bunch of evidence to use
for the trial." Papyrus was holding out his bony hand to accept it. "Well, you can take a look, but we'll have to give it... to..." His eyes went wide.

"Our lawyer," Frisk finished for him. "Papyrus, you're OUR lawyer?!

"NYEH-HEH-HEH-HEH-HEH!"

"you didn't pick up on the hints?" Sans asked, and it wasn't clear who he was talking to.
"I'm not sure if I want to know or if I'll even understand the answer, but Papyrus, how did you even become a lawyer?!!" Frisk asked as their brother handed and sent Papyrus the evidence and Mom went to get the food.

"WELL, I WENT IN FRONT OF THE STATE BAR AND ASKED THEM FOR A LICENSE. BAD NAME BY THE WAY, THERE'S NOTHING TO DRINK THERE. THEN THEY ASKED ME, PAPYRUS, WHAT LAW SCHOOL HAVE YOU BEEN TO, 'YOU' OF COURSE BEING 'YOU' PAPYRUS, NOT YOU, FRISK. SO I SAID I WENT TO THE GIANT UNDERGROUND LEGAL LIBRARY INSTITUTION BUT LESS EXPENSIVE."

"You just outright lied?" Frisk asked, shocked, as Asgore frowned at Papyrus.

"THAT'S MY JOB. SO THEN THEY SAID I HAD TO TAKE A TEST BUT THAT I'D HAVE TO TAKE IT LATER LIKE EVERYONE ELSE! SO I MADE A JOKE THAT TREATING ME LIKE EVERYONE ELSE WOULD BE DISCRIMINATION! AND THEY THOUGHT I WAS SO FUNNY THAT THEY LET ME TAKE THE TEST THE NEXT DAY! IT WAS CALLED THE BAR EXAM BUT LAWYERS REALLY LIKE TO LIE WITH THEIR NAMES."

"But.. but how'd you pass?!" Frisk blurted, looking around at their dad, Sans, and Asriel. Sans was just grinning. That reminds me, I've got stuff I need to ask him too.

"EASY! I WENT TO THE STORE AND BOUGHT A BUNCH OF BOOKS WITH ALL THE ANSWERS IN THEM!"

"They don't just sell the answer key to the bar exam in a store!" Frisk shouted.

"I think he means he bought law books and studied for the test," Asriel said, leaving Frisk flabbergasted.

"BUT THEY HAD PROBLEMS READING SOME OF MY ESSAYS! SO I MADE ANOTHER JOKE THAT IT WAS HOW MONSTERS WRITE AND THEY HAD TO CHECK THEIR HUMAN PRIVILEGE! AND THEY THOUGHT THAT JOKE WAS SO FUNNY THAT THEY MADE ME A LAWYER! WOW! THEY SURE DO LIKE MY JOKES EVEN THOUGH THEY NEVER LAUGH! OOH! IS THAT SPAGHETTI?"

It was, and it smelled excellent. Toriel had cooked it, and unlike Papyrus she actually knew what she was doing. It was made with extra-long noodles, garlic powder, homemade sauce, and love. Papyrus slurped down strand after strand. How is he doing that, he doesn't even have lips! Spaghetti tended to fill Frisk up quickly, so they gobbled up as much as they could. They usually didn't eat this much in one day, but they anticipated burning a lot of energy tomorrow.

"So, Sans, Papyrus, I've been wondering, what were your mom and dad like?" Frisk asked the skeletons. Papyrus stopped slurping his spaghetti instantly and just sat there, frozen in place, a spaghetti noodle hanging from his mouth. Sans glanced at Frisk with an uninterpretable expression. "Woah, hey, if you don't want to talk about them, I totally understand."

"asgore, toriel, you ever met our parents?" Sans asked, quietly. Both of them shook their heads and answered no. "you, asriel?" He thought he might have remembered something but did the same. "frisk, mebbe one day i'll tell you. it ain't for the same reasons you have. hey, bro. buck up, uh?"
"DADD-EEEE!" Papyrus wailed, tears glistening in his eyes. "PLEASE COME BA-A-ACK!"

Sans gave Frisk a more definitive now you've gone and done it look while Frisk looked back with How was I supposed to know?!

"Hey, now," Asgore asked. "Is that any way for a lawyer to act?"

"NO... I'M SORRY, YOUR MAJESTY. I'M GOING TO GO DO THIS PUZZLE NOW," he said, holding up his phone and the papers Asriel gathered, and leaving his plate still half-full as he walked out.

"put that in the fridge, eh? he'll be back for it," Sans said, and Toriel did. "frisk, you want to hear about parents? asgore, you think they're ready for your story?"

"After everything that's happened, I suppose they are," Asgore said slowly. "Children, I'll tell you the story of how I met your mother." Frisk and Asriel listened attentively.

"Focus on the good," Toriel requested, primly sitting back down.

"There was a child lost in the snow," Asgore began. "A young boy, maybe just a bit younger than you," he said, looking at Frisk and Asriel. "He had been chasing me with a group of other boys, but they went home and he did not. When he saw me, alone and cold, he was afraid of me, thought I would eat him up. I tried to warm his fingers and toes with my magic... and I brought him home." He closed his eyes and sighed. "He must have told someone where he had found me, because the very next day, a girl, half your age, came seeking me there, calling for me, with only a simple dress and nearly bare feet. She had a family, but the marks on her arms and legs... and she was thin, so very thin. She told me that she had dreamt of a Goatmother, and she knew where to find her, if only someone would take her there. How could I have refused?"

"That was a horrible winter," Toriel said. "Horrible enough to birth me. Enough children needed someone to take care of them, that their dreams, their wishes... continue, dear."

"I had only been born a couple of years before," Asgore said. "The previous King, somewhere in the world, had perished. The King is dead; long live the king." He continued. "Toriel was living in an old log cabin, altered with magic. The cabin was so warm, she was so warm, and when she saw the child... it nearly broke her heart just looking at that little girl. Your very first words to me, Toriel, 'Why does she look like this?'"

"She was dying," Toriel said. "They all were. All the children you brought to me. Six, and then eight, we fed them all with venison, porridge, vegetables, and snails taken from hibernation..."

"Those were good days," Asgore said. "We wanted for nothing. We built stone walls, and we had an ice fishing hole... never really caught anything, though... and the fireplace was always roaring, a real fireplace."

"That thing was horrible," Toriel said. "The children always wanted to play with it, but it was dangerous. To them, and to the whole house. I had to put up stone bars to keep them from fooling with it."

Asgore nodded, smiling. "We had salt for the children's food, and they had space, and nice clothes, and toys, and Toriel taught them how to read and to write." Asgore chuckled. "Here I am, talking about simple pleasures, to a child from the future whose experience of the world is phones, cars, waterslides, playgrounds, and Lego toys. Asriel, do you remember..."

"Just keep going, Dad," Asriel said, uncomfortable.
"All right. And then the humans discovered us. There were three of them, trying to break into the cabin," Asgore said. "But I had just returned from a hunt, and they didn't see me coming, and I took their SOULs, all at once. We released the children back to a village, but the adults, they said we were abominations..." Asriel gasped; he'd been called the same thing earlier that day. "Then the war began. The humans would hunt us, then realize what they could gain, and then hunt each other for it. I would try to protect monsters with the power I'd gained, but it only made things worse. It had probably happened many times before, around the world, but this time, the humans found something. Some... power. Power to make seven of them into wizards. Power enough to create a place for us, and to lock us in it. They sacrificed themselves, and their power, to be rid of us." It was difficult to tell if Asgore was crying. "Your mother and I missed those children so much, we decided to have a child of our own," he said, turning to Asriel. "And then another child fell down..."

"You can stop, dear," Toriel said, and Asgore nodded.

"There is one more thing I must admit," he said. "To remove monsters from the whole world, they needed the help of their King. I was tricked. I thought that all monsters, everywhere, would be sent to a place where we could live happily, without needing to worry about humans. So I released the human SOULs, it had hurt so badly to try to keep them contained, and used my own to help cast it... and only a few of us were sent there, and so many just disappeared, and Home was so small... there were more monsters, later, and we found New Home, but it was a prison, not a home. But our days of woe are behind us. Our good days are here again. They're here to stay, are they not?"

"It's like I told Az, we can't lose this trial," Frisk replied.

"I feared... something irrevocable," he said, with a long glance at his children. "I've been sad for so long, I've forgotten how to be happy." It was easy to tell that Asgore was crying. "Toriel, you've always known how to be a mother, but I have forgotten what it is to be a father." Nobody spoke for a moment. Toriel didn't want to tell him his business, Sans wasn't talking, and Frisk's not-father's idea of parenting was to tell his child to do things and then get mad when he couldn't.

"I think you're supposed to help us learn things? To help us grow up?" Asriel suggested. "Not just teaching, showing us. And, if you've had human SOULs before, then maybe you can help us." Asgore looked at his son. "Frisk and I are going to practice transforming me tomorrow. Without the bad part." Toriel looked worried, and Frisk smiled at her as a silent reminder.

"I'm not sure how much I can help. But I'll try. I have cleared my calendar," Asgore said, carefully pronouncing yet another unfamiliar phrase, "and I plan on spending the day with you tomorrow. If it isn't... awkward for you."

"Dad, you're ten feet tall when you stand up all the way. I'm pretty sure awkward doesn't cover it. And I'm pretty sure we really don't have to care," Frisk said.

"Dad... did you think we've been avoiding you? I mean, yeah, Frisk and I have been doing a lot of stuff, but... I miss being with you, too," Asriel added.

"All right then. Perhaps we can enjoy those toys of yours before bed, then? Show you what a father can do with magic."

"asgore," Sans said, his eyes closed, "you're a good dad." He excused himself and left.

Toriel's family helped her with the dishes; there was a dishwasher, but none of them knew how to use it. The kids changed into their pajamas, Asgore into his bathrobe, and this time, they built a house, somewhat similar to the fortress-school but with all sorts of amenities. Asgore took time to
show his son how to attach disparate solids, to take a piece of string designated as a third-floor zip line and meld it to a plastic brick, to reshape, to create. Frisk felt a bit envious before chiding themself for being greedy with superpowers. Asriel even created plausible-looking beds out of his own fur, and Frisk wondered if they'd ever be able to save up enough to make them a sweater.

Papyrus did, in fact, come back for his spaghetti. "I DON'T THINK THAT PUZZLE YOU GAVE ME HAS ALL THE PIECES," he said, as the kids filled the third floor of their house with all sorts of implausible and impractical things.

"Oh, no, are we gonna have to go back again?" Frisk asked, frustrated.

"I got everything I could," Asriel said. "Going back won't help. Papyrus, can't you just find more somewhere? Like, from other people? Maybe Frisk's old school?"

"It's not going to be like a jigsaw puzzle," Frisk added. "It's more like... well, like Lego." They gestured to the project in front of them. "Just build as much of a case as you can, and we'll make it work. I'll make it work."


"That's... pretty cheesy and twee," Frisk said. "Saccharine, that's the word."

"But not too different from what actually happened," Asriel added, and Frisk acknowledged the point. "We just have to make sure nobody will say anything different in court."

"THE WORD IS TESTIFIES! I LIKE THAT WORD. ROLLS OFF THE TONGUE. IF I HAD ONE."

"Yeah, testifies. I don't think Frisk's not-mom is going to get any monsters to testify for her." Frisk laughed a bit and the kids shared the same thought: She's so full of hate, she's making this easy for us.

"I doubt they're foolish enough to do that," Asgore said, his face darkening.

"WITNESS INTIMIDATION! DON'T LET ANYONE CATCH YOU DOING THAT, YOUR MAJESTY."

"I shouldn't have to," Asgore grumbled. "I shouldn't have to do any of this. A King may withhold information but should never have to lie." Frisk, holding two Lego pieces in their hands, couldn't keep holding on to them, they were laughing so hard. Whether it was from their SOUL or simple contagious laughter, their mirth spread to Asriel, and before long both kids were doubled over in hysteria. "And now is when you tell me what is humorous."
"Dad, if you **don't** lie, you'll be the only political leader on the planet who doesn't," Frisk explained. "You think Trump got elected by **telling the truth**?"

"But this is a democracy," Asgore said. "Why did the people not elect someone honest?" Frisk laughed so hard they tasted half-digested spaghetti.

"Because there aren't any. All of Trump's opponents in the playoffs were liars, and in the playoffs on the other side, both of them were liars too, and so for the finals it had to be liar versus liar. He was better at it than she was, and that's why he won. Honest people never even get to the playoffs."

"How did you become so cynical so young?" Toriel asked. Frisk didn't want to answer.

"I think that's because of their not-parents," Asriel said, and Frisk nodded.

"It's not regular lying, though, not like they did," Frisk said, gesturing to the Lego set. "It's like Lego, too. I mean, our real house obviously isn't going to have a giant passenger-carrying bird on it, a catapult that throws us into a mattress so we can get in, or a zip line that takes us down so we can get out. And I don't think we're ever **really** going to have our own personal **spaceship**. But your magic does an awesome job of making it look like we can. Except magic is more real than what they promise."

"They, politicians, or they, not-parents?" Asriel asked.

"**Both.**" Asriel chuckled, Papyrus bid his goodbyes, and Frisk kept quiet while Asgore taught his son the finer points of magical control until it was time for bed. They took off their bracelets and plugged them in before Mom tucked them in, as usual, and both Frisk and Asriel felt that she could keep doing that all the way through high school. Asriel knew the definition of happiness: a belly full of mother-cooked spaghetti, a warm sibling to rest his head on and draw energy from, and a dad to teach him how to use his powers.

But **then** he went through hell-

Frisk awoke in the middle of the night, gasping. "Azzy! Did I LOAD? In real life?"

Asriel looked around, confused. He was still in bed, and he had been having the worst dream. He'd become something **horrible** but Frisk wouldn't accept it and the two of them just kept doing it again and again and **again**- "No, you didn't. And I'm still me."

"Oh, thank God. I had a really bad dream. You're still you? You kept changing... into big and evil and then **Flowey**-"

"And you kept LOADing," Asriel said. "We shared that."

"I gave you my **nightmare**?!" Frisk asked, horrified.

"Or the other way around. Or it was both of us. Don't blame yourself." Asriel put his head back onto Frisk's chest as they lied back down, slowly falling asleep. There were no further nightmares, only warmth and softness.

"Okay," Frisk said as they woke up, unplugging and snapping their bracelets on as Asriel did the same. "We're going to do this **right**. Let's do our morning stuff, then I'm going to SAVE, and then Dad can watch us practice. And if you ever need me to LOAD, if you ever think you're going to lose it or whatever, just say so." They did their morning stuff, and as Frisk brushed his fur they remembered their earlier idea. "If I save your fur, can you make me a sweater out of it?"
"A sweater out of my fur?" The idea brought a quizzical smile to his face.

"Yeah. A you-sweater. You're wearing a you-sweater, so I should be too."

"Okay!" Asriel's smile was wide. "I'll do it. Save it up." Frisk did, and placed it on the bed before picking up their phone and hitting Checkup. Good, no problems. Frisk put an arm around their brother, full of DETERMINATION not to lose control. SAVED.

"All right, Dad, Mom," Asriel said, stepping into the living room with his sibling, their tea-drinking parents watching them. "We're ready. Frisk."

"You lead," Frisk said. "Just focus on what you want to become. Take as much as you need."

"All right." Asriel did not transform instantly, this time; his horns grew steadily, his pajamas faded into a version of his father's kingly robe, and he held a blade of magic in front of him, which he put away. He had large horns and a large grin, but there wasn't any malevolence or vengeance in his countenance or posture. "Woohoah. I'm still me." He looked down at Frisk, amused, and then with a single movement of his arms picked Frisk up under their legs and back. "I can carry you, like you don't weigh anything." Frisk laughed, amazed as their brother threw them into the air, like a small child, as Frisk giggled like one and their parents applauded. "I think we've got this," he said, sitting Frisk up on his shoulders. Something was wrong, though. "Hey, Frisk? Frisk!" Asriel put Frisk down before reverting to his usual self. Frisk was hyperventilating, trying to stand up and falling back down, confused and unable to see straight. "What's wrong?"

"I think it's... no, I can't... no, forget this."

--LOAD--

"Did I hurt you?" Asriel asked.

"Sort of," Frisk said, still breathing hard even though they didn't need to anymore. "It's okay, it's why they call it practice. I think the problem is that I'm still alive. If it was just my SOUL, you could probably keep doing that, but my SOUL's still in my body. And that still follows ordinary human physics," they said, walking into the living room again. "Hey, in case you haven't figured it out..."

"You had to LOAD," Asgore said. "Yes, we heard you and got the deja vu."

"You get deja vu when I LOAD?"

"We remember some things," Toriel said. "It isn't always clear."

"Remember... when..." Asgore started, not willing to finish.

"Yeah. I remember," Frisk replied, nodding. Asgore had killed them more than once, and they had told him each time. "Azzy, try again. But not for very long this time." Asriel transformed instantly, and Frisk felt a sharp tug on their SOUL- almost as if were being pulled right out of them- and Asriel tossed them up in the air a few times before setting them back down. "Yeah, that's enough. A little dizzy. I'm getting over it."

"Well, at least we know what I'll look like when I grow up," Asriel said.

"I hope that's right," Frisk said. "I hope you can grow up properly. I can't." Their family abruptly turned to look at them, and they sat down for some tea, their brother following. "I won't go through puberty. Not unless I get some special injections, or growth hormone, or something like that."
"You don't have," Asgore said, understanding.

"Yeah, I don't have. Not those parts. Male or female. I hope it doesn't affect you, Az. Sorry my human biology keeps getting in the way," they said, sipping their tea. Was that flavor-?! "Anyway, I know what we can do after that ninety years. Az, you almost took my SOUL." Every member of their family almost, but not quite, spilled their tea, Asriel horrified at himself. "When I get really old, just finish it." They finished their tea in a single, delicious gulp.

"I still don't care about your stupid human biology or physics!" Asriel yelled, trying to calm himself. "I don't want you to die! Of anything! If your human biology is killing you then... fix it! With magic or science or something! I don't want to live with your SOUL trapped inside me forever! You'd still be dead!" He turned to his parents. "Mom, Dad, tell them!"

"A human SOUL is just an essence, Frisk," Asgore told them. "It's the central part of you, but it's not the whole you, it doesn't have all your memories or thoughts. The SOULs I took would have eventually escaped... but you could probably stay in your brother forever. But he's right. You would be mostly dead." He looked down at his tea. "There's no true life after death for humans, not the way they envision it, as much as they want to believe there is. None for monsters, either, if the memories are gone." He shrugged the shrug of a man used to tragedy. "Sorry I couldn't help with your transformations, but I think you have it figured out."

"Super powers, and it's just another emergency button," Asriel said ruefully after a swig of butterscotch-and-cinnamon tea. "In Case Frisk's Not-Parents Show Up With A Hit Squad Right After Frisk SAVEs, Break Glass."

"Those two don't have a hit squad! At least I don't think they do," Frisk said, imagining. "They hired a lawyer instead, so I'm guessing not. Besides, we've still got Jenkins and Undyne for that stuff."

"Speak of the fish," Asriel said, and the elevator opened shortly thereafter. Undyne was in her usual athletic wear, and Kid was there next to her, in his usual striped shirt but wearing a metal exoskeleton that extended to his feet. A pair of fully formed, five-fingered mechanical arms extended from his shoulders, and he waved at the Dreemurrs with both of them, overjoyed.

"01 and 02 took me to Emeyetee!" he yelled.

"Mighty? What?" Asriel asked, just as confused as Frisk and their parents.

"No, Em, Eye, Tee. It's like, a school, but they do stuff there. I met Huey there, his legs are like my arms. He kept asking about my ner-fuss system before I showed him how magic works. So I just control them with that. I can grab stuff, and hold stuff, and I can spin my wrists allll the way around," he gushed, demonstrating, "and I can wear cool bracelets like yours, and I don't fall down anymore. Undyne said you're going to go places, so can I go with you?"

Frisk and Asriel looked at each other and smiled. "Like either of us are really going to say no," Asriel said. Frisk was the one who'd pulled him up from falling off a cliff, after all. "Mom? Dad?"

"I'm so glad you've made so many friends," Toriel said, smiling.

"As long as you aren't terribly annoying," Asgore said. "Don't use those new arms to get into trouble. Undyne? Your responsibility." Undyne nodded. "So, where first?"

"Well, there's this one place, that says 'Where a kid can be a kid,' and since that's my name, I think we should go there. If you guys want to."
"My not-parents never let me go there," Frisk agreed. "They said it was too expensive. Guess what we don't have to care about?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Asriel said, "but I want to find out." They went to get changed, Asriel and Frisk picking out colorful shirts and pants they'd never worn before, choosing to advertise the Lego company in exchange for the free toys. Although they'd probably go nuts if they saw how my brother played with them, Frisk thought.

"We're having breakfast first," Asgore said, and they went down together, Kid still fooling around with his new arms, bending them around in positions impossible for a human. His practice paid off; he was able to eat waffles all by himself without putting his face into the plate. The royal family's king-size appetite practically finished off the waffle mix, and Asgore had developed a taste for bacon. They went downstairs to the SUV, where Jenkins was waiting for them. He looked like he was going to say something, about the absurdities he'd seen and heard of (their kids running off with a skeleton? another, obviously untrained, skeleton serving as their lawyer?!), but he chose not to. Despite driving the car, he was just along for the ride.

And, he had to admit, the royal family's choice of places was fairly appropriate. Going to a Chucky's as soon as it opened was a good idea, as this early in the morning next to nobody was there. The staff was about to do the hand-stamping thing, then looked at who they were admitting and decided to skip that part.

The place was flashing lights and arcade machines and tokens (a handful of twenty-dollar bills gave them the amount they thought they'd need) and a climbing section and a ball pit, confusing the adults and delighting the kids. "Hey, Frisk, wanna play one of those shooter games?" Asriel asked, gesturing to a two-player light gun game.

"Ehh... I've kind of lost my taste for violent games," Frisk said.

"C'mon, it's just a game," Asriel said, leading his reluctant sibling over to play it. "So all I have to do is just point this at... Oh, got it."

"Why isn't this hitting?" Frisk asked after a few seconds of play.

"I think the inside isn't pointing straight," Asriel said, holding it, altering it. "Now it is." They did very well before taking too many cheesy, unavoidable hits and deciding not to play anymore. "All right, what else is there? What's Kid doing?"

Kid was enjoying a game of skee ball, having just stopped playing a basketball-throwing game, a long wad of tickets in his left hand and a ball in his right, practicing how not to throw the little ball up too hard. 10... 10... 10... and a 100! And a 50! Kid laughed with glee as Undyne cheered him on. Of course, the other kids couldn't help but get involved, and Asgore and Toriel watched.

"Hey, it's Chucky's mom and dad!" a small child yelled, pointing nearly straight up at Toriel and Asgore. Asriel heard it and chuckled, but didn't stop playing.

"Alfred! That's no way to talk to royalty!" his mother shouted to him, a moment behind. "I'm so sorry. You know how they are at that age."

"It is fine," Toriel said. "It is not just children who confuse us for other things."

"I can imagine." She looked up at Toriel and tried as best she could to quietly talk into her ear above the ambient noise. "Yours don't give you nearly as much trouble, do they?"
"Oh, no," Toriel replied. "Ours do not get into any trouble they cannot get out of."

"Oh, they're clever? Sneaky? Good for them. Watch them, though. If you ask me, the guy in the Chucky suit?" She made an indistinct motion across her neck. "Bad news. What kind of weirdo dresses up like a giant mouse for a living? Anyone who puts on one of those suits to look like an animal? Don't ever trust 'em." She tried to take a selfie with them, but had a hard time getting the proper angle with the eight-foot-tall goat monster and her husband who couldn't stand up fully without hitting the ceiling, and wound up taking a selfie-styled picture while staring at the floor, the camera pointing up Toriel's nose. She then called her friends, leading her son out by the hand. Asgore started laughing, and Toriel gave her husband a thump on the chest.

The kids eventually got bored of skee ball, pockets overflowing with tickets, and went to explore. "Woah! What's that?!!" Kid asked, pointing at the animatronic mouse which was singing something horrible.

"That's a Chucky robot," Frisk said. "That's, like, the mascot."

"It's creepy," Kid said. "I don't like looking at it." He backed off.

"What, you're afraid it'll jump out and scare you?" Frisk asked. "That can't happen. Besides, even if the animatronics did come to life and start terrorizing people, Azzy can be way scarier than that if he wants."

"What? No way." His face showed the pure disdain that only a child can have. "Asriel, you can't be-" AAYYYYYAHH "Aaahhhhh!" He fell back onto his mechanical hands. Asriel's facial transformation made an excellent jumpscare, Frisk noted. If they couldn't feel it coming, it'd have scared them too. Undyne burst out laughing.

None of them ate any of the pizza. What was coming out of that kitchen smelled like the cooks needed a loud, blond, British chef to start kicking their butts. They kept playing, eschewing the electronic games for more physical challenges. Both Frisk and Asriel were laser-quick and were learning how to read each other's movements, making for a truly insane game of air hockey that ended up in a tie. Kid used the grab machine to get a plushie to cuddle (third try!), but Frisk did not; they already had one. Eventually they all ran out of tokens, and didn't want to bother to get more; they used their accumulated tickets to buy a whistling, tailed, soft-foam football and a fairly large assortment of single-use glowing wristbands.

Of course, having a soft-foam football meant that they had to use it, and they went to the same playground park Frisk went to before, tossing it back and forth with their father. Kid had a hard time throwing things; he didn't quite understand what he needed to do with his arms to get the ball moving. However, he did very well on the monkey bars, the exoskeleton arms easily able to pick up his negligible weight. Asgore threw it to Undyne, and then suddenly it became a contest of direct chest passes to each other as if the soft foam was a spear, while the kids laughed. Asgore eventually got the upper hand, tossing it over her shoulder as she fumbled at catching it. Toriel, with surprising speed, leaped up and caught it before it went too far.

Exhausted, happy, and a bit hungry and thirsty, they went back to the car. "Hey, Frisk," Kid piped up, "I've been wondering. Are you a boy or a girl?"

"Both. And neither," Frisk answered, not wanting to get into it. "Actually, Mom, can we go and get a dress I can wear to court? Something frilly and pink that makes me look like a princess."
Everyone else in the car looked shocked, save for Jenkins, who could be surprised by absolutely nothing at this point.

Asriel couldn't keep the mirth off his face. "I didn't know you liked dressing up, Frisk."

"I just want to make not-mom mad." And I'd much rather have my not-parents getting mad than me getting mad. "Actually, wait, not pink. Dreemurr royal purple. With that symbol on the chest."

"The Delta Rune?" Toriel asked.

"Yes, that. And we should all wear it. Isn't that the Dreemurr family crest?" Their family nodded.

"Frisk, why are you going to court?" Kid asked. "What'd you do?"

"Be born to the wrong people," Frisk replied. "It's a common crime. Often with a harsh punishment and no possibility of parole. I got out early for good behavior."

Toriel found a bridal and formal store nearby. Nobody else wanted to go in there with them, particularly not the children. Asriel looked at his sibling and his bracelets, and Frisk just nodded; an average-sized store couldn't be the equivalent of a couple hundred meters or any real amount of solid rock. Asriel tried not to be too obvious that he was looking at his wrists while Toriel and Frisk went in together. Nope, still a solid green throughout.

Frisk came out a few minutes later, their mother carrying their other clothes, wearing a floor-length light purple dress with puffed sleeves and a bow on the back. It was wide at the bottom, multi-layered, and, after Mom's magical ministrations, very comfortable and expertly tailored. They wore a purple headband and short, white gloves; they had almost chosen elbow-length ones, but those would go either over the bracelets (unsightly) or under them (not the best idea). Rolling along in their shoes, it looked like they were floating on air. Asriel opened the door and Frisk curtsied before lifting their skirts to step in. Asgore smiled, Kid stared, and Undyne's jaw nearly fell off her face.

"Frisk, you're beautiful," Asriel said. "This'll make your not-mom mad?"

"Thanks, Az, and I guarantee it," they replied, smoothing their dress down to sit next to their brother. "What, Undyne? You want to take Alphys here sometime?" Blushing deeply, she looked away.

They decided to see a movie together, but they acknowledged that neither Toriel nor Asgore would ever fit properly in theater seats, so they just decided to go back to the penthouse and watch something on Netflix. Their family almost chose some horribly godawful Christmas special (it was getting close to that time of year), but Frisk knew the difference between good and bad movies and chose The Neverending Story instead, sitting on the couch in their dress next to their brother and picking popcorn out of the bowl with their white gloves. All of them cried when Artax sank (even Undyne, especially Undyne), all of them cheered at the ending (Asriel wanted to turn into Falcor, but that was beyond even Frisk's power), and Asgore almost continued with the sequel before Frisk used their superpower of looking at IMDb first.

They ate dinner together, laughed and played together, and the next day the adults went back to work while the kids explored, learned, and enjoyed life. Sans, slowly shedding his laziness, had taken up seeing the snowman regularly, as he told Frisk, and Trump had not resumed the monster farming after the Parsnik fiasco Sans had set up.

And then the day came; it was time for the trial.
Judgment Day

Frisk woke up to Asriel gently nuzzling their chest, his arms draped over them. The last few days had been pretty good. They'd taken Undyne to the Baltimore National Aquarium (needing to tell her that eating the exhibits was strictly disallowed), sat in the VIP booth for a Steelers game (Asriel's verdict: boring, loud even through the sheltered VIP box, and best watched pre-recorded at home with the fast-forward button at the ready; at least the Steelers won), went hot-air ballooning (Asriel found it far superior to an enclosed plane, even if the high wind of a December day was cold on his ears, and the pilot was surprised by both the monsters' near-complete lack of weight and that none of the Dreemurrs seemed to have any fear or anxiety at all, even when peering down out of the balloon), and almost considered skydiving before they realized it'd be an excellent way to either put them and Asriel in an embarrassing situation or break the 200-meter limit.

He's been awake for some time, Frisk realized, he just doesn't want to get out of bed. Neither did they. Maybe they could just call in sick? 'Sorry, Your Honor, we've all got airborne monster ebolAIDS. Highly contagious, and the only cure is a trip to Disney World and never having to see those two retards again.' They'd take a million easily-reversible falls from a hot air balloon over the ensuing, basically irreversible aggravation. Anxious, yes, scared, thankfully no. Then again, if they really could get me back I'd probably go climbing that mountain again.

"Frisk, can we procratin.. procrackin..."

"Procrastinate." It was a word their not-dad had used at them often, usually relating to homework.

"Yeah, can we procrastinate? Make this morning last eighteen hours, maybe longer. Watch a movie, and then LOAD, and then watch a different movie." The trial was scheduled for the early afternoon.

"Do you really want to give Mom and Dad deja vu and make Sans repeat everything too?" Asriel shook his head, and Frisk felt it on their chest. "Besides, today's already going to be a long day. In more ways than one."

"Yeah, that's kinda why I wanted to do that. You're right, we shouldn't." He made no move to get up, and neither did Frisk. They really weren't feeling up to it until they got a whiff of familiar smells.

"Is that what I think it is?" Asriel asked, perking up, putting on his bracelets, and stuffing his phone into his pajama pocket. Like Frisk's dress, the kids' pajamas didn't have pockets before Toriel and Asriel were done with them.

"What, the pie? Yeah, we had that a few days ago," Frisk said, putting on their bracelets and usual purple hairband (they'd worn it daily; it stopped boy-or-girl questions and kept Frisk's lengthening hair out of their eyes) and grabbing their phone.

"No, the other one! Don't you smell that?" He rushed out of the room. "It is, it is!"

Toriel handed her son a cup of warm hot chocolate, which he held like a precious goblet. It was steaming, too hot to drink, so he concentrated for a bit, taking the heat into himself, and then it wasn't. He took a long, deep drink, his ears extending in rapture, and he gave a long, contented bleat. "Mom, where did you get this?"
Toriel's expression was amused. "We bought it at the store."

"You can just buy chocolate?! I guess I should have known. Back when they fell down, it was so rare to have any..."

"You mean Chara?" Frisk asked quietly.

Asriel nodded, looking at his half-full cup. "Yeah. I'm not sure if I should have this."

"C'mon, Az. Just because someone you don't like likes something that you like doesn't mean that you should stop liking the thing that you like," Asriel mulled that over, smiling. "Oh, Mom, Dad? I'm sorry for all the deja vu you'll get today. I really don't think we're going to do this first try."

"You do what you need to do," Asgore told his child, handing them a cooled-down cup of hot chocolate. "Stay determined, Frisk."

"Always," Frisk replied, taking a sip. Ohhh, that was good. I don't care how many times. Nobody is taking this from us.

"Is there anything we can do to prepare?"

"Yes, take a bath when you're done eating, and we'll see about making the two of you presentable. And Frisk, make sure to brush him thoroughly first." She turned to her son. "We do not need you shedding all over the courtroom, young man." Asriel's facial expression was clear: Mommmm!

"Oh, that reminds me," Frisk said. "We've been saving Azzy's fur. We're going to make a sweater."

"A sweater?" Asgore said, chuckling. "Dear, you think we have enough to help them finish that?"

"You probably have enough for the whole thing yourself, Fluffybuns," Toriel told her husband. "Is this between you two, or can it be a family project?"

"It's going to take forever with just me," Asriel said, and Frisk nodded. They finished their pie and hot chocolate and commenced their morning ritual, doing as their mom said (including with Frisk's own hair), and handing Asriel's fur to her before sitting in the bathtub. Bubbles, bubbles every day.

"Well," Frisk said, trying and failing to relax, "at least this'll be over with."

"Remember the last time you said that?" Frisk just sighed with their mouth below the surface of the water, adding even more bubbles to it. "Are you going to be okay? Seeing them again?"

Frisk didn't want to reply, but Asriel was looking expectantly for an answer. They slowly lifted their face from the water. "I should be."

"You promise?"

The question was crushing, tearing, and Asriel felt the heartbreak and angst. Frisk either had to make a promise they might not be able to keep or not be able to promise that they wouldn't demon-possess their brother. "I promise I'll try," they said, weakly, and ducked their head beneath the surface to mix their tears with the water.

"Hey," Asriel said, coming around to Frisk's side of the tub and sidling up next to them. "We can't lose, remember? And if you need me, I'm here."

Frisk hugged him fiercely. "I need you, Az. You and Mom and Dad and everyone. Sometimes, I think that I'm in a coma or something, and that I'll just wake up one day in the hospital with my not-parents standing over me... who am I kidding, they wouldn't be there... and I don't really have
any powers and you guys don't really exist, and I'll tell Rebecca and she'll just say something like 'Did you dream you were a prince or a princess?' All my friends are made of actual magic. How can I know any of this is real?"

Asriel hugged them back. "And sometimes I worry that all of this is just something Flowey's making up because they're bored, that no other kids came after Chara at all, that there's no such thing as penthouses or Lego or Frisk. I mean, come on. Football? Aquariums? Hot air balloons? Chocolate that you can just buy at the store? A world that rotates? Hair dryers?! A human who's let me use their SOUL and become my sibling? Those things can't really exist, can they?" They smiled at each other. "If it's not real, then let's just keep dreaming." He reached for a bottle. "Oh yeah. Shampoo. There's no way this stuff can be real." They cleaned each other's hair thoroughly, and Frisk gave Asriel's fur extra attention with the hair dryer and the brush.

Toriel had their clothes waiting for them, Frisk's dress with the Delta Rune emblazoned on its center. Frisk pulled it over their head and put their headband and white gloves on while Toriel helped her son with his robe, a miniature version of his father's. Toriel helped smooth out Frisk's dress after they put on their roller shoes; one of the wheels seemed to be sticking, but a brief touch from Asriel fixed the bearing. "We have something else for you to wear today," Toriel said, smiling. "Guess what it is?"

"What? You couldn't have done it already?" They had. Asgore and Toriel had combined their shed fur with their son's, magically creating a sweater that on close inspection was clearly not made by human hands or machinery, as the hairs were fused, not woven. There were irregularities, maybe a few small spots that could have been called defects, and of course it had fur strands sticking out of it everywhere and would probably pick up all kinds of stuff from whatever it touched, but it was warm, cuddly, and extraordinarily comfortable, like a continuous hug. And I thought the Delta Rune was a good symbol. There's no mistaking what this means.

"Are you ready to go?" Toriel asked.

"We don't have more time?" Frisk asked, checking their phone. They had some, not much.

"You slept in," she said, smiling. "Besides, we should get there early. It is a bad idea to keep a judge waiting." Asgore frowned; as King he didn't feel that anyone had the right to sit in judgment over him. Especially not when it came to his family. He felt that it would be more just to have a duel to the death with Frisk's not-father himself. Needing to rely on his child's powers for a victory in a system he didn't like wasemasculating, and he'd endured quite enough emasculation over the years. But his family would still regard him as their patriarch, and he'd still be King, and Frisk had taught him the ways of mercy.

They took the elevator down to meet their friends, Frisk seeming to float down the hall in their dress except for the clacking of wheels on tile. The skelebros were eating breakfast with Undyne and Kid, telling lawyer jokes. Undyne had just finished telling the group that fifty lawyers at the bottom of the ocean was a good start (Kid and Papyrus didn't get it at first, and then they did) and was now telling them that the best place for a lawyer was in the cemetery.

"YOU MEAN WHERE THE SKELETONS ARE?" Papyrus asked, and Undyne laughed.

"Let's go," Asgore told them brusquely, and they finished their breakfast quickly. They had a brief, occasionally vigorous, discussion about who was riding with whom. Jenkins, amazed that they'd want things this way, drove with Undyne, the Dreemurr parents (who were too big for the other car), and Kid in front, while Papyrus drove Sans' car, carrying his brother and the kids. Despite the somewhat icy roads and being Papyrus, he managed to drive them to the courthouse without
anything exploding in fiery, dust-strewn wreckage. (There was a brief bit of road rage when someone tried to get between Jenkins and Papyrus, but one friendly smile from Papyrus nearly spooked the guy off the road.)

Both vehicles stopped just outside the front doors of the imposing-looking building, the Sholeases just outside, talking about legal stuff that Asriel didn't understand. Fueled with rage, Frisk easily gathered DETERMINATION and SAVEd. "Okay, Papyrus, this is the first time. Just... do your thing."

"I ALWAYS DO MY THING. I WOULDN'T EVER DO SOMEONE ELSE'S THING. I DON'T THINK THEY'D LIKE IT IF I DID. TELL ME WHEN I SHOULD DO YOUR THING."

"You can't do my thing, Papyrus," Frisk replied. "I'm afraid to ask what would happen if you could." They opened their door, and their not-mom was way too close.

Seeing them get out, she approached quickly before anyone else could. She looked down at them and hissed, "God help you, you little brat. When this is over, you'll wish you had never been born." She did not notice Sans' eye briefly flash blue.

Frisk barely even heard the words, instead hearing only an internal mantra: *I will not take over my brother to kill you. I will not take over my brother to kill you.* After she turned and walked off, Frisk shot an angry glance at Jenkins for letting her get so close. He shrugged, opening his hands. She was still their birth mother, right?

There was a metal detector, and Jenkins helped them through it; Frisk's shoes didn't set it off, the kids' bracelets and phones went through the conveyor belt just fine, and Papyrus' evidence got special handling. The courtroom itself was decently large, but there was no jury box. Rather, the court was divided into two halves, with a gallery behind. The Dreemurr side of the court was a who's-who of the Underground; Undyne with Kid and Royal Scientist Alphys (the Dreemurr parents had taken next to no convincing to reinstate her), 01 and 02, and a handful of others. And we're going to blatantly lie in front of all of them, and hope that none of them say anything about it. The Dreemurrs themselves were near their lawyer, Asriel and Toriel next to Frisk, Asgore next to Asriel, Sans by Toriel, Frisk right in the middle. *See me? I'm where I belong.* Near the center were the lawyers' desks, each with a desk lamp. Two poles were next to the lawyers' desks, each with a padded guard a bit less than six feet off the ground. Asriel asked Frisk what those was for, but they didn't know either. On the Sholeas side sat several people, some of whom Frisk barely recognized as being far relatives (including their grandfather; Asriel spotted the resemblance), some of whom might have been brought in to make the Sholeases look like they had more friends than they actually did. There was one particularly nasty-looking guy, in a neatly tailored black suit, who Frisk didn't like at all. Government? Corporate? Men in Black? Trenchcoat Mafia? Somebody in charge of that monster farm?

Toriel helped take Frisk's sweater off and draped it over their chair, and Frisk and their not-parents glared daggers at each other from across the courtroom. Rebecca looked half-asleep, her usual attitude towards anything involving Frisk, but something was off. *She's not bored. She's just pretending to be. I'm royalty, and she's envious.* Frisk tried to send a simple message through body language: *It's not too late for you to get on my good side.* But she was deaf to it.

And they waited, and waited, and waited some more. Frisk wasn't willing to SAVE again, figuring they might need the extra time.

"All rise," said the bailiff, who would not let a courtroom full of monsters change the way he did business. Asgore rose; he was the tallest figure in the room by far, and everyone else standing
looked up at his face. Even the judge seemed impressed. It was hard to tell how old she was, but it was easy to tell what she was; a no-nonsense lady with absolutely no tolerance for implausible stories. She wouldn't let a courtroom full of monsters change that, either.

"Be seated," the bailiff said, and the judge began.

"Mister, uh... what is your last name?"

"I don't have one," Papyrus said in his best lawyer voice that made him sound like a reasonable, sane, capable, and well-adjusted adult. Papyrus had discovered a knack for lying.

"All right, Mr. Papyrus, tell me why a couple of monsters from another plane of existence should get custody over a human child."

"For starters, Asgore and Toriel have been more than adequate parents. They have given them-

"I don't care," the judge said. "It's obvious they're taking good care of her and she wants to be there." Frisk's not-mom minded 'her' and 'she' a lot more than they did. "It doesn't matter. Under the laws of this state, unless her birth parents are unfit, they have custody. If the Dreemurrs didn't have diplomatic immunity, this'd be a kidnapping trial."

"The birth parents are not fit," Papyrus said, glancing at Frisk's not-mother, "in more ways than one. But, Your Honor, there is a special circumstance," Papyrus said. "Frisk and Asriel cannot become separated from each other. If they do, Asriel shall suffer a horrible, grim, and entirely undeserving fate, and any dog who would inflict it is a foul cur indeed."

"Prove it," she said.

"Um. I can do that, Your Honor," Alphys said. "I have a chart showing how it works..."

"You're on their side. How do I know you're not lying?"

"She's the one who made these bracelets keeping us together!" Frisk exclaimed, holding them up. "These aren't enough?"

"How do I know those are real?" Her Honor asked.

"You seriously don't believe us?!" Frisk was indignant.

"Listen to me, young lady. This is a court of law. I'll make this real simple. I don't believe your story. I think you brought in a bunch of props. If you can't prove it, through third-party sources, I can't accept it." And the only way to prove it would be to...

"Fine then, you don't get to know about that!" Judge Saibancho had just enough time to look puzzled right before the

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"Okay, don't even bother telling the judge about the whole inseparable thing," Frisk said. "She's not going to believe it."

"huh. so much for using our strongest attack first," Sans said. "it was worth a shot."

"It was," Frisk agreed. "Also, Papyrus, she doesn't care how good my parents are. You need to prove that my not-parents aren't fit to be parents."
"THEY'RE NOT." He looked outside the car at Frisk's not-mother. "IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE."

"You told that joke al... never mind. Just don't correct the judge when she calls me a girl. It makes not-mom angry when she does."

This time, not wanting to be threatened, Frisk delayed getting out of the car until their not-mother started going in and they were too far away to exchange harsh words. Fathoms looked at Frisk for a bit, and Frisk mouthed the words *Honey. Chocolate. Anthill.* at him.

Waiting was even worse the second time through, but Frisk was resolute. Sans was sleeping. The evil guy in black kept right on staring. And the first few lines went the same way.

"...should get custody over a human child," the judge said, again.

"Because Frisk's birth parents are completely unfit," Papyrus said, not telling the joke again. "We have pictures, and testimony, and all the other stuff that judges eat. I call Frisk Dreemurr to the stand." Frisk got up, adjusted their dress, and began to slowly, quietly roll to the stand. Please let not-mom think I have even more magic powers than I actually do.

"Objection!" Fathoms Sharpvalue shouted. "The record will show that the child's name is Frisk Sholeas."

"Let's swear her in first," the judge said. "Say 'I', and then your name."

"I, Frisk Dreemurr..." Frisk said, silently thanking Her Honor for letting them get the point across. Papyrus asked them a series of rehearsed questions, and Frisk told the court everything they'd told Asriel, about their not-mom taking things, about their lack of relationship, and about the family pictures, which Papyrus presented as evidence.

"Hold it!" Fathoms shouted. "Where'd you get these pictures?"

"Frisk gave them to me," Papyrus lied. "Are you saying they shouldn't have been in that house? Because that's what we're trying to say."

"Then one of the Dreemurrs was in the house with them," Fathoms announced, holding up a small plastic bag with some white strands in it. Papyrus' expression went googly-eyed (Bone status: troubled) and Frisk winced. *Oh, no. Azzy shed in there!* But it would be easy to argue that the fur was transferred from other clothing- or-

"No they weren't. I was wearing my sweater," Frisk lied. "The sweater I wore today."

"Let me see it," the judge said, and compared the loose strands and the sweater. "Is this made out of their fur?"

"Yes, it is, Your Honor," Frisk answered, smiling and causing gossip in the gallery. *Oh, great. I think I've just started a fashion trend.*

"Well, that explains it," the judge replied. "So you just went in there to gather evidence?"

"Yes. I was originally going to try to talk them out of this, but then I found the door was unlocked, so I went in to gather evidence instead."

"Were your parents home at the time?"
Frisk would have liked to say no, but the lie would be too easily countered. "I think Grelod was."

"You're saying your mother was home and you didn't even say hi to her at all? No 'Hi, Mom, I've come home', nothing?"

"She's **not** my **mom**," Frisk said, firmly. "That's why I'm sitting here."

"You get an A for consistency," the judge replied, somewhat impressed. "Now let's take a look at these pictures. I'm seeing what appears to be family photos without Frisk in them and a closet with a bed in it and not much else." Her brow furrowed. "This was where you were sleeping?"

"Yes, Your Honor. "Get it now?"

"I find it troubling. Do you have anything else to add, Mr. Papyrus?"

"I want to put this into the evidence," Papyrus said, pulling out a folder from his very lawyerly briefcase. "This is the missing-persons report that the Sholeas family gave the police." He handed it to the judge.

"Everything looks in order. What are you trying to tell me?"

**There's no picture.** They are so pictureless that the police had to go to the school for a photo. A large group photo. With their face very tiny in it. They couldn't have put this on a milk carton. Unless it was a milk carton for ants, but they're not very good people finders." Asriel and Frisk smiled at each other from across the courtroom. Papyrus had actually done something somewhat useful himself.

"If that's all the questions, the witness is excused. Mr. Sharpvalue, would you or your client like to explain these pictures? If you're not even going to take her picture, why should she go home with you?"

"Yes, Your Honor. I call to the stand Mr. Richard Sholeas." Frisk's not-dad walked to the witness stand, a deep frown on his face, and did the swearing in by rote. "Mr. Sholeas, why didn't you take Frisk's picture?"

"Because they didn't want me to," Richard lied, and Frisk could tell the lie was rehearsed. **Of course they knew! If Azzy hadn't shed-!** "They never wanted to be seen with us. Pictures, gatherings, you name it. All of this doesn't come as a surprise, Your Honor. The circumstances are unusual, but the behavior is not." **You lying sack of- I can end your miserable life with a thought- I will not take over my brother to kill you. I will not take over my brother to kill you.** And of course no one on the Sholeas side spoke against the lie, not even Frisk's grandfather, who was very close to becoming considered their not-grandfather.

"So what's this about the nearly empty closet under the stairs?" the judge asked.

"Frisk and Rebecca never really got along," Richard said, telling the truth for once, "and they didn't want to share a room. It's a two-bedroom home, Your Honor. We gave Frisk the best we could. We're not royalty. But we've always put their needs first."

"Hold it tightly!" Papyrus yelled. "If you put their needs first, and you knew they didn't want to be seen with you..." Papyrus brought out another folder with a flourish. "...then why did you schedule interviews with several talk shows for money? You even bought them plane tickets!" Frisk chuckled as Papyrus laid out all the discarded mail. Assuming his own victory was something their not-dad liked to do.
"Objection!" Fathoms replied. "That paperwork is clearly stolen."

"They visited the trash. Are you going to accuse them of theft for doing household chores?" Papyrus asked brightly, and Fathoms did not reply.

"Please explain this to the court, Mr. Sholeas," the judge demanded.

"Needs, not wants," he replied. "Just because they might not want to be seen with us doesn't mean we're not still their parents. After we lost them, we decided not to let them hide again. Yes, we accepted paid interviews from many talk shows. We're going to use the money to buy a bigger place so Frisk can have their own room." Lying. Sack. I will not take over... Some people from the Sholeas side even dared to applaud, and the judge banged her gavel.

"So why is the room empty?"

"They said that their toys were too childish and that they wanted to focus on school," Richard lied. "I should have known that they'd try something like this."

"If that is all, the witness is excused."

"There's one more thing I want to add," Richard said, displeasing his lawyer. "I never leave that door unlocked. And there's no key under the mat. I don't know how they broke in, but they did break in."

"We don't have any proof of that. I find it hard to believe that she'd throw away her own toys," the judge said. "I want some corroboration on these claims."

"We'd like to call Rebecca Sholeas to the stand," Fathoms replied.

Rebecca, Frisk noted, looked like hell. Her body shape hadn't changed, not like her mother, but she was wearing too much makeup and dressed too poorly for court. Everyone there had to notice that she didn't look very much like Frisk, and she even had problems being sworn in. She doesn't want to be here. Why'd they even call her up? Fathoms was realizing that he'd made a mistake and decided to keep it short. "Ms. Sholeas, has your mother ever taken away anything from your room?"

"No, never," Rebecca lied, and it was so sloppy-sounding that it sounded like the truth. "I never had anything go missing, or anything like that."

"So, the reason for the empty room?"

"It's like Dad said. They threw all their old toys out and just decided that school was more important."

"No further questions, Your Honor."

"I have just one question," Papyrus said. "Wasn't Frisk your sibling? Before your mother lost her job, weren't you responsible for them? Did you ever leave them alone when they were young?" No one could tell that Papyrus was struggling his hardest not to cry. After what happened to Dad, Sans had always been there for him.

"Not really, not for long. I mean, they'd be home alone for like five minutes before Mom lost her job because their bus came first. We never really talked a lot. I did check up on them every so often, though," she hastily added. Papyrus' puzzle sense kicked in, and he picked up on something.
A grin crossed his face, but, being a skeleton, no one noticed.

"I'd like to call Grelod Sholeas to the stand," Papyrus said. "Although I'm not sure how long she can stand." She performed the swearing-in expertly, staring at Papyrus, convinced that she could overcome her monster enemy through sheer force of will. Frisk stared at her, smiling. **Sorry, you don't have the DETERMINATION. I do.**

Papyrus asked exactly one question. "Mrs. Sholeas, you've never taken away anything you gave to Frisk? Not once?" Fathoms didn't see the trap exactly, but he knew there was a trap, and he shook his head at Grelod.

"No. Never." Wrong answer.

"Make with the stopping!" Papyrus shouted with a flourish. "We know from Rebecca's testimony that Frisk let themself in the house before you lost your job." The look on Grelod's face showed how cornered she felt. Someone in the gallery started playing some upbeat music in some earphones, and Asriel heard it. "So, if the door's always locked like Mr. Sholeas said, and they could let themself in before, where did Frisk's house keys go?!" His lawyer voice broke. "NYEH-HEH-HEH!"

"Monster, that's..." The judge was scowling at her. "I... Okay, I took the house keys back! For safety! That doesn't prove I don't love them! I love my child, I always have! Your Honor, we've made some mistakes. But this doesn't prove we're unfit to raise our child!"

And then Frisk realized how they could prove it. If only they had... but 'if only they had' didn't apply to Frisk.

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"Sorry, Sans. This should be the last time," Frisk said.

"just get to the point."

"Az, remember what my not-mom said the first time?"

"Yeah."

"This time, record it. And don't let anyone know you did. This needs to go the exact same way. Oh, and Papyrus, don't bother telling the judge about the whole inseparable thing, she won't believe it, don't correct her when she calls me a girl, and she doesn't care about how good my parents are, you just need to prove that my not-parents aren't fit."

"THEY'RE NOT. IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE." Frisk just sighed. Asriel was right; doing the same things over and over again got boring **fast.**

Frisk stepped out of the car in the exact same sequence and the exact same time as their first approach, Frisk's not-mom said the exact same things, and the only exception was Asriel holding their phone out just behind Frisk.

It did go nearly the exact same way. Sharpvalue's tone of voice was a little less aggressive (didn't give him the 'anthill' business this time) but he asked the same questions, every piece of evidence was introduced and brought up the same way, and Frisk tried to act agitated instead of cataclysmically bored. And they were getting really, really sick of that weirdo in black staring at them.
This time, their not-mother's last line was "I love my child, I always have!" Now. Frisk tapped Asriel's shoulder, and Asriel handed Papyrus his phone, with the video paused at just the right moment and the volume turned all the way up.

Papyrus didn't even try to use his lawyer voice. "OH? THEN WHY DID YOU SAY THIS? NYEH-HEH-HEH!"

Telling your kid that they'd wish they'd never been born isn't really something you want to have played back in a custody hearing. Or anywhere. Kid gasped audibly. Even the black-suited man started to stare at Grelod rather than at Frisk.

"Mrs. Sholeas, would you care to explain why you said this?" Her Honor asked, clearly annoyed. She's just going to say she was angry. She's just going to say she didn't mean it, and the judge'll believe her. She's going to get out of it and we'll have to think of something else. "Because that's how you have to talk to liars!" she shouted instead, and Frisk's heart soared. Gotcha. Finally!

Except for the upbeat music that only the listener and the goats could hear, there was a moment of dead, pin-drop silence.

"Your Honor, it's lying to this court right now!" she continued, ignoring her lawyer's frantic use of the time-out symbol, "It's wearing a dress, but it's not a girl! They just put it in that for sympathy." Fathoms was making desperate X motions with his arms. Sweat was pouring off her husband's vigorously shaking head. Frisk was fascinated, watching their not-mother dig her own grave with a backhoe, having never been so happy to see her so angry. "Your Honor, go and look at the medical records, you'll know why and how it's a lie. You hear that, liar? They're not your family. We are! Like it or not!" Fathoms got up and started slamming his head against the pole, hitting the padded part with a loud THUMP THUMP THUMP, and she still didn't notice.

Ohhhh! That's why they have that there! Frisk and Asriel realized. To prevent further brain damage!

Judge Saibancho nodded her head. "Mrs. Sholeas, in all my years on the bench, I've never seen a more convincing argument in a custody trial. You've left this court no reasonable choice but to award sole custody..." Frisk's not-mom's smile was huge and triumphant, and Frisk, in a moment of inspiration, quickly pulled out their phone. "to the Dreemurr family." It fell off her face into an expression of shock, and Frisk took a picture of that shock, setting it as their phone's wallpaper. Most monsters and a sizable chunk of the humans in the gallery started cheering. Papyrus put on a pair of sunglasses, which flipped open to reveal another pair of sunglasses. A vague smile crossed the scary guy's face; as Frisk suspected, he hadn't come there for the Sholeas family. The judge leaned down towards the witness stand and told her something that Frisk couldn't hear.

"Wow, I didn't know judges could use words like that," Asriel said to Frisk.

"But what about visitation rights?" Frisk's not-father asked.

Judge Saibancho laughed at him. "You should feel lucky you're not visiting the inside of a jail cell. Court is adjourned. Goodbye." She whacked her gavel and walked off.

Across the courtroom, Frisk's not-father looked at them with an expression unmistakable as anything but raw, boiling anger. Filled with joy, relief, satisfaction, a little schadenfreude, and no small amount of DETERMINATION, Frisk immediately SAVED. There. Now if he tries something and Azzy pulverizes him, we're not going to have to do that over again. "Why didn't you just come and talk to us?" he asked instead, in a perfectly reasonable voice. "It didn't have to be like this. We could have worked things out." After momentary incredulity and anger, Frisk and Asriel turned to each other and broke up laughing. Frisk didn't even bother to flip their not-father off before putting
their sweater back on and turning to leave with their family, twirling their dress with a flourish. Asriel was just relieved that he didn't actually have to do anything, and he was overhearing a very annoyed grandfather say something to his son in a language Asriel didn't know.

The news media was waiting for them on their way out with a barrage of questions, Mettaton's basic form using its strength to force its way up front. "FRISK! ASRIEL! NOW THAT YOU'VE WON YOUR CUSTODY BATTLE, WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?" it asked, holding up a sign saying "MTT Vacation and Resort Plans" with the hand not holding the microphone, showing a large bag marked with a dollar sign in a central compartment.

"We're going to Disney World!" Frisk shouted instead.
"No, Dad, it's just **called** the Magic Kingdom," Frisk was explaining. They and their brother had changed clothes ('Blame my brother!' 'Blame my sister!') to handle the pizza, which was thick, coated with toppings, dripping with sauce, and devoured within minutes. They were all sitting on the floor together, the television tuned to The Weather Channel; the dining room table was simply too cramped with everyone there. "It's all illusions and fake stuff. They don't actually have any magic there."

"Or they **didn't**," Asgore said. "Be... well, careful when you SAVE, if nothing else. It might be a great deal more dangerous than it appears." Frisk was about to ask what he was worried about when Asriel told them that someone was coming.

Jenkins was standing behind a stranger in an elevator again, only this time he didn't look like he was bringing bad news and the stranger, a balding, short man in his mid-fifties, looked like someone who wasn't out to do something nasty to them. "Good afternoon," he introduced himself. "My name is Lawrence Honk, and I am a private jet pilot." Jenkins nodded, having checked the man's credentials. "The Walt Disney Corporation has placed me under contract to fly Frisk Dreemurr and company to Walt Disney World. I dearly hope that you accept. This is being provided for free by the company; there is no charge to you." Lawrence couldn't believe the words coming out of his mouth, but then again he wouldn't have believed who- or what- he was speaking the words to, just like he barely believed that an airplane-monster had come dangerously close to his own craft before looking embarrassed and flying away. What he did absolutely believe was that the contract was legitimate and that he really would be paid that much (plus expenses, as if expenses even mattered next to that much) to do this.

"I wanna go!" Kid piped up.

"Alphys?" Undyne asked.

"Well, I've never been a fan of.. erm... Western animation, but I suppose I can come for a look-see."

Undyne grinned her trademark grin. "Don't worry," she told the Dreemurr parents. "They'll be in good hands. C'mon, let's get to packing." Frisk chose to leave their dress behind, as it wasn't something for running around an amusement park in, and, with Asriel, packed T-shirts, shorts, socks, and a pair of sandals they didn't think they'd ever wear.

"What if you have to dress warmly?" Toriel asked, with a stern expression.

"Hasn't Florida come up yet?" Frisk asked in reply, pointing to the television. "There it is now! See? High, seventy-five. Seventy-two. Seventy. Another seventy-five. And we're going to be running around. I'll be fine, Mom. Really. I won't freeze. I promise." She relented. "Papyrus? Sans?" Frisk asked as they were about to leave.

"CAN'T, GOT LAWYER STUFF TO DO." A new client had asked him for representation in a civil fraud suit and he had considered defrauding his client.

"mebbe some other time."

"Just you five? Okay. Not to pry, but how much do you all weigh?" Lawrence asked.
"I don't know for myself, but..." Frisk motioned at Kid. "See that thing he's wearing? That thing weighs maybe fifty pounds, and all the rest of them put together might weigh about that much."

"Seriously?" Frisk nodded. "I wish all my clients were like you. We're good to go, then." He called up the resort to tell them who was coming.

"I still think you should have some of my people with you," Jenkins said. He'd been even warier than usual recently. His boss had started acting different, somehow, although it was hard to put his finger on.

"Jenkins. We will be fine. Nobody's getting assassinated at Disney World." And they still weren't going to tell him that a successful assassination or even most failed ones simply wouldn't stick.

"I still don't know why I had to go up the stairs, just to take an elevator down..." Alphys was whinging, dragging along a backpack that she wished was heavier.

"Oh, stop crying," Undyne told her, as they got in together and Frisk and Asriel hugged their parents goodbye.

"You wouldn't even let me pack my favorite episodes! Or their player! Or my favorite costumes!"

"That's because we're going outside for most of the day. You know? Outside? The place we've been trying to get to instead of sitting inside and watching anime like a loser? So we'll be sitting outside! And watching Western animation! Like total losers!"

"No, Alphys, that's not what happens there. Or it shouldn't be," Frisk explained. "It's a theme park. We'll go on scary rides and do cool stuff. Hopefully there won't be long lines."

Lawrence chuckled. "From what they're telling me, I don't think that'll be a problem. They must really like you. VIP treatment, start to finish. They're even paying me to sit around to wait for you to come back, so, I'm on vacation too."

"Doesn't surprise me," Frisk replied. "I mean, I went on national television basically being a real princess" Undyne stifled a giggle. "and monsters are actual magic. Their whole business is pretending with princesses," Another giggle stifled. "fantasy, magic, and dreams, so of course they want us there." Asriel gave a sideways glance, looking concerned about something. "It's like the toys and the books. Come to Disney World, the place where actual princesses" Undyne failed to stifble the giggle this time. "with actual magic friends go. Undyne! This is your princess!" Undyne almost lost it. "Stop laughing every time someone says the word 'princess'!" She successfully held back laughter, and Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, smiling.

The pilot was also a good driver, and he took them to a private airfield, dispelling Frisk's worries about what would happen if the TSA realized that Undyne didn't actually need to carry spears to have spears. The jet was somewhat small, but no one complained, given their destination. Lawrence gave them the rundown about why not to move around too much in there, but since the monsters were supernaturally light and Frisk was a kid, he wasn't too concerned about weight shifts, and he pointed the plane straight to WDW's own private airstrip, a journey of a few hours.

"Hey, Undyne," Asriel said, looking out the window next to her, watching the scenery gradually change.

"What is it?"

"Princess." Clenching her fists, she forcefully closed her mouth.
The plane ride was boring, as plane rides are, but after that trial, 'boring' was exactly what Frisk and Asriel needed, and the jet landed sooner than they expected.

"Well, folks, pleasure to get to know you. I'm handing you off to this guy," Lawrence said, leading them out. "Y'all take care now." He got back into his plane to park it.

"My name is Rudolf," Frisk could tell by something in his voice that it was, in fact, his actual name, and he was very sick of being asked if it was. Fortunately, none of the monsters saw it as important. He led them into his car. "Guests, I am pleased to serve as your tour guide. We have reserved a place for you in the Magic Kingdom's Dream Suite." None of them knew what that was. "It was originally supposed to be Walt Disney's residence, but he never had the chance to live there. Instead, it was made to his specifications for some years, but we made some changes on your behalf."

"Someone trashed the place," Undyne said.

"I won't say what precipitated the change," he replied in unsaid admission, "but our policy is now to make alterations on behalf of every Guest."

"By the way, you don't need to be all stiff and.. saccharine with us," Frisk said. "This is Disney World, not North Korea." Even sitting in the back seat, Frisk saw the brief flash across his face that meant What's the difference? Of course the place was tightly controlled. "Hey, didn't you say you were taking us to a hotel?"

"This is a hotel with only one room in it." Frisk got a megadose of paranoia and kept their metaphysical finger on the LOAD button. Rudolf led them into an oversized golf cart and drove them to the center of the Magic Kingdom. "Welcome, Princess Frisk," (Undyne almost chuckled) "Prince Asriel, and friends, to Cinderella's Castle." Frisk had seen pictures of it, of course, but they never knew anything was in there. I'm sleeping in the actual Disney Castle?! They were. The sheer concept brought extreme, unfathomable joy to their heart, and they felt silly for feeling it; they had much more important things to feel happy for, didn't they? Their inseparable prince brother, their friends, their power to reverse time at will.

But holy crap, their own room inside the Disney Castle.

"Dinner is served here," Rudolf said, gesturing to the kitchens, "or can be brought up to your room. I urge you to get plenty of sleep and set your alarm for before six o'clock. The 'magic hour' begins at seven, but..." His eyes glinted a bit. "Tomorrow, we'll start things up at six." He bowed and walked away.

Frisk got it at once, barely able to comprehend it. "Az! Do you know what this means? We have Disney World all to ourselves for a whole hour!" Or, if they really, really wanted, indefinitely more hours than that until Sans called to tell them to cut it out.

"Why is that good?" Asriel asked as the group got into the elevator. "Is there something we can do when nobody's here?"

"Is there something- are you kidding me?! Do you have any idea how crowded this place can get? It's Disney World. All to ourselves."

"You're being pretty greedy," Asriel pointed out. The door opened and Frisk made a beeline for the room they most wanted at the moment. I'm peeing in the actual Disney Castle. Loud, boisterous laughter from the monsters disrupted their flow for a bit.
"What's so funny, guys?" Frisk asked, following the laughter past one large, quaintly decorated bedroom, past a child's blue bedroom with bunk beds, to a bright pink room. "Are you kidding me?!" It wasn't just the bright pink walls with the princess pictures all over them. It wasn't just the pink canopied bed, with the matching pink themed sheets. No, what really took the cake here was the series of costume dresses in the closet, all of which were apparently Frisk's approximate size. "Why would they think that I'd want this?!"

Asriel's ears wobbled as he laughed. "Gee, Princess Frisk, I don't know! What ever could you have done to give them that idea?"

"Yeah, but- but that was tasteful!" The pink was beginning to hurt their eyeballs.

"I think it suits you perfectly!" Undyne shouted, completely losing her composure. "Enjoy, Princess Frisk!"

Frisk turned to her with the smuggest of expressions and said it before Alphys could. "Actually, Undyne, we take off our bracelets to charge them at night, which means we have to be sleeping in the same bed." The look on Undyne's face froze, and her unpatched eye began to twitch. "So, unless you're suggesting that he should also be sleeping in here..."

"Sweet dreams," Asriel said, not wanting to be in that room anymore, and the kids left Undyne and Alphys alone, Frisk slowly, silently closing the door.

A bit later, after enjoying a small steak dinner, with Undyne sleeping in the bunk above Kid, Alphys pulled the pink coverlets over her head and went to sleep to the gentle, fading sound of Disney music.

Frisk, of course, had a lot of trouble going to sleep, but Asriel's head using them as a pillow was always nice. They had been silly. Happiness wasn't sleeping in a particular room in a particular place, no matter where that place was. Happiness, as always, was cuddling a warm, fuzzy goat.

But they'd been far too excited to dream and when the alarm went off at 5:50 they moved like lightning. Bracelets on, headband on, T-shirt and shorts still on where they'd left them. "Outta bed, Azzy!"

"mrf."

"Do I have to carry you? Because I will." Frisk unplugged Asriel's bracelets from the charger and snapped them on their brother's wrists one at a time. He'd fallen asleep in his clothes, too. Oh yeah, Disney-branded sunblock and the swimming trunks they'd brought, and Azzy's swimming trunks, and it took everything to get him to put them on, after which he fell right back down. "Okay, carrying it is. Let's go." Frisk kind of wanted to put him on their shoulders, but doubted he'd stay up, so they simply carried him to the elevator with arms under back and knees. "You ready?" Kid asked, just as alert as Frisk.

"Finally, someone else with common sense," Frisk said as they went down together. They checked their phone for a map, answering the burning question: Where was Space Mountain? Tomorrowland, of course, with the rest of the space-themed attractions. They were halfway there before they realized they hadn't done their morning the same way as usual. Setting the awakening Asriel on his feet, they reached into their pocket for their phone to run Checkup so they could SAVE. I'll wake people up if I press this. They left their phone in their pocket and did not SAVE. No, they wouldn't abuse time just to get more hours of Disney World to themself and their brother, but holy God was it tempting.
Sitting in the Space Mountain seat woke Asriel up the rest of the way. "You sure about this, Frisk?"

"Az, are you actually afraid?"

"No... okay, kind of. I just don't know what's going to happen."

"I don't either," Kid said, backing out. "I'll let you guys go first." The ride operator made sure Frisk and Asriel were strapped in before starting things up.

Then Frisk thought of something. And then thought of it some more. And then realized that they didn't like the implications of what they were thinking. "Hey, Az... how old is Kid?" they asked as the operator hit the button to the three of them cheering.

"Old," Asriel replied. "Older than... older than I am."

"Oh, hey, no, didn't mean to strike that nerve." The ride got started in earnest, and they got tossed around for a bit. Frisk felt the G-forces pressing on the turns, but Asriel, who weighed next to nothing, didn't. Lacking eardrums and other organs, he couldn't feel vertigo, or dizziness, or the sensation of falling, so it did nothing for him; normally he'd feel the rush of air on his ears, but the loud clatter and speakers irritated them too much.

"It's all right," Asriel said during a brief lull as the coaster ascended. "It's just that he's not complete, kind of like the way I... wasn't complete."

"Not complete?"

"Yeah, most monsters-" The coaster fell, and this time Asriel felt the wind. "-aaaaaaaaren't!" They got tossed around some more in the darkness. Frisk was discovering that they weren't really a fan of being subjected to forces beyond their control and kept feeling like something would start attacking them while they were strapped to the seat. Another lull came. "They don't have full human minds, but they're not like animals. Kid's pretty close to being a full person, but he can't grow up. No matter what. It's just not who he is." A few turns happened, and then another long section of vigorous ride, and then the slow part before the end.

"So what you're saying is that I complete you," Frisk said, smiling in the darkness, putting their hand over their brother's. Asriel laughed. "Yeah, actually. You do. Hey, Kid! It's not that scary." Ordinarily, someone might have said something to Kid on account of his height, but he went on anyway, the staff member managing to buckle him and his mechanical arms in. He screamed like a banshee nearly the whole way through.

"Not scary? Not scary?!" he shouted near the end. "How was that not scary?! I don't wanna know what you think is scary!"

"Not a whole lot," Frisk said. "Come on. We've got a bunch of other things to do." Asriel pointed out the trick on the second thrill ride that morning; the park didn't really staff every single ride. They were being watched, the nearest staff member getting to their chosen ride before they did. Which was almost as impressive as having everything fully staffed just for them.

Of course, they went on all the important, big, and scary ones in the Magic Kingdom and then went on them again a few more times just to be sure. Undyne and Alphys caught up halfway through, and then they went on the same rides they went on before yet again. In what felt like a lot less than
an hour, it was past seven and other guests started trickling in, but that was fine because Frisk and Asriel did not want to do all that again any time soon.

"Well, that was kind of a pleasant version of memory lane," Asriel said, turning to their sibling. "A bunch of different, themed areas, each looking like it should be big but only has a few things in it? I don't know, what does this remind you of?" Frisk winced in sympathy. "It's kind of funny, because I want to know what's below us."

"What's below us?" Frisk asked. Well, that made sense, those ride operators had to be coming from somewhere...

"Yeah. There's people down there, and machines, a bunch of stuff. Everywhere in this whole place. What's down there?"

"I have no idea."

"Well, Rudolf's down there, and he's coming here."

Shortly thereafter, Rudolf stepped out of a hidden door, sighed, and looked at Frisk. "Did you enjoy your morning?" All of them agreed that they did. "This isn't usually something we have to ask our Guests..."

"We're not your usual guests," Frisk reminded him.

He laughed. "That you're not." He took a short breath. "There's a monster in a place it shouldn't be. It's getting disruptive. Prince Asriel, we were hoping your parents would be here, but we know how you dealt with that small monster. We were hoping you could deal the same way with this one. And its minions." That was Frisk's cue to hit Checkup, and Undyne and Alphys, right there, answered it. Everyone else swiftly came back good. DETERMINATION was in no short supply here. SAVED.

"Its minions?" Asriel was asking. "This is a boss monster? What has it done?"

"Said a lot of hurtful things to Guests, mostly. Threatened violence a few times. I think it might have tried to hurt someone a couple of times, but it was off the cameras." Frisk wasn't aware that anything in this whole place could be off the cameras.

"What's it look like?" he asked.

"It changes depending on the ride, it comes out when music starts playing. We actually stopped playing music on a lot of rides, but then it came out anyway... it shouldn't have looked like that. Anyway, we'd like to ask you to come down." Asriel brightened up- finally, he'd get to see what he'd been hearing! "Normally, you'd have to sign something just to come down there, and we don't even let kids as young as you down there. But today looks like a good day for breaking rules. All kinds of rules." Including the rules that governed reality last week. "Ms. Undyne, Ms. Alphys, all we need is your permission..."

Undyne laughed. "Our permission? That's the Prince, you know, an actual prince?" She looked at the castle in the distance, with its fake, forced perspective, and laughed. "You guys really aren't up on the whole kingdom thing, are you?"

"I suppose not," he said, pushing open a panel in a wall. "This way, please."

"So, um, what have you all tried to do before we got here?" Frisk asked, rolling along down the
utilidor tunnels, something that no other kid would be able to do, ever. Behind the rest of the group, Undyne had formed a spear in her hand and was looking around in between cracks and walls.

"We shot it with a couple of tranquilizer darts," Rudolf explained.

"What, with like, chemicals?" Asriel asked. "That's even more useless than bullets. You didn't actually hurt it, did you?"

"I don't think we did," Rudolf replied. The darts had passed right through it, leaving small holes, but the next time they saw it, it didn't have any holes. "If it ever gets out that we hurt this... well... you'll have to see for yourself."

"You shouldn't, anyway," Frisk said. "Killing a monster messes you up for life. Not kidding." Trump's book held that the 'messing up' was positive but Frisk wasn't going to tell them that.

"It's close," Asriel said. The thing could be quiet, but nothing else could be making that sound...

"It's right here!"

"Gosh!" it said, in a voice that was halfway between Mickey and Goofy. "New friends to play with!"

"Yeah, maybe," Asriel said. "But one of these friends is the Prince of Monsters. And it sounds like you've been bad. What's your name?"

"Walt," it said, oozing out from its hiding spot between two pipes. To Frisk's eyes it looked like an amalgamate, although they reasoned that it probably wasn't. They spied aspects of the major Disney roster in it; Mickey's ears and feet, Goofy's nose, Donald's tail. Other things they didn't fully recognize: a pair of steam pipes bellowing smoke over its head and a gnashy-looking pair of claws. Who the heck dreamed this thing up? Frisk wondered.

"Please don't tell me this thing's the ghost of Walt Disney," a passing staff member said, slowly backing away.

"It's not, it doesn't work like that," Asriel replied. Although it might think it is, or act like it, he thought, instinctively knowing that newly created monsters could be troublesome. If he only understood what the stories of this place were about! "Why are you making trouble for these people?"

"Me? Making trouble for them? They, who have failed the vision? Who have corrupted the fantasy, made Tomorrowland into Yesterday? Who have let in the riff-raff? Who have allowed this place to be defiled through neglect?"

"They still built this place. They still run it," Asriel said, reasonably. "You can't expect humans to do what you want."

"Oh, can't I?"

"No," Asriel replied. "You're not allowed." Suddenly, he was his full adult form. "I am Asriel Dreemurr, Prince of Monsters, and I command you to stop usurping this place!"

"You name me usurper? You, soulless prince? This is my kingdom of magic! You have no power here!" They began to square off.
"Listen," Frisk said to the humans. "Whatever happens, just stay out of the way." They'd obey, Frisk knew; seeing a child instantly turn into an adult changed people's perspectives on things. "You too, Kid. Hey! Walt! If you know what he is, then you know what I am."

"One who crossed the barrier. You allowed me to be born."

"Yeah, that's right. If you don't-"

"One who allowed me to see this place fall apart! One whose SOUL is- give it to me!" Frisk ducked its claw swipe, which left scratches into the wall. Yeah, this thing's tough. Maybe tougher than Dad. But it was clumsy, overloaded. It moved to slam its claws downwards, and Frisk rolled on their shoes straight backwards for several feet. It increased its width, filling the whole corridor with malice, and Asriel dropped the transformation and ran away, the thing following.

"Undyne, we have to get in the open!" She stopped standing her ground and ran with the rest of them. "Rudolf! Start playing It's a Small World!"

"What?!"

"The song! From every speaker! Play it!" They started running up the stairs, Rudolf and their friends following, cast members and security guards scattering. Walt re-transformed into its original form, following them up.

"Do you have any idea how much power I wield? The number of dreams needed to create me? To make me whole?" It ballooned in size and tried to squash Frisk several times, but the move was far too slow and Frisk was far from the landing. Bystanders stopped to watch.

"Stay back!" Frisk warned them. "This isn't what you think!" One more clumsy claw slam dodged by rolling back, another claw swipe blocked by Undyne's spear, but she couldn't keep blocking and the next one sent her flying into a wall. "Walt, I'm not sure you are whole. You're acting more like a cartoon villain than a complete person." Then again, maybe a cartoon villain was what it really was...

Rudolf was on his phone. "Yes, you heard me- are you even looking at the security cameras? Yes, this is actually happening. Just do it! This kid's done this before, do it! You can't find it?! What are those-"

Minions. Lots of them. In all different shapes, most of them very small. Frisk knew they were from different franchises but didn't have time to guess which was which.

"Leave these to me!" Undyne shouted.

Frisk didn't know if there was EXP if monster killed monster, but yelled "Don't kill 'em!" at Undyne anyway.

"I'm no murderer, Frisk." She used her spear like a golf club, whacking them straight out of the park with every well-placed blow, running back and forth to catch them as they crawled out of the hidden nooks and crannies that made up Disney World.

"What do you mean, your antivirus needs to update?!" Rudolf was shouting into his phone.

Walt had formed a pair of tremendous hammers and was smashing them down onto the ground as hard as it could, but Frisk was never there to receive them, even if some little kid was distracting them by shouting "Just use your keyblade!" It lowered its head, shooting a wide, deadly arc of
burning steam at them, but Asriel darted in front of them and blew the steam back into its face as the facades to either side of them started to warp and crack.

"If I can't take you, then end me! End my suffering!" Walt screamed. "End my presence here!"

"I don't do that, either," Frisk replied. Frustrated, it whacked two claws downwards while they had their back to the wall, and Frisk dived aside. "You know there's innocent people here?"

"You vermin infest this dream like weevils!" it screamed at them. It turned back to Frisk. "Give. Me. Your. SOUL!"

"Come and get it."

It pulled a comically oversized cartoon gun out of nowhere and began spraying large bullets at Frisk, much slower than real bullets but damn near impossible to dodge- and then Asriel was there, transformed, batting them aside to disintegrate.

"Then say no! Say Reboot Later or something!" Rudolf was yelling. The crowd kept growing, and its claws kept swiping, high, low, high, low, high-to-low, and Frisk had to tuck their knees in, Asriel catching them before they landed hard on the concrete, and then it slashed with both claws from both sides (duck!) and got its hands tangled together, giving Frisk and Asriel time to back off a bit.

Suddenly Walt grew an extra pair of blue arms, one of which was holding a laser gun and the other holding a remote control. A green, easily-dodgable blast came out of the laser, and as Frisk limboed under it they heard a shout from behind. They couldn't afford to turn around and see what it hit or how much damage it did, but since the man was wailing "I'll sue this place for everything you've got!" Frisk figured he'd be all right.

Walt clicked his remote and instantly appeared next to Frisk, who intuitively jumped away. But the thing wasn't focused on Frisk- it was focused on the guy behind them, the guy he'd shot. Or maybe this guy won't be okay after all. He was morbidly obese, sitting on a scootypuff, looking like nothing so much as a fat, white maggot in a stretched XXXL T-shirt. Walt would tear him apart. "You?" it bellowed at him instead. "You presume to have dominion over me? The soulless prince and the valiant heroes, they have a place here. But you, who have crippled yourself with your gluttony? What right do you have to be here, in my world, in my presence?!" Both Asriel and Frisk caught the faint reek of urine amid all the good smells of Main Street.

"Hey!" Frisk shouted. "You're fighting me, remember?"

Walt turned, smiling, grinning. "Now there's the selfless American spirit these people came to see!" It altered its form again, making itself rounder, giving itself Pete's face. "Well, c'mon! Let's give 'em all a show!" A cheer rose from the crowd. These people still don't realize this is real! Or maybe they don't care. Or maybe it's affecting them somehow...

Frisk suddenly felt their SOUL alter slightly, becoming an aspect they could only associate with the color green, and Asriel blinked in surprise. Yeah, Az, now you know a little more of what it's like to be me. Suddenly Walt attacked with fists from all sides, forward and back and above, and Frisk struggled to block everything, the fists bouncing off their crossed arms. Two at once- no way- and Asriel blocked the other one. And then all of them were two at once, and Asriel had to partially transform to keep up and the crowd was cheering and Frisk felt like they were going to pass out and considered just doing a LOAD-
"It's a small world after all!" Every speaker in the whole place started to belt out the well-known Tune of Parental Irritation.

"Oh thank God," Frisk sighed in relief. "Please let this work." Walt's fists got smaller and slower, and Frisk's SOUL returned to its normal state as Walt shrank to the size of a child, then a dog, then... a mouse. Asriel picked it up between two fingers and the crowd screamed in glee. Even Kid was jumping up and down, shouting about how cool that was. Well, now they all know what we can do. This is gonna be all over Youtube. Maybe that fact, in and of itself, deserved a LOAD, but Frisk wasn't up for anything that might lead to another round of that.

"We need to talk," Rudolf whispered. Asriel motioned for his friends to follow back down into the utilidors, and Rudolf made sure none of the bystanders were coming along. "That was... amazing. I'd spend another lifetime doing this to see something like that. But... how can we stop this from happening again, prevent them from coming?"

Asriel's jaw nearly fell off his face. "Prevent them from coming? To this place?! Are you- are you serious?" He first looked at Frisk, who was starting to understand. "Weren't you listening when I told you what we are? Remember when you said that this place's business was princesses and fantasy and magic and dreams?" He turned to Alphys and Undyne, who were also smiling. "At least you get it." He turned back to the befuddled employees. "You created a place that millions of kids dream about and want to go to, you've made a whole artificial city of this stuff. You couldn't possibly summon more monsters if you tried! I'm surprised there's not more!" Then again, Walt'd taken so much energy into himself...

Rudolf and the security guards looked at each other. "It's a lot like this at our other properties," Rudolf said. "And there's more monsters on the grounds here."

"Yeah! There's gonna be! Unless you do something stupid like kill them, and believe me, you don't want to get into that." He believed Sans when he said that there was no EXP without suffering. "Listen. Rudolf," he said, holding the diminutive Walt up in his palm. "Take Walt to your boss, or your boss's boss, or whoever's really in charge here. Because you're going to have to work together or things are going to get ugly. Uglier. You guys decided you wanted to create dreamland, well guess what, you did. And you, Walt? Sorry, but you're only in charge of the monsters of the small world. I'm the prince of the big one. No more of this stuff, huh?"

"Ooo-kay," it apologized in a tinny voice. Asriel tossed it to Rudolf, who, surprised, caught it and handed it to a guard, who quickly ran off with it.

"This is like something out of..." a woman dressed as a princess Frisk didn't recognize said. Not Cinderella or Belle, was she supposed to be Sleeping Beauty?

"Out of one of your stories?" Asriel replied. "Stories are real now. Your tales get retold. Use magic responsibly, or the next time's going to be worse." He looked around at the small crowd of staff, hoping he'd driven the point home. "We need breakfast." They practically fell over each other trying to give suggestions, and eventually Rudolf just said "Club 33" and everyone else instantly shut up.

"I've clubbed a lot more than 33 already," Undyne said. "Or do you mean I have to club 33 more?" That got chuckles out of the humans.

"It's a private establishment. Very exclusive," Rudolf said. "Doesn't even serve breakfast, technically, so we'll just have to get you something from any other restaurant here. Name what you want, we probably have it." He led them to its hidden entrance, and they sat down in an
entirely empty room, looking around. Swanky, it was, but Frisk felt like it was overrated.
Exclusive, just to be called that. Frisk got blueberry pancakes and a big omelet, Asriel got waffles
("the best you can make!") and bacon, Alphys got bacon and eggs in lieu of anything better to think
of (she managed not to embarrass herself by asking for pocky), Undyne asked for cream cheese-
coated bagels and an energy drink. Kid wanted a little bit of what everyone else was having. The
group relaxed, Frisk with a smug expression. The thing hadn't even hit them once, and a no-hitter
first try is always an accomplishment. Their food came quickly.

"Hey, you know what these waffles taste like?" Asriel asked, chewing slowly and carefully. Frisk
looked at him. "The ones at the hotel. From the waffle machine. Bacon? Maaaybe a little different,
cooked a little better, pretty much the same."

"Whaaat?" Undyne asked. "Let me see. Oh my God, you're right! It's just regular food! So much
for exclusive club!"

"Well, what'd you think they'd give us, super magic food that you can't get anywhere else?" Frisk
asked. "You can make a place exclusive, but it's not like they butcher special pigs just for us. At
least I don't think they do." They shrugged. "He doesn't care," they added, pointing at Kid, who
was scarfing down everything.

Asriel smiled. "Oh, I don't really care either. If it's edible, it's awesome."

"Why's that?"

"'Cause I'm here eating it with you, Frisk." Both Undyne and Alphys gave audible "Awwwww"s.

The group passed the rest of the day in a more expected fashion, but ordinary thrills, despite their
number, couldn't come close to an actual battle. Every single thrill ride in all of Disney World, no
exceptions, and even most of the non-thrill ones that weren't for babies. Every last slide in every
water park in the resort, and no one had the stones to say anything about Frisk changing from
apparent girl to apparent boy with a girl's headband. Being treated with outright awe was nice, but
that was only from people who knew they weren't all part of the show. There was a petting zoo, of
course, and at Frisk's insistence Asriel did pet the goats, making for a memorable picture. (GOATS
CAN PET GOATS?!) They ate twice more at Club 33, realizing that they were in an even more
exclusive club than the patrons, who tried immediately to get on Frisk and Asriel's good side, just
because of who they were. Frisk didn't entirely blow them off but made no friends. None of you
elitists would have even wanted to talk to me a couple weeks ago.

"That was an incredible day," Frisk said at the end of it, dead exhausted and lying on their back,
shoes still on and everything. They could probably have even fallen asleep in the princess room. "I
wonder what would have happened if we went to that MTT resort instead?"

Meanwhile, on a state road in northwestern North Dakota, an electronic sign intermittently flashed
"MTT RESORT PROPERTIES, INC." An arrow pointed away from the sign to a road buried in
snow. A couple miles down that road, an old barn had been hastily converted into a couple of
small, cramped rooms and a fast food joint. Shivering, Burgerpants huddled as close to he could to
the griddle for warmth, hoping that the generator would last a while longer before he had to pour
more kerosene into it, wincing every time a gust of wind blew through the wooden boards, hating
his life and wishing the universe would end.
It's Their Job

Frisk and Asriel awoke to the sound of tap-tap-tapping on their windowsill. "Is that a bird?" Frisk muttered, feeling dragged out of dreamless sleep. They'd gotten up early yesterday, but after everything they did they felt they felt like sleeping in. They looked to the window, where a mechanical contraption was tapping on the sill and a plastic-covered note was taped to the outside, facing in. It looked like it was produced by a professional printing company, even if the lamination looked cheap. It was embellished with old-style lettering, a drawing of a magician with a top hat and a magic wand ("The Great Asmodeus, with magic like you've never seen before"), advertising a magic show to be held at a certain address ("Kids only!") and a certain time, with specific driving directions from where they were. Which would have been interesting even if their suite wasn't on the fourth floor. Frisk was impressed. "How'd they put this here?"

"It had to be a monster," Asriel said after thinking it over. "If somebody with weight were climbing around on the wall, I would have heard it." Frisk tried to think what else it could be- no, Azzy would definitely have heard the buzzing of a drone, and if it were someone in a bucket crane he would definitely have heard that.

Frisk looked at the paper again. "There's gotta be a trick," they said after some consideration. "I'm sure a human made this. I think Disney might be messing with us, maybe Walt put it up here. We should play along." You didn't have something like this taped to the outside of your window on the Disney Castle and then not go. That'd just be crass.

"It has to be Disney, doesn't it?" Asriel asked. "I mean, everything around here is watched, so someone must have seen it. Unless it was a ghost." Leaving a note and running away was Napstablook's style. "Hey, wait, you think maybe Hapstablook stopped being Mettaton long enough to do this?"

"Hapstablook is Mettaton?!" Frisk sputtered.

"Yeah, you didn't know?"

"You know, that's probably it. C'mon, Mettaton's been trying to get our attention, let's go give some to it. After we do morning stuff." They'd neglected some basics yesterday, and it showed. Falling asleep in their clothes and hairband (and with their bracelets on, what were they thinking?! Charge meter was two-thirds), not brushing their teeth in the morning... Mom would have never allowed it. "See if I can find something to brush your fur... what the heck?!"

"What... Oh my God!" Asriel had shed everywhere, far more than normal. The bedsheets were covered in white goat fur, and he shook it out of his clothes, using magic to get the stray hairs out. "I have no idea why."

"You've never been out in summer before," Frisk figured out. "There's nothing to tell your body it's winter, so it thinks it's summer. Lots of furry animals have winter coats and summer coats, and this is your summer coat."

"So what do I do when we go back home?!

"Wear your sweater, I guess? You could probably make some clothes out of what's right there..." Asriel looked embarrassed. "Hey, I'm the one with the biology problems. You're fine. This'll make it easier to brush. Come on." It was just like normal, except everything was Disney.
"Hey! Undyne!" Frisk shouted after they were done. "We gotta go somewhere," they explained, opening the door to Kid and Undyne's room, and she was right there, having leaped up out of bed. "It says 'kids only', though."

Alphys stepped out of the princess room wearing a frilly pink nightgown resized to her shape. "Really?" she piped up. "Because, Um. There's actually some things here that are, um, adults only. Undyne wants to take me to them, she says that she's even willing to endure the fake water, whatever that is..."

Asriel didn't know quite what she meant. Frisk did and smiled. "Hey, if you two want to have a day to yourselves, you don't need to worry about us."

"Are you going off by yourselves? In the middle of a strange city, to an unknown destination?" Undyne asked, with faux shock. "A prince and princess alone, without the presence of someone to protect you? A pair of innocent lambs like you..." She couldn't keep going and broke out laughing. "You need guards even less than Asgore did," she said, with intense respect. "It's everything else that needs guards from you."

"Hey, I'm coming too!" Kid yelled.

"That you are," Undyne agreed. She and Alphys needed more alone time.

"Well, someone needs to drive us," Frisk said. Which was frustrating. Even though they were in a position to just tell adults what to do, they still needed them. Even in a place like this, with a platoon of Disney employees rock-solid committed to providing the Dreemurr kids with the greatest of times (and obviously making projection-crushing amounts of money from the skyrocketing attendance), Frisk was constantly reminded that they needed people to do things for them, and they never wanted to be served. Having Mom take care of them was one thing, but this... let someone else 'be their guest.' They resolved to get a bicycle when they finally lived in that community. Maybe one for Azzy, but a tandem bike would be perfect.

"Oh, um, I have Lawrence's number..." The phone barely even rang before Lawrence picked up and agreed to meet them in ten minutes with a rented car.

"But you mustn't go quite yet!" Undyne shouted. "You humans have invented an amazing marvel that you should use first!"

"I already went to the bathroom," Frisk said.

"We already used the hair dryer yesterday," Asriel added.

"I speak of a different marvel. I speak of... the money machine." Her unpatched eye narrowed, and she spoke in hushed tones as she walked into the elevator with them. "There are many money machines. But each allows you to receive a little bit at a time. You insert a magnetic card. You give it the secret password. And you can receive... money."

"You mean an ATM," Frisk said. Yeah, they probably needed some of that, the 'being Frisk Dreemurr' 100% discount couldn't possibly work everywhere. "You have your own account?"

"Alas, I have not. Your parents have allowed me to partake of theirs." Undyne caught the immediate Oh God please don't let her spend all their money look. "Fear not! I would never abuse such privileges. And I can not, for the amount is too miniscule."

"Undyne, stop talking like that," Asriel said, mildly annoyed. The elevator door opened.
"Fine, ruin the magic, my prince." She turned to Frisk. "I don't know how you humans treat these things like they're normal. And I mean everything."

"If we walked around having supreme reverence for everything we've made, we'd never get anything done," Frisk pointed out.

"But it'd be cool!" she protested, walking with them to the entrance and its attendant money machines. The early morning crowd ("Magic Hours") was treating the group with more awe than Undyne treated any ATM, taking pictures, yelling hellos, and staying well out of their way. Someone in a wheelchair asked where Kid got his prosthetics, and Kid told him enthusiastically. A crowd of preteen girls darted in to take a selfie with the group (Undyne grinning her trademark grin) and quickly darted out, their chaperone apologizing. See, Undyne? This is why we should treat impressive things like they're normal! They'd gotten similar treatment all day yesterday, and it had worn thin then.

Undyne gave the crowd a menacing look near the ATM and they backed off somewhat. Insert card, insert four-digit secret password. "This is how much it'll let me take out in one day," Undyne said, withdrawing the cash and splitting it between Frisk and Asriel, "and this is how much money it has all together." She showed them the total-balance figure.

"I know what the period's for, but why are there two commas in it?" Asriel asked.

"That's just to break up the numbers," Frisk explained. "This should be way more than enough for one day. Thanks, Undyne." And that other number should be more than enough for a lifetime. Especially if it keeps going up. They didn't know where Mom and Dad were getting the cash, exactly, but there were a million plausible sources. Frisk wanted to give what they didn't need to a charity, but they didn't know how much that was yet.

Lawrence was near the gate, standing outside a rental car well before the ten minutes he'd said. The three children piled into the back of the car, Frisk giving him an address to plug into his navigation system.

"You sure these directions are right?" he said after fifteen minutes of driving. He slowed down to a stop; a couple of two-legged monster alligators were herding their actual reptile brethren across the street. One of them waved to the car before disappearing into a small wetland.

"I was reading street names," Frisk said, also looking at the car's navigation system. "We're definitely going the right way."

They continued into some forgotten suburb of somewhere else that looked like the swamp was reclaiming it. Judging from how many of who was at the donut shop they passed, the place was probably not a nice neighborhood at all. The address in question (marked clearly by other pieces of paper matching the one they'd seen) was to a windowless building that looked like it'd seen better days several decades ago. Lawrence pulled into the parking lot, frowning. "You sure this is all right? Looks like kind of a sketchy place for a magic show."

"We do a lot of weird stuff," Frisk replied. How could they possibly tell him that yes, they knew it was a trap, but they were immune to those? "Hey, if you wanna go have some donuts or something, go ahead, this might be a while." Lawrence seemed like someone who would instinctively run into danger to protect children, and that was the last thing they needed, especially since he was looking at the kids skeptically. "Relax. In case you haven't watched the news, we've got magic too." They didn't even need to watch it to know that they were on it.

He had watched the news, and he had - carefully, frame by frame- analyzed all three Youtube
videos that weren't horrible quality, each of which had passed the five-million-hit mark in less than 24 hours. He didn't think any human or ordinary monster had much of a prayer against Asriel's transformation if the prince ever got serious. "Up to you," he said after a bit, and started to pull away.

"There's a kid in there," Asriel said, pointing to the RV as they approached the entrance. "She sounds like she's playing." He took a deep breath, trying to hear other sounds above the comforting throb of Frisk's heart and the steady pffh-pshh of their breathing, the low whirring of Kid's exoskeleton and the faint noises of traffic. Not for the first time, he wished that Frisk could hear the world the way he heard it. "There's a human in there. Just one." One human couldn't possibly be a real threat, not to him and Frisk.

"Going to have to wake everyone up, this might take a few tries," Frisk said, Kid not understanding what they meant. Whether most of them had been asleep or not, Checkup took next to no time at all. SAVED. They tried the door, and it opened easily; a dour-looking man in a black magician's robe (where have I seen this guy before?) stood up from his cheap office seat and greeted the two of them at the entrance with a slight bow. "Good morning," he said. "My name is Asmodeus Riddle." A slow, sad smile crossed his face as he pulled out his phone. "I'm so sorry for this." Frisk and Asriel intuitively backed off a bit, but all he did was press a button-

A sped-up string of nonsense syllables came out of it in his own voice, and Frisk didn't know what he was doing until they felt their SOUL being sucked right out of them and they tried to LOAD but it didn't work and everything was coming out of their wrists- realizing in a half-instant, they took their bracelets off- and Asmodeus was trying to do something and Asriel was screaming in agony and Kid was screaming in terror, and they could have sworn they saw flower petals around their brother's face, and the sharp jolt of absolute horror gave them enough DETERMINATION to

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Frisk and Asriel looked at each other in shock and relief, both of them taking off their bracelets, and the door blew apart and Asmodeus was there, lunging at Frisk with supernatural speed and trying to take their SOUL the old-fashioned way, but ASRIEL DREAMMURR blocked his path, and they were tearing each other to pieces-

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"Run!" Frisk shouted, fumbling in their pocket for their phone after ripping off and dropping their bracelets- the door exploded from behind them- Frisk did three quick button presses and a lot of shouting, trying to explain where they were and why somebody needed to be there right now- why did they send Lawrence off, he could have rammed this guy or something- Asmodeus shoved Kid out of the way as Asriel, transformed, took Frisk's other hand and pulled on them to run faster, almost pulling them right off the ground, but Asmodeus was flying towards them, gradually catching up as Frisk ran out of breath-

And that was when two of the most recognizable faces in the world came running past a donut shop in a skeezy neighborhood shortly after dialing 911 in the morning, a wizard with clear, malicious intent close behind them.

"GET ON THE GROUND!"

He turned quickly, his hands afire, brimming with power. "You have no idea-"

With focus, he could have deflected everything coming out of a single pistol, possibly even two or
three.

But this donut shop was in America.

"Think they'll make a hashtag for this guy?" one of the dozen cops joked, handcuffing the corpse as Asriel clutched his agonized ears.

"Frisk, are you all right?" another cop asked.

"It doesn't matter," Frisk said, taking a breath. "This didn't happen either."

Asriel turned to them in shock. "Are you"

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"completely out of your mind?!" he finished, as Frisk took the precaution of taking off their bracelets again. Asriel swiftly followed suit, still incredulous. "He can for-real kill you! And me!"

"I don't think he'll try this time," Frisk replied. "Not after that."

Kid looked between them, startled. "What are you talking about?"

"I can go back in time," Frisk explained. "You don't remember when I do. The door opened, and Asmodeus stood there, sadly looking at Frisk. "But he does." Frisk looked up at the man. "Does your little girl?"

"How did you know she's there?" he asked, wary. Asriel, frowning, waggled an ear at him, and he nodded. "No, she can't remember, thank God. Haven't cast the spell on her." He sighed. "I suppose I'm going to have to try talking now, but before I tell you, can you explain to me why you went back? You weren't hurt, your enemy was dead. Why would you not want that?"

"Because Frisk," Asriel said. "It's just what they do. Even when it's crazy."

"You have someone to take care of," Frisk said. "You didn't do it for yourself, did you?"

"No, I didn't." He sighed again. "I need your SOUL, Frisk. I'm sorry. Yours and mine are the only things that can put the barrier back up."

"Put the barrier back up?!" Kid, Asriel and Frisk exclaimed in unison.

"Yes. Or something else will take your SOUL and destroy the universe with it. I know how insane that sounds."

"Said the wizard to the time traveller and their monster friends," Frisk replied. "Why don't you give us the explanation over some donuts?"

He laughed sharply. "Donuts! That sounds good. Let me go get my daughter." The kids gave him plenty of space for him to walk out to the RV and followed him several feet behind. "Victoria!" he called as he opened the door. "Put your shoes on. We're going out." He turned back to Frisk. "I'm diabetic, but now if I have high blood sugar, I can just burn it right out of my bloodstream." He demonstrated with a small flame from his forefinger, which he kept going in lieu of insulin. He'd gobbled down several packages of Oreos earlier; he'd anticipated having to use his power, and he'd been right. "Of course, when she eats sugar, she wants to burn it too."

"She can cast?" Asriel asked.
"Yes. Not very well, but yes. You have no idea how much I had to pay the babysitter while I watched your trial."

"That's where I remember you from!" Frisk shouted. "You were that creepy evil-looking guy!" Frisk didn't realize they'd been insulting until after they said it, but then again the guy did just try to kill them.

"Yes.. yes, I suppose that's right," he replied, shaking his head. "Victoria! Are you ready?"

His daughter came out then. She was nearly five and dressed in a black-and-pink witch's costume, complete with bent pointy hat, although given what she was it wasn't really a costume. She took one look at what was outside the door, shrieked, and ran back the way she came. "Victoria, come back. It's all right."

"Monsters, Daddy!"

"Yes, they're monsters. It's okay. They're not going to hurt you." He led his daughter back by the hand.

"You didn't tell your daughter to be afraid of monsters, did you?" Asriel asked.

"I told her to stay away from monsters. Not to interact with them and definitely not to kill them. It's what I had to do. Say hi, sweetie." He locked and magically sealed the door after leading his daughter out.

"Hi," Victoria reluctantly said. She looked at Kid. "Are you a robot monster?"

"No, just born without arms," Kid replied, flexing his arms and spinning his wrists around.

"Science is awesome."

"Yes, yes it is," Asmodeus slowly said as they walked together. "Too bad it's not the only thing governing this world. Do you know what's been going on?"

"Obviously not," Asriel replied. Sans had been telling them not to watch the news...

"There's been random attacks on monsters, you probably guessed that. And then not so random ones." Frisk and Asriel frowned; their parents hadn't been telling them, and none of their friends had been attacked. "What normally happens- Victoria!" He had to grab his daughter from walking around the side of Kid, as she was about to step off the curb and into the street. "We don't go there when we're walking." He sighed and looked at the others. "She was a handful before she could set things on fire."

"Is it just you and her?" Kid asked. He waved to Lawrence, who was eating a donut in the car and waving back.

"Yes, unfortunately," Asmodeus replied. "Being a no-magic wizard with a secret legacy isn't the best way to get or keep a family, no matter how hard you try. I signed an agreement with my ex. I got Victoria, she got pretty much everything else." They walked into the Dunkin' Donuts, which was sponsoring an ASPCS charity drive. A few of the cops, who had swiss-cheesed Asmodeus in another timeline, gave friendly, surprised waves to the group, who waved back. Just like the Underground, Frisk thought. Everybody's so friendly when we're not trying to slaughter each other. "This is going to sound embarrassing, but I don't have my wallet on me."

"It's fine, we're rich," Asriel said. He pulled out a twenty from his pocket, and then, looking at the
prices, pulled out another one. "Just get what you want."

They did, Frisk and Asriel getting a couple of cream-filled, sprinkle-covered donuts each and some root beer, Kid getting one and root beer, and Asmodeus getting a sugarless donut and coffee for himself and a few unpowdered donut holes plus a small cup of decaf for his daughter, limiting her sugar intake. Asriel told the worker to keep the change.

They sat together in a booth as far in the back as possible, and Asmodeus started talking in a low voice. "Anyway, as I was saying, what normally happens, what should be happening, is that the people killing monsters start competing, or getting killed. Some of them have gotten killed, I think, but some have gotten arrested on animal cruelty or manslaughter or what have you, and you'd think they'd be fighting each other in jail, but there's been a couple of prison breaks instead. They're **combining** their power. Something else is controlling them."

"And that can destroy the whole universe? All however many billion light-years of it?" Frisk asked before taking a bite. **LOADing** was weird. Their mind remembered being through hell, but their body wasn't exhausted.

"Yes," he replied, taking a purposeful bite of his donut. "The controller's power, plus your power, plus however much combined LOVE they have, equals a breach. And a breach anywhere is kiss physics goodbye everywhere. This is an imperfect, created universe. The power the original seven got was left by God, or gods. It went into them when they touched it. I don't know what you'd call it. An artifact made out of cheat codes, I suppose, if you want to use the computer program analogy."

"My powers are called SAVE and LOAD," Frisk replied, and Asmodeus nodded, understanding.

"They could have done nearly anything with their powers. I think that's what they were supposed to do, whatever they could, that the assumption was that they would benefit their species. I believe that monsters and magic are supposed to be God's safety valves against suffering, but it didn't work out the way He'd hoped."

"So that's why the universe is imperfect?" Asriel asked.

"It's imperfect because it has those kinds of hacks. I don't know if this is just the beta version of the universe, or some sort of supposed upgrade, but, and I hope this doesn't offend you, a truly perfect universe doesn't have monsters, or magic, or time travel, or EXP, or anything else that violates the laws of physics." That did somewhat offend Frisk and Asriel, who considered a universe without each other to be a very poor universe indeed, but they kept listening. Kid wasn't able to follow the conversation and was playing with Victoria instead. "A **perfect** universe, in an ontological sense, has no sign of God at all. Maybe such a universe exists somewhere, but it's not where we live. Anyway, those seven- Victoria, what are you doing?"

She was holding one Kid's mechanical hands in her two, examining it. "I was just looking."

"Well, look with your **eyes**, sweetie. Not your agie-may. That's machinery. You okay?" he asked Kid.

Kid flexed his fingers and twisted his wrist around. "Yeah, she didn't do anything."

"Okay, good. Anyway, as I was saying, those seven did the dumbest thing they could possibly do. They created a pocket universe to shove monsters in. And that was even more flawed than our own. In there, a human could do all kinds of things. The first human to go down would be inextricably tied to the concept of EXP itself."
Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, alarmed. "Chara!" Asriel exclaimed, drawing a bit of attention. He lowered his voice. "You mean they're part of the universe now? They're what's doing this?"

"Yes. The flaws of the pocket universe got transferred to our own once the barrier broke. And, well, I'm not sure how this works, but a human, or just humans in general, who went down there would be able to do what you do, Frisk." Asmodeus was very glad that Chara, whoever that was, didn't have Frisk's power; they'd all be dead otherwise. "But only one at a time. It's not possible for more than one person to have your power, even in this broken universe. So that's why it has to be you. Please, Frisk. I know what I'm asking. It'll cost both of our lives," he looked at Asriel, "all three of our lives." Frisk was looking at him skeptically. "Yes, I know the barrier might be broken again. But please. Give us all just a little more time." Both Asriel and Asmodeus were looking at them with pleading looks, the latter apologetically and the former with Please don't tell me you're taking this seriously plastered across his face.

"No way," Frisk answered. Their tone became extremely hushed. "We die now so everyone else dies later? You leave your daughter with no father, and how would this go, a message that if the barrier breaks again she has to kill the next time traveller and kill herself too? Hopefully after she has kids of her own? You really can't think of anything better than that?"

"It's all we can do. You think I haven't been over this a thousand times? You think I haven't studied the books, double checked everything versus what's actually happening? The artifact put knowledge right into their heads, telling them how to be wizards but apparently not telling them how to use it properly. Or maybe their brains were too small. Anyway, they wrote it down, all of it they could before they sacrificed themselves, and I've collected all the good ones." There was one supposedly really bad one, 'Precautions' something, that was written by someone who'd only snuck a peek at the original texts for a few minutes. Asmodeus suspected that it gave extremely bad advice and hoped the last copy was long gone.

"It's still all you've thought of," Frisk snapped. "You went through all that, you must have flown up there, invisible," Asmodeus nodded. "to our window, printed that out and rigged that up- why didn't you just try for us there?"

"Casting a verbal spell like that after wearing myself out? No chance," Asmodeus replied. Flying was hard. "I'd hoped to actually have a magic show inside of Disney, but they wouldn't let me and I didn't have enough time to prepare anyway."

"Anyway, yeah, you did all that, you went to our trial, but you haven't talked to Mom or Dad or Alphys, the one who made these." They took their bracelets out of their pockets. "You haven't talked to Sans, and I know he knows stuff. Maybe it really is the only way. But you can't just decide that by yourself. Maybe you should have tried talking first." Asmodeus realized his error, and realized it hard. Of course the monsters behind the barrier would know some things about how it all worked. He just hadn't thought to talk to them, because they were monsters, and as a wizard his ancestral duty was to keep them locked up. He clenched his teeth, angry at himself. He'd been condemning his daughter-

"Can we put these back on?" Asriel asked, pulling his bracelets out. "Without you trying to murder us again?"

"Here," Asmodeus replied, showing the kids his phone and deleting an audio file from it. "That was the spell I used. By the way, I can probably help fix those. Patch the exploit I used, maybe decrease the size, add some power. And, you know, hopefully you're right. Hopefully we can think
of something. And I apologize."

"For trying to kill us? It's fine," Frisk said, snapping their bracelets back on. "Most of my friends have tried to kill me or capture me or send me into an infinite loop." Asriel tried not to look away as he snapped his bracelets on. "By the way, let me add you to the Checkup list."

"What list is that?" Asmodeus asked as Kid and Victoria started to play a version of pattycake.

"The you aren't going to die any time soon list. I press this button and make sure everyone's okay before I SAVE. Just try not to get too far from your phone." They showed Asmodeus how to download and install it before the group finished the last of their drinks and started heading out.

"See, Az?" Frisk asked, and Asmodeus, having been called that as a kid, almost thought Frisk meant him. "This is the last- hey, wait, are you actually the last wizards?"

"Yes, we are," Asmodeus replied. "It's heritable, but the gene only passes down half the time." He wasn't about to try to teach them Mendelian genetics, nor was he about to go into detail about how he called up family after family after the barrier dropped, asking them if they got their powers, and receiving negative answer after negative answer to the point where he thought he'd gone insane.

His daughter accidentally lighting a rug on fire had snapped him out of it. He picked her up on his shoulders and walked back to his RV.

"See? The last adult wizard. Turns out we need this guy so the universe doesn't bluescreen. This is why I save people."

"Too bad you can't save vacation plans," Asriel replied, getting into the car.

"Something wrong?" Lawrence asked. "Seemed like a pretty short magic show." He'd actually overheard a small bit of their conversation, and he did not like any of what he'd heard.

"We saw lots of magic," Frisk explained, "and we're going to see lots more."

"I'd love to know how it all works."

"So would I," Asriel said. "I can cast the stuff and I don't know half of what he does. Especially that stuff with the recorded voice." He hadn't even known that there were such things as verbal spells. Perhaps those were impossible for monsters; he strongly hoped not.

Frisk smiled. "When this is all over, we should make him our school's magic teacher."

"Hey, yeah! We need that invisibility spell. No more stupid crowds."

"Can anyone cast it?" Lawrence asked.

"No. Sorry," Frisk said, and then felt bad. It wasn't right, it really wasn't. It wasn't right that they, of all the people in the world, should be the only one in the entire universe to be able to SAVE and LOAD at will. It wasn't right that they could sleep in the Disney Castle while a little girl slept in a cramped RV. And it wasn't right that that little girl and her father had a special cheat-code gene that let them cast actual magic while no other human in the world could so much as create an electrical spark with their fingers. But Frisk had no interest, absolutely none, in taking that girl's power away from her or losing their own. "Maybe one day, that'll change," they said, pulling out their phone.

Dad was busy, so they called up Mom while Asriel called up Undyne and Alphys.

"Hey, Mom. Yes, I'm fine. Yes, I had to do that, a few times in a row. I'm fine, Mom." They
weren't about to say how close they'd come to not being fine. "Hey, listen, I've got to come home. Yes, really, it's important. We should have a couple of guests for dinner. Tell Dad not to freak out."

"I'm sorry, but we have to!" Asriel was saying. "This is your prince. We have to. We are literally saving the universe. That's what an actual wizard says. Yes, Mom, I actually said wizard. No, I'm not talking to you, Undyne, Frisk's got Mom... Frisk, do you know how to do group calls on these things?"

"No, we'll have to learn later. Yes, Mom, it is actually one of those wizards. And his daughter, who's also a wizard. No, he's not going to try to put the barrier back up. Yes, that's why I'm saying warn Dad, so they don't start going after each other!"

"Yeah, he says that the bracelets are vulnerable, so you and he can- No, Mom, we're fine!" Asriel was saying. "Anyway, you can talk it over on the plane. Yes, you have to leave now, what part of the whole universe do you not get? No, I don't know what we're going to do, but we can't do it hanging around here! Yes! Get ready now!" Asriel finally hung up, and Frisk was able to hang up shortly thereafter after giving their goodbyes. "Cripes, this is annoying!" Kid burst out laughing.

"I actually understood most of that," Lawrence said before they could call up Sans. (Papyrus, too, was busy; Frisk hoped he wasn't getting into legal trouble.) "There was this thing called the Cold War. The US and the USSR were going to nuke each other, but a lot of somebodies on both sides decided that maybe they shouldn't do that. And I betcha they sounded just like you did."

"Sorry to drag you into something worse than global thermonuclear war," Frisk said. "We'd rather be playing games." They called up Sans, who answered before the first ring finished. "Hey, Sans. Chara, who's basically the Devil now, is trying to mass up people with EXP and LOVE, then collect my SOUL and destroy the universe with them. I can't believe I just said that out loud and meant it. I'm not in a coma, I'm in an insane asylum.

"yeah."

"Is that a 'okay, I understand' yeah or an 'I already knew that' yeah?"

"yeah."

"Sans, the fate of the universe is at stake, are you going to stop being deliberately obtuse at some point?!"

"yeah."

"Let me talk to him," Asriel said, and Frisk handed him their phone. "Sans, can you do something about this?!"

"nope."

"Can you tell us what to do about this?"

"nope."

Frustrated, Asriel handed the phone back to Frisk, who asked, "Sans, do you know what's going to happen?"

"nope."
"But you do have some idea."

"yeah."

"Sans, for the love of literally everything that exists, tell us everything you know about what's going to happen!" Frisk demanded.

"ok. it's not gonna be something you'll like." Sans hung up.

"Does he actually not really know anything or is he hiding something?" Asriel asked.

"I'm guessing a little from column A, a little from column B," Frisk replied. "Now I'm really curious who his dad is." They sighed. "By the way, Lawrence, I'm sorry for trying to get you out of the way before we met that guy. I thought we could handle everything ourselves, and it turns out we really, really can't."

"You got cocky," he replied. "It's a good thing to learn, at your age. Some guys learn when they're in the pilot's seat. Some guys don't learn at all. And some guys, well, their first lesson is their last. Kid, I don't know what kinds of unholy powers you're messing with, so as just an ordinary person on this here Planet Earth, I got only one thing to say to you." The three kids waited for it. "Don't screw this up."

"I promise I won't let the universe be destroyed," Frisk replied. It was the one promise they felt perfectly safe making; if it were broken, there wouldn't be anyone to call them out on it.

They arrived back at Disney World, Asmodeus' RV close behind, and an annoyed Undyne and Alphys (carrying heavily packed suitcases) plus a confused Rudolf met them at the gate. "Frisk, they won't tell me the reason you want to leave," Rudolf said the moment their door opened. "If there's anything we've done to offend you..."

"No, it's nothing like that, you were a perfect host," Frisk replied. "Guess the most ridiculous, Saturday morning cartoon reason you can think of that we need to quit our vacation. Go on, just take a wild guess."

"I don't know," Rudolf replied after a moment's thought. "Save the world?"

"First try!" Frisk replied. "C'mon, gang, let's go- still can't believe I'm saying this- save the universe."
Disney doesn't normally let just anyone's RV on the tarmac of its private airstrip, but that was among the least of the rules Rudolf had broken for the Dreemurr royal family and far from what he was prepared to break. He was used to waiving restrictions for celebrities who put the VI in VIP, but none of the moguls' children, second-childhood billionaires, or whatever pop band was melting teenage girls' hearts this week (it was one of those that had wrecked the suite) could come close. God, he envied that kid, more than he'd ever envied anyone. There was something else about them, something beyond the questionable gender and the form-changing monster brother and the weird bracelets that he was increasingly convinced did something. He hadn't even slept much last night; he'd just watched that Youtube video, over and over and over again, hearing snippets of his own phone conversation (the guy he had been talking to was not only fired, he was extra fired, super fired, fired to the point that Rudolf thought the President might sue for trademark infringement) and looking into the kids' entirely fearless faces. Frisk- no, both of them, although Walt had been focused on the human- had treated almost being smashed to a smear like some kind of game, a game that they couldn't really lose. Could Asriel have won that fight in an instant or can Frisk just not die? he'd wondered last night.

And now they looked nervous, giving Rudolf a deep, low sense of nausea and existential terror; they obviously hadn't been kidding about the universe being in jeopardy, as impossible as that was to wrap his head around. Asriel was antsy, pacing a bit, looking like he was anticipating a particularly lousy afternoon; Frisk was brooding and repeatedly checking their phone, then having an agitated, whispered conversation with Alphys and Undyne. Those two had personalities, to be sure, but Rudolf felt very, very comfortable serving them, no matter how much he had to accede to Undyne's demands for fresh, unchlorinated water; the only annoying part was having to talk some human bystanders out of jumping into the lagoon with her. Kid, despite his advanced prosthetics and his monstrous nature, had been even easier to deal with.

And then there were these other two, the man dressed like some kind of magician (he was a dead ringer for the Sorcerer in Fantasia and, under other circumstances, Rudolf may have asked him to play the part) and his daughter like a cute witch, and he understood very well the girl's loud complaints about going to Disney World without actually going to Disney World and her father's patient insistences that it wasn't possible to accomodate her. Rudolf opened his mouth and took a step forward, eager to tell the man that Disney would gladly provide 24-hour babysitting services (it wasn't a service they normally offered but Rudolf would find someone, just as the company had found Lawrence) and that yes, in fact, his daughter could stay in Cinderella Castle for as long as she liked, right as the girl started whining that she didn't want to go on a plane without her teddy.

"You made him explode last week, remember?" her father replied as he carried out very old, very large books under one arm and large packages of cookies under the other.

Rudolf reversed his step and closed his mouth. Well, that was a pretty good reason to dress like magicians. He didn't think he could get the legal department to draft an employment contract with "irreversible anuran transformations" in its indemnification paragraph.

He couldn't hide his fear when Asmodeus came towards him, but the wizard was only holding his RV keys; he briskly told Rudolf that he could send the RV and everything in it to the nearest car crusher, and Rudolf quickly nodded. How'd that go again? Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for you are tasty and go well with ketchup? Wait, that was dragons. But there was still something eating him. He'd wondered if the question would be offensive, but screw it, screw everything, screw his career and his retirement and his family, he had to know. "Frisk!" Rudolf called into the
"What's special about you?"

Frisk stepped to the entrance with a wide smile on their face. "Being in the right place at the right
time." And then they lifted the door and stairs closed and the jet took off in record-breaking time,
leaving Rudolf standing there with his fingers in his ears.

"I wonder why he asked that," Frisk said, puzzled, sitting down next to Asriel on one side of the
plane with Asmodeus and his daughter on the other, the rest in the back.

Lawrence scoffed from the pilot's seat. "After what you did with that big monster yesterday? I
don't. You really don't know what you look like to everyone else, do you? But we don't have time
for that. You headed home?"

"Yeah," Frisk said, visualizing the geography of the Eastern Seaboard. From Orlando to the Mt.
Ebbot area was mostly north and a bit west, a somewhat briefer trip now that Lawrence was going
full throttle. To the east of Mt. Ebbot was- "Oh, crap! Azzy! We forgot!"

"Forgot what?"

"The monster farm, who was running it?!" Asriel's ears stiffened in a downward position, his
short summer coat standing on end, his sister-blaming T-shirt saying what Frisk was thinking.
Frisk pulled out his phone; Lawrence almost said something about why it wasn't kosher to use a
phone on an airplane before remembering all of existence and keeping his mouth shut. Frisk found
the name he wanted at once, but the phone just kept ringing. Oh, no, Frisk thought, terrified. Oh,
no, Chara'd got to him, probably right after Frisk SAVEd so there was no time to-

"Hey, Frisk." Asgore's voice boomed through the phone. "Your mother told me what's going on. Is
Asriel all right?"

"Yeah, Dad, listen. I need Jenkins' phone number. It's really important." Frisk heard their father
spend a minute fumbling with his phone, beeping more than once, trying to figure out how to read
a contact's information. "No, Dad, you just have to double-tap it," Frisk said. "Oh, you got a
different phone, then I don't know..." Frisk overheard him asking Jenkins what his phone number
was. "Dad, if he's there, just give him the phone!"

"This is Jenkins," the man said, and his authoritative tone was a relief. "Frisk?"

"Yeah, listen, is Trump in the White House right now?"

"Yes he is, and it's a good thing you asked." He sighed and took a deep breath, remembering what
Asgore had asked of him before: to do the right thing when it came down to it. "He's been acting
errestically, to say the least. He attempted to demand us to take you to central Kansas, into a
growing congregation of people, including escaped convicts, who may have help from monsters."

"It's not like that at all," Asriel said.

"He said that you could stop them, but it sounded like he was just making it up," Jenkins
continued. And that worried Jenkins most of all, because he knew quite well that Trump was a
better liar than that. "Congress doesn't dare impeach him, but he seems to be going insane. Asriel,
Frisk, if this keeps up, if he becomes a threat to your safety..." Jenkins sighed again, never, ever
wanting to say this. "I may have to imitate the Praetorian Guard."

"Praetorian Guard? What's that mean?" Frisk asked.
"Give me the phone!" Asmodeus shouted abruptly, and he used magic to whisk it out of Frisk's hand when they held it in his direction. "You don't want to do what you're planning. No, I'm definitely not saying they should go there- have you ever seen Ghostbusters? It'd be worse, actually. Can you get us to Trump instead? Yes, in person! Because he's **possessed** and I'm going to try to **exorcise** him. Yes, I can do that, you don't believe me after watching that video? Because everyone's watched it! No, I'm not a priest, I'm an actual wizard and I have the symbols to get it out of him. You need Frisk to tell you? Hey, Frisk-"

Asriel abruptly gripped Frisk's hand, stiffening up, looking like it was time for the anti-fun to begin. Frisk could guess what he was hearing.

"Oh. Hello, Your Majesty," Asmodeus said, very politely. "Yes, that's correct. Yes, I am descended from them, and so is my daughter."

"We're fine, Dad," Asriel spoke up in response to a question Frisk didn't hear. "He's on our side. Yes, really, he's the one Frisk told Mom about. Just trust him, okay? Yes, Dad. I know. It doesn't matter anymore! That was hundreds of years ago. We've got worse problems now."

"Listen, if you want my head on a pike at the end of this I'll give it to you, but not before we're done," Asmodeus said. "Please put the human back on the phone. I swear I will not hurt your children." Asmodeus' face suddenly went white. "Yes, and it was caused by a misunderstanding."

He mouthed **He can remember?** at Frisk, who mouthed **Deja vu** back. "Your child made it not have happened, does it matter?" Lawrence's head swiveled around from the pilot's seat and he abruptly wondered just who the heck he was flying.

"Oh come on, Dad," Frisk said. "It's not like you never tried to kill me." Lawrence almost twisted his own neck trying to look at them while still flying the plane. "Just let him and Jenkins talk to each other."

"Can you get us to him?" Asmodeus asked Jenkins. "It doesn't matter what you tell him! Tell him that it's some kind of requirement, can you do that? Listen, he's not in control of his own mind anymore, if he doesn't know what's going on... Hey, how old is this Chara?"

"When they died, they were about as old as we are," Asriel said.

"Yeah, it actually is a kid," Asmodeus said. "A kid with a grudge, I'm sure you can fool that. Yeah. I **hope** there won't be any side effects, it's not like I've ever cast this before! Yeah, that'd be fine. Perfect, actually. That's fine. Let's do that." Asmodeus handed Frisk back their phone after hanging up. "Hey, ah, Lawrence? Change of flight plan. Take us to Andrews, wherever that is."

If Lawrence had been drinking coffee he would have choked on it. He wanted to tell him that the request was ludicrous but everything about this was ludicrous. So, he smiled, said "Yes, sir," and wondered when things would get back to something resembling normal.

They flew in mostly silence, Frisk and Asriel leaning against each other, worrying, trying to think of anything else they might have missed and coming up empty, Undyne looking out the window with a fatalistic grin on her face, Alphys, Victoria, and Kid quietly playing in the back, none of them wanting to distract Asmodeus, who was frantically working on his spell, consulting tomes and speaking carefully pronounced, very inhuman syllables, one by one, into his phone. A couple of them were so dangerous that he spoke the sounds separately, splicing them together and not daring to play them back aloud out of context. Using your own SOUL to tell the universe what to do was not safe, easy, or conducive to a long and happy life. Saying 'Bake me a cake' was only a half-choke away from 'Bake me into a cake'. 
"You should use a Vocaloid!" Alphys suggested.

"A what now?" Asmodeus asked, halfway through trying to splice three grunts together to create the symbol for 'EXP'. Harmless by itself, but he didn't want to inadvertently cast 'Give me EXP', which would assuredly cause a feedback loop and lead to a very bad and fortunately brief ending.

"It's software that you type in what you want to say, and it sings a song for you! You can change the pitch, the voices, everything!"

"Really? Can I type in q'lath z-tahk? Accent on the 'k'."

"Um. No, I suppose not, there, um... wouldn't be much of a market for that. I'll be quiet now."

"If there ever is much of a market, the world will be a very different place," Asmodeus said, returning to work.

A few minutes later, Asriel tapped his sibling on the arm and gestured behind them. Frisk quietly turned to look. Alphys had packed her bag solid full of dresses from the princess room and was showing the little girl how to dramatically compress material, thickening and smoothing the fabric to resize one of them. Frisk smiled; at least that stuff had gone to people who could appreciate it. Asriel got an idea, and silently started altering other material, trying to keep his mind off what would happen in a few hours.

"I wish someone would have told us this would happen last week," Frisk quietly said about a half an hour later. "You can bet people have died because of Chara taking other people over. And what'd we do? We got in a stupid legal fight with my not-parents and went to Disney World. How dumb is that? Maybe I should have done the one-save thing. But I bet Chara remembers, too..."

"Hey. Like it says on my shirt, don't you ever blame my sister." What? That wasn't what these shirts said... but now, it was, with Frisk's shirt bearing the same message for their brother. Frisk gave an appreciative laugh; they liked wearing this version much more. Never, ever blame Az. "It doesn't matter if it's the end of the world. You can't be blamed for something you couldn't know would happen."

Frisk was about to say something about blame and the proper distribution thereof, but decided it didn't matter. If they were going to be blamed then there wasn't going to be anyone left to do the blaming. "But are we doing the right thing now, though? Is there anything we should be doing that we're not? Anyone we can talk to, or call, or..."

"Frisk, you're shaking," Asriel told them, and Frisk looked down to find out that they were. This is what fear is like. I'm afraid again.

"Just doing random things doesn't make things better. Trust me on this. You told Sans everything. He's not going to let the world end."

"Who's Sans?" Asmodeus asked. He'd spent the last few minutes triple-checking as best he could. He had to stop; either the spell would work or it wouldn't.

"A quantum physics book inside a joke book inside a quantum physics book inside a... you get the idea," Frisk answered. "I'll call him again, maybe you and he can have a meaningful conversation." Asriel was reminded of something but saved it. Sans picked up almost immediately.

"Hey, Sans-"

"boop. boop. boop."

"We're talking about the end of reality, are you going to spend your last few days doing a very bad
"imitation of a busy signal?!"

"boop. boop. boop. boop. boop."

Frustrated, Frisk handed the phone to Asmodeus. "You try."

"Sans? This is Asmodeus Riddle, a wizard. I know you probably don't want to talk to me, but please. Unless this isn't stopped, billions of people are going to die." The booping continued. "If you can do something and you don't, what does that make you?" Endless booping. "And if you aren't willing to do anything, why do you exist?" The neverending boop. "What do I need to do to get you to talk?" Boop now, boop tomorrow, boop forever. Asmodeus shrugged and handed the phone back. "Waste of time."

"Sans, please. I know you can do something. Please, just do it." Nope, it's boop. "You're a really bad friend, you know that?" Boop. "What's Papyrus going to say? Actually, let's go call him, he'll be more help." Asriel handed Frisk back their phone and dialed up Papyrus on his own.

Papyrus' ringback tone was 'It's the end of the world as we know it,' but he picked up on the second ring. "OH PRINCE ASRIEL, THANK YOU FOR CALLING! IT'S HORRIBLE!"

"Yeah, I know, but if-"

"MY CLIENT WAS THE BAD GUY! HE WAS A FRAUDSTER! A CHARLATAN! A SHAM! AND I WASN'T EVEN AS GOOD AS IT AS HE IS, BUT HE STILL WANTED ME TO REPRESENT HIM!"


"REPRESENTING... GUILTY PEOPLE?!"

"Yeah, most of the time, I think."

"BUT- BUT THEY'RE GUILTY!"

"Hello, we've got bigger problems!" Asriel blasted him with. "We tried to call up Sans, but he just keeps on doing this boop noise."

"HE'S GIVING YOU THE BUSY TREATMENT? HE USED TO DO THAT TO ME. I DON'T THINK ANYTHING WILL MAKE HIM STOP. EXCEPT MAYBE THE END OF THE WORLD. GOOD LUCK WITH THAT, BY THE WAY. IF ANYONE SUES YOU FOR IT, CALL ME."

"Yeah, we'll file a claim in the court of void, Judge Emptiness presiding, but it might be hard to find witnesses," Asriel said. "Thanks anyway, Papyrus. At least you talk." He hung up. Sans, on Frisk's phone, had kept right on booping throughout, and Frisk hung up, irritated.

"I should have known he could be a jerk," Frisk said. Asriel looked at them questioningly. "Right before I met Dad for the first time, Sans told me how EXP and LOVE work, what they really stand for, what I'd really be doing if I gained them."

"Okay, so what's the problem?" Asriel asked.

"He told me at the end! After I got done dodging everyone! I mean, it wouldn't have affected what I did, but shouldn't he have told me at the beginning of all that?! Or better yet, why didn't he tell Mom, so she could tell any kid who fell down? I guess he wanted to see who I really was. He's
"That, too, is a choice," Lawrence said. "I've been listening to all of this, and I'll be damned if I know what to tell you. I'm flying a plane full of living creatures apparently made out of styrofoam, a couple of honest-to-God wizards and what exactly can you do, Frisk? From the sounds of it, you can go back in time? How far?"

"Not very far," Frisk said. "I pick a SAVE point and then I can LOAD everything back to it, but some other people remember and the thing destroying the universe remembers what happened too."

"I'm guessin' you're being careful with your points. That's whatcha do, that's whatcha are. Just one more reason to be terrified of you, like I said, you have no idea how you look to the rest of the world, not that it matters if the whole thing goes belly-up. Me? I just fly planes. Now the President, you manage to exorcise him, what do you think he can do against a large group of people?" Frisk's breath caught in their throat. "See? I bet you didn't want to be told that. I bet that's what your friend, whoever and whatever he is, was trying not to tell you. Betcha that's how this ends. He pushes the button." Frisk couldn't talk.

"Okay, stop," Asriel said. "I don't understand. The button nukes people, but what does that mean exactly, to be nuked?"

"It means everyone dies," Frisk said, choking out the words. "Everyone in the whole area. Every single one of Chara's groups is wiped out, gone. Unless Trump can just use regular bombs. But then they're all still dead." Hands shaking and eyes watering, Frisk turned to Asmodeus. "There's got to be a mass version of that exorcism spell, right? Have it affect a large group of people?"

"Oh, yes, it's a couple more syllables," Asmodeus said. "And it's totally impossible to cast. Even if I sacrificed my life, and yours. We'd be hitting the enemy where it's strongest."

"Did you know this was going to happen?" Frisk snapped, alarming the kids at the back.

"I was hoping it wouldn't be, but I can already tell you that nothing else is going to work. If these congregations have as many people with as much LOVE as I think they do, tanks, bombs, artillery won't even hit them. It's not even magic as we use it, it's just raw power. Personally, I'd recommend a big nuke. Or."

"Or?" Frisk asked.

"Or," Asmodeus replied, gesturing to Frisk's bracelets, "we change the rules back to what they were. You won't even feel it, I promise." Yeah, and one of the last few people who tried to kill me told me it'd be like a trip to the dentist.

"No. If the choice is nuked monster killers versus sending all monsters everywhere back there, you have my answer," Frisk replied.

"That's not the choice," Asmodeus said. "In the long run, the choice is which one we do first. Or how many times we keep on doing it. Either someone decides that collecting EXP is a good idea or someone breaks back into the Underground. Now which one do you think is easier for the world's functioning governments? Sealing off one simple area or trying to police the entire planet?"

"I don't care. I'm not sending them back," Frisk snapped. "It's not about my own life. I'm not sending Mom or Dad or Azzy or any of the other monsters into that place again, or just killing them outright like the first time. Not after this. Not after everything we've done." Everyone in the
plane was paying attention to the conversation. Undyne looked like she was about to leap into action. Even meek Alphys looked ready to fight.

_They're not real people_, Asmodeus mouthed, and Frisk almost transformed Asriel to slay him where he sat.

"Um. There is one more thing to try," Asriel said. "Before you cast your spell, Asmodeus."

"Please. Tell me," Asmodeus practically begged him.

"I'm going to talk to them. To Chara. Because I don't think they're completely evil."

Asmodeus' face grew a bit red. "And what gives you that idea?"

"If they were, and they have control over Trump, what would they have attacked first? Who are the big monsters that give the most EXP?"

"They had to know I wouldn't let Mom or Dad get hurt!" Frisk replied.

"Yeah, but Mt. Ebbot is still rich, monster-wise," Asriel pointed out. "They never even tried for the area. And I bet they haven't even been attacking all that many mostly complete monsters."

"Near-human monsters have cell phones," Asmodeus said. "They can buy and use guns, I bet you never thought of that." Asriel recoiled; he hadn't thought of it. An armed and practiced monster, who wouldn't even notice a few small holes, would always win against an equivalent human, who would. "They're just too much of a risk when there's seven billion people's worth of lesser breeds."

"Still, I want to talk to them."

"Be my guest," Asmodeus welcomed him. "Just make sure you're getting more information out of them than you're giving. You know, Frisk, you should probably SAVE after the nuke and never again thereafter. Maybe, eventually, we'll find a semi-stable solution. See how long we can make this universe last, but I'd be surprised if it's more than a couple of years with us in it."

"That's the one thing I like most about you. Your sunny smile and your cheerful disposition," Undyne snapped. "Your willingness to look on the bright side of life, to have hope in the midst of hopelessness."

"In my years-" he started, but Undyne overrode him.

"You're not fighting for the future. You don't even fight to survive! You just want a way to sacrifice yourself, so you can say it was for the greater good." She got in his face. "Let me tell you something, pinhead: it's not! These kids fight for the future, and you want them to throw their lives away trying to put things back the way they were? Why don't you tell your daughter what this all means? Come on, I dare ya." Her sharp teeth were inches from his nose. "Say it in words she'll understand. Go on. Look her in the eye and tell her who she's going to lose. Tell her who's going to be left in this plane, you coward." Asmodeus slowly looked away. "That's what I thought." She backed off, contemptuously, and went back to looking out the window.

"How much longer?" Asmodeus asked after a minute or so.

"A few hours," Lawrence replied, as if nothing had happened. "Hard to say, depends on how we're greeted." Asmodeus closed his eyes and hoped to get a few winks of sleep, knowing that he never could, not in here.
"Oh, Asmodeus, you said you'd fix these with Alphys, right?" Frisk asked. "You want to get started on that if you've got nothing better to do?" They took their bracelets off briefly, but Asmodeus didn't accept them; instead, he went to the back with Alphys to explain what she'd done wrong and how he could help fix it.

"You really trust him?" Asriel whispered in their ear.

"No, but I trust Alphys," Frisk whispered back, barely audible at all.

Asriel smiled and folded his soft hand over Frisk's. "I think that, no matter what happens, it'll be all right in the end," Asriel said. Frisk looked at him. "Because I trust you." The air in the cabin was getting colder as the jet flew north, and the two of them huddled together in their summer clothes for several minutes, Asriel's thin coat offering him much less protection than he was used to.

A grey blanket came from over their heads and settled over their chests, Asmodeus placing it with magic. "You two looked cold." He shook his head. "God, I hope I'm wrong about all this."

Frisk and Asriel were woken up (they hadn't recalled falling asleep) to the sound of Lawrence having a lively conversation with Andrews ATC. "Yes, it's me, call sign," He rattled off a string of letters and numbers. "Frisk and Asriel Dreemurr. You should be expecting me. Okay, that's fine. I don't care! Send 'em next to me, I'll be happy to see 'em. Okay, flight path, altitude..." The kids didn't understand what he was saying, but they did understand when a pair of fighter jets bracketed Lawrence's plane in perfect formation. Frisk waved to one of the pilots, who waved back. *Cri**p**es! I just got waved at by a fighter jet pilot!*

"I'm never going to get used to being important enough for fighter jets," Frisk said.

Lawrence laughed. "See what I mean? You still don't know how scary you really are. Even to people who don't know you have powers."

The plane landed alone as the fighters veered off, and Jenkins was waiting on the tarmac. He climbed inside the moment the door lowered to the ground. "Okay, plan of action. Frisk, Asriel, Asmodeus? Asmodeus, where are you?"

"I'm right here," Asmodeus whispered in his ear, invisible. His breath smelled of cookies.

"Wizard, right. Okay, plan just changed. That makes things a lot easier. In the car, all three of you. Everyone else, stay here." Jenkins' nomally deferential voice was surprisingly commanding and had more than enough 'I know what I'm doing' for no one to question him. He opened the back door and Asmodeus got in quickly enough for no one to notice him, followed shortly by Asriel and Frisk. Not that anyone would have told. They'd all seen the President's increasing theatrics which had long since descended past even his worst usual self-parody.

"Okay, listen," Jenkins said. "He's gotten some... I guess you'd call them superpowers. Saw him punch a man across a room, broke half his ribs, and he said he didn't hit the guy hard. I don't know how well he'd do against you but I'd rather not test it. Asmodeus, how quick can you hit him with this?"

"Three seconds, but he'll hear it," he replied. He let himself fade back into visibility.

"Okay, good, better than I was hoping for I'm going to introduce you, and then, just.. hit him. I have a dozen people, we'll stand in the way if we have to."

"I need to talk first!" Asriel protested.
"He's not going to hear you, I'm not even sure if he can," Jenkins replied.

"No, not to him, to **them**. To Chara. How do you think we knew their name? Chara used to be... my sibling, like Frisk is."

Jenkins almost turned around in the driver's seat while making a tricky left turn. "You really think you can talk them out of this?"

"I have to try. It's something Frisk taught me. Talk first. If it doesn't work... we hit them. Besides, like Asmodeus said, we might learn something." A few more turns, a few more intersections, and they were at the White House gates and inside, Asmodeus invisible once more. **This time's going to be much worse than last time if this gets ugly**, Frisk realized. **No more slow moves. I won't be able to dodge the same way, and they'll end me in one hit.**

Jenkins opened the door like he'd done it a million times before. The Donald was facing front instead of back this time, and he looked at the three people he could see with some disdain. "Jenkins!" Donald Trump's vocal cords boomed out in a very un-Trumplike inflection. "I ordered you to bring them to Kansas, not here!"

"Stop it, Chara," Asriel said. "We know it's you."

The face relaxed, and a smile appeared on The Donald's face that was clearly not his own. **Finally. Sure took you long enough. You always were pretty slow, Az.**

"I'm fast now. Thanks to Frisk."

"Oh, yeah, thanks for keeping him around," Chara said in a genuinely happy voice. "That whole time, I was hoping you'd just kill something, anything, hopefully everything, then I could have erased the Underground and done the same thing here. But this is okay too. Now I can take you with me, Az, and you're not that stupid little flower anymore. You and Mom and Dad. You can all come with me into my new world. Until I get bored of you, I guess, but you won't do that for a long while."

"So you're not going to destroy the universe?" Frisk asked, realizing that this must be the first live psychopath they've ever seen. They didn't like what Chara said nor the way they said it, but they **really** didn't like the way Chara inhabited the man's body, how he moved it as he pleased, like a kid would with a puppet they didn't really care about.

"And kill **myself**? I'm not going to kill **myself**. I did that already, it was stupid. I'm going to **reset** the universe. All the way back, to the start, when there weren't any laws. Then I'm going to make my own laws, first law, nobody can hurt me, second law, I get anything I want. Frisk, if you help me, you can be my friend too." Frisk did **not** like the way Chara said 'friend'. "I'll keep you safe. Nothing will be able to hurt you either. I might even give you a little of my power. If you're nice to me, I'll give you each a galaxy of your own. And Mom can make pie, and Dad can ruffle my hair... and... Wait. Az. You didn't tell Frisk my secret, did you?" Frisk turned to Asriel: **Secret?**

"No. I swear. I haven't told **anyone**."

Chara turned Trump's head to stare at Frisk, who quickly said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Good," Chara said. "You're still good. Both of you are. I'll like having you as friends. Hey, can you get to Kansas though? I'm sick of this world already."
Asriel took a breath and said, "Actually... is it possible for us to be your friends without you resetting the universe? I mean, wouldn't controlling everything get boring?"

"This world is boring!" Chara snapped, getting up and slamming Trump's hands on the desk and adding even more cracks to a large web of them. "It's all full of stupid rules and laws, like grammar and gravity! Now, am I going to have to just drag you to Kansas with this body, or should I just take your SOUL right now? You'll die if I do, Az."

Frisk lost hope. There wasn't any reasoning with this person, or thing, and a look at Asriel's face showed that he agreed. "Actually, there is someone who can break the rules of gravity. And of vision, too. Hey, tell them your full name."

"Oh, yes," Asmodeus said, turning visible and rising a bit off the ground for effect. "My full name is" He pressed a button on his phone, and by the time that Chara realized that wasn't actually a name, the spell had been cast.

Donald Trump screamed in pain and rage, squeezing his fists. "That little brat. That little God damned brat! He's ruined me! And he's going to ruin my country! Oh do I have a surprise for him. But we're going to make a plan first. A good plan. And then we're going to execute the plan. And then we're going to execute that little brat! Live! On pay-per-view!"

"I wish you could," Asmodeus said.

"Who, exactly, are you? And what did you do? Thanks for that, by the way. Thanks from the entire good people of the United States. I'll have Congress give you the medal of honor, get you set up with a pension fund."

"And I have to thank you, Mr. President, for that," the wizard replied. "Wish that was our worst problem. Let me tell you what's going on, get some people in here, and then we can work on that plan..."

"Over lunch," The Donald said. "You'd think if some kid like that took a body as good as mine, he'd learn to take care of it!"
Frisk and Asriel came home crying.

They'd both remained stoic throughout the seemingly endless meeting, as the American leadership was given an exhaustive rundown on exactly how monster magic and human wizardry worked, and Frisk had been straightforward and honest when asked to explain why their SOUL was so necessary for Chara to reset the universe (DETERMINATION was immediately classified TS/SCI, despite who already knew they had it). They'd confirmed from other reports that Chara could remember when Frisk LOADed. They'd even talked about the bracelets. Asriel had been asked what Chara's secret was, but he'd simply said that it was extremely personal and had absolutely nothing to do with any way to defeat Chara, and had asked Trump if personal secrets were up for discussion; Trump had rapidly changed the subject, instructing Asmodeus to cast his spell on everyone at the table just in case Chara had spies. (They didn't.)

They'd even remained stoic, at least on the outside, while realizing why Sans had told them not to watch the news. The hordes of possessed slaves from Canada and the U.S. had been like locusts, robbing food and gasoline the whole way, easily fending off attacks while the possessed Trump had prevented a national response, killing surprisingly few people along the way simply because Chara either couldn't be bothered or couldn't pay attention to everyone at once. (It was this last suspicion, bolstered by evidence, upon which one of the many contingencies rested.) In other parts of the world, all hell had broken loose. Chara had largely stayed away from cities for their gatherings- Frisk and Asriel voiced the suspicion that, like their own connections, it was hard for Chara to distribute power through solid objects- but Chara had taken one particularly famous city in Saudi Arabia and crumbled that pesky monolith in the center, and the entire Middle East was erupting in terror and chaos. ("Business as usual," Trump had quipped.)

It didn't help that the air conditioning was turned up to accommodate a crowd of people in suits (and how could the kids complain about a thing like that, with the world at stake?), and it didn't help that these people in suits could barely even grasp what was going on. The only adults in the room who knew anything were Asmodeus and the monsters, and Trump had to tell a few of his people to shut the hell up because twenty years in government was surprisingly useless in what one of the smarter ones called an "Outside Context Problem". Someone who came late to the party had asked if radiation created monsters, and Asriel and his parents had laughed because the idea was obviously ridiculous.

At least the food was good, although Frisk and Asriel weren't used to red meat served as hors d'oeuvres.

Chara had provided one of the key linchpins to the plan: they'd sent two of their slaves to kidnap Frisk's not-parents and drag them to Kansas. In the livestreamed threat, Chara stated that Frisk would show up to save them "because you're the good guy", and Frisk had, under stress, burst out laughing. Like they were really going to risk the whole world for those two! The plan came together swiftly after that once Alphys told them that yes, she really could do something like they wanted. But it also meant that the kids needed to go somewhere with her, which they welcomed just to get out of that room. Especially after Frisk had made a phone call, lying profusely to people they didn't care about.

"You should feel lucky I got elected," Trump had said before they'd left. "Hillary couldn't even handle this, and her goons would have sent you all to Area 51 until this thing's army overran it." They figured it'd be a bad idea to tell everyone what Trump had done when they'd first met, at least...
while the universe was in jeopardy.

Then the Dreemurr kids had been poked, prodded, and measured for a solid hour (the technicians were very kind and professional- as if that helped), and then their mannerisms, voices, and speech patterns were analyzed. They'd gotten out of there at about 9 o'clock, the coffee flowing freely because Alphys would stay up with the technicians long after Frisk and Asriel were finally allowed to go home. And even that, some people had balked at, but Trump had decided to dramatically increase security around Newer Home instead of saying that they couldn't go there, and Jenkins had driven them through heavily fortified military checkpoints.

It'd been too much for too long. Asriel didn't want to cry in front of Frisk, and Frisk didn't want to cry in front of Asriel, but Frisk had been wiping away a few tears in the back of Jenkins' van and then Asriel had started crying and then the two of them had let it all out while Jenkins drove in silent sympathy. It wasn't that the plan wouldn't work, it was that it probably would, and absolutely nothing bad would happen to the two of them. Wake up in the Disney Castle, have breakfast with a wizard, and eat lunch in the White House, and meanwhile hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people were going to have their lives obliterated by thermonuclear bombs because they'd been foolish enough to kill monsters and get influenced and then possessed, not to mention the military forces obliterated by Chara's raw, physics-defying power and the complete innocents caught up in it. But us? We get to go home to Mom and Dad.

And the home they went to was a beautiful, wonderful place, much more opulent than most of the houses that would be obliterated in the blast waves. Jenkins pulled up as close as possible to the front door, and the kids ran through the thin layer of snow and through the tremendous door, whose white paint would never be charred by somebody's embedded shadow. The house and half the furniture, which would never be blown across the room in burning pieces, were sized for Asgore and Toriel, making the kids feel very little, which was how they felt anyway as they ran to their waiting parents to bury their faces in their chests, bawling as their parents hugged them close.

"Dad?" Frisk asked between sobs. "Is it- is it... Is it okay if we kill a whole lot of people to save everyone else? Is it okay to commit genocide to make the world safe?

"It's okay. I understand. Sometimes, the only thing to do isn't the right thing to do," Asgore said. "Come on. Your mom made you something." The microwave beeped, and the Dreemurrs ushered their kids to sit at the brand new table that would not be blasted to bits, and sitting on such elevated chairs, that would never snap to splinters under infernal pressure, made them feel even smaller while their mother set out two bowls of warm vegetable soup. The children ate slowly and even though it wasn't remotely sweet it was warm, thick, savory, and nutritious. The kids didn't resist or say anything as Toriel undressed and bathed them, shampooing their hair and turning on the relaxing bubbles in the even bigger jacuzzi that would never be charred by a nuclear blast, then methodically drying their hair, making comments about how Asriel needed to grow his coat back, as both of them sat in silence. She led them up the long, tall stairs, each one clutching her hand, then led them into their room, which had computers and consoles and toys and everything else a couple of kids like them could ever possibly want (not nuked, never will be nuked), then helped them put on their matching pajamas and tucked them into an extremely comfortable, perfectly safe, not radioactive, bed with goodnight kisses.

"Can't I actually save them, Azzy?" Frisk asked as they hugged each other so tightly that Frisk was worried about crushing their brother to dust. "The way I saved you?"

"You saved me with your SOUL. You offer Chara your SOUL and they'll just take it."

"But... isn't there something we can do that isn't this? There's not, is there? Sans knew. He knew
the whole time. When this is over, let's get answers out of him. All of them. Even if we have to force them out of him, he owes us those, at least. Like it'll even matter."

"And if Asmodeus is right, then all of this is for nothing," Asriel said. He didn't think the wizard was, though, at least not in the short term. All of the suit-wearers in that room had been just as committed as Asmodeus to preventing Chara from creating any more gatherings once this was over, whatever it took, treating EXP earners as a more dangerous national security threat than any conventional terrorist and keeping a close eye on monsters. But they couldn't possibly keep it up forever (could they?), and Chara was, as far as anyone could tell, completely immortal. "I just... I wish..." But what was a wish worth, without the power to make it come true?

No, falling asleep that night was not easy at all.

They were woken up by a phone call as the morning light trickled in. "Be ready in one and a half hours," Jenkins said when Frisk picked up. "And, Frisk... thank you."

"Don't thank me for nukes!" Frisk snapped, hanging up and then feeling bad. Jenkins was along for the ride just as much as they were. "What are we going to do today, Az?" they asked furiously, getting up and snapping on the bracelets that Mom had diligently plugged in. "Sleep in? Procrastinate? I hope nobody we know gets hurt, I can't even LOAD anymore, not without Chara maybe using it to get someone else hurt." Asriel, looking cowed, put on his bracelets and silently got out of bed. Frisk's voice softened. "Oh, hey, I didn't mean to take it out on you..."

"If it makes you feel better, it's okay. It's all okay. All that time, and I never knew. I never asked." He looked downcast. "I wonder if this was their plan from before, to make me either kill or die. If I had died before coming back to the Underground, then Chara would have gotten loose, wouldn't they? Somebody would have earned EXP killing me, and then... or maybe they just didn't know... but it doesn't matter now." They had their own bathroom, and they did their morning ritual by the numbers.

Toriel knocked on their door as they finished. "Come in, Mom," Asriel called, and she did, a strangely peaceful look on her face and a Dreemurr formal robe covering her body.

"Do you think that man will attack us again?" she asked.

"No chance, Mom," Frisk replied. "There's going to be other people there, Asmodeus told him his book was garbage, and he doesn't want to be possessed."

"Then there is no reason for you not to look your best," she said, opening their closet. "The Council of Elrond wore the finest things they could, and so shall you."

"The what of what?" Asriel asked, Frisk looking equally confused.

She sighed. "I know what reading to assign your class." She took Frisk's dress and Asriel's robe from hangers, both of which had been altered to have long sleeves and extra fabric to protect against the chill. "I had been alone for far too long," she explained, helping Asriel out of his pajamas, draping his robe above his head and adjusting it around him. "I had forgotten what it truly meant to be a Queen. We are royalty, and we will conduct ourselves as such, particularly in the face of adversity, no matter how great." She brought out roller shoes sized for Asriel, and Frisk got some much-needed humor; she thought they were formal attire!

It struck Frisk: This is how she copes. She, like nearly everyone at the strategy session, was absolutely terrified but refused to show it. Trump had his impenetrable ego, Asmodeus had his fatalism, the various generals and senior heads had their professionalism, and Mom had formality
and motherhood. *Is this what it means to be an adult? To still be a kid, just hiding it better?* Frisk stepped out of their pajamas, and Toriel helped them into a pair of long, Dreemurr-fur socks and tied their roller shoes on their feet before pulling the dress over their head, lowering their hairband into place, and slipping their white gloves on. "Furthermore, it is not right for children your age to attend such a critical function without your parents, despite how little help you believe we can be." Normally, Asriel and Frisk would have balked, but 'normally' had left the station a long time ago and they meekly let their mother guide them to the breakfast table, where they climbed up on their tall chairs and enjoyed full cups of top-shelf tea, French toast, eggs, and bacon. Their father, with a voluminous robe and a clearly forced smile, raised a cup of tea. A *toast to the end of the world, while Chara's forcing their slaves to subsist on whatever they can find.* But they were royalty, and the whole family ate the delicious food carefully so as not to get any on their clothes.

"Are we ready?" Asgore asked with their plates were cleaned.

"As we'll ever be," Asriel said.

"Then let's not hesitate." He reached for his phone, and a few minutes later they were in Jenkins' SUV, escorted by other cars to the front and back, and he drove with such wariness and machinelike precision that the kids wondered if he'd been replaced by a robot. For the second time, Frisk rolled along the White House floors, holding their brother's hand to keep him from falling over doing the same thing.

Asgore, hunched over, saw Asmodeus sitting at the table next to Sans (*next to Sans?!* Frisk and Asriel noticed) and their eyes met. Asmodeus clearly had not slept, and he looked like death fueled by coffee.

"Woah, woah," the President said. "Last time I saw two guys look at each other like that, they started hitting each other with garden tools." Frisk and Asriel were glaring at Sans just as hard, but Trump didn't notice and Sans wasn't glaring back. "If you want to fight each other you can do it on the lawn and I'll sell tickets to pay off the national debt."

That broke the tension. "National *debt*?" Asgore asked, confused. "Your country *owes money?* If your nation is so powerful, why do people not owe you?"

"Hah! Get a load of this guy. I bet you think the Treasury is where we have actual treasure." Asgore, who did think that, remained silent.

"Sans, are you here just to boop at us again?" Asriel was asking the skeleton, who unlike everyone else in the room was in his usual tracksuit and slippers, too lazy to bother with anything else.

"i'll just say one thing, kid. what happens now is the best thing that could have happened."

Trump spoke in the commanding voice that had gotten him elected. "So here's how this is going to go..."

Chara was happy.

Of course Frisk'd taken the bait. How could they not? They'd even called up their birth parents' phones shortly after Chara'd made the threat, promising to come and save Chara the next day. (*They're so naive, just like Az, I love it!*) The Americans had evacuated the area, so Chara'd spent time amusing themself with other parts of the world (*especially that one part, hoo-wee did those guys want that place back?!*), blasting everything out of the air and right off the ground with extremely brief rips in the fabric of reality. The humans (*evil humans, horrible humans, humans who-*) didn't understand anything, didn't understand how Chara could see and react to things from
so far away, didn't understand how they could just nullify tank divisions with ten thousand possessed humans in one place. Even the truck bombs that some of the humans had smuggled in (because even Chara couldn't possibly keep tabs on all of their puppets at once) hadn't done any damage. All the humans had was physics (except for that one, but he was just one and Chara was legion), and Chara's concentrated LOVE, pure violence incarnate, had placed them almost completely outside physics. *They can't even nuke me. I'll blow their missiles right out of the sky!* All Chara needed was Frisk's half of the key, and they'd finally put an end to all this.

And here it came. The helicopter, painted bright white, came in low and slow, showing that it was harmless. The helicopter had allowed Asriel and Frisk, clad in their matching striped shirts, to depart before quickly taking off again- Chara had cut it in half lengthwise right after it took off again, right through the cockpit, and they were disappointed to find out that it was entirely remote controlled.

"Wow. You really don't want to hurt anybody, do you?" Chara asked, through several dozen throats at once. "You really haven't made Az cry once, have you?"

"No," Frisk answered after a bit. "No, I haven't." They looked so calm, so collected, and Chara looked forward to wiping that silly little expression right off their face.

Chara burst out laughing, from every puppet in the world. "It's like you keep on going for this perfect record. Thinking that somebody's going to tally up every time you've been mean, every time you've been bad. No, no execution points for Frisk, can't have that! Have to protect your precious purity! Have to try to save everyone, that's what God would want, right? There is no God, Frisk. There's just me. Now, have you actually come to try to save me, or are you just going to-"

Asriel realized that Chara was about to tell the exact secrets of Frisk's DETERMINATION to the entire world and and interrupted them as fast as he could. "Chara, please!" he blurted out. "It's not about purity. It's just about something you don't have. It's about compassion."

"In the next universe, I might make that actually exist, just because everyone keeps talking about it so much. You know what that liar did to me! Why do you keep telling me the same stupid lie?!" So many of their puppets had believed in that same stupid lie, too, but all Chara had to do was entice them to kill enough monsters and the lie evaporated.

"It's real," Frisk said. "I understand what you want, and I don't blame you for wanting it." Chara's many faces looked curious. "To rewrite the universe, to make yourself God? Who wouldn't want that? But it's not right to do that, because it's everyone else's universe, too. That's compassion."

"Chara, you're not complete!" Asriel shouted. "You're like... that flower that couldn't feel good emotions. There's a piece of you that's missing."

"Even if you're right, I don't care. This is over." Through sheer force of will they grabbed Frisk and Asriel from twenty feet away and floated them towards themselves, looking for Frisk's delicious SOUL and *not finding it* and then tearing them, both of them, to pieces and finding nothing but metal parts, and seeing the depths of Chara's rage Trump found the perfect moment to-

"DON'T PRESS THAT BUTTON!"

The voice was young and all-commanding, and it boomed through the Situation Room's speakers like a call from heaven. Chara began screaming from everywhere at once. From the one remaining camera in the Asriel robot's eye socket, the team saw people glow with white light before the robot fell to the ground. Other people were calling to report the same thing, that people were glowing
briefly, that they were occasionally hitting each other and going for food and water and generally being confused, somewhat violent people.

"Aww, come on!" Trump protested. "I went through a whole election so I could press this thing if I wanted, and now I just got blue-balled by God?! Give me a break!"

"that's not how this goes," Sans said. He looked confused, afraid, and deeply dismayed, and neither Frisk nor Asriel could recall him ever being any of those things. "this isn't what happens. he presses the button, they all get blown up, i talk frisk out of doing a LOAD and then we all stop devil kid from doing it again."

"You saw a different future," some suit-wearer at the table accused.

"i'm seein' it right now."

"So, was that actually God?" Asmodeus asked, standing up. "Hey, God! Come on down. I need to talk to you about your design specifications."

"I don't know," Asriel said. "That wasn't really one voice, it was two mixed up together. One was a boy about our age, and the other one... was you, Frisk."

Frisk would have said bad words, but their mother was there.
And so it came to pass that the National Security Council stared in fear and awe at a prepubescent child in an elegant purple dress, a plastic purple hairband and dainty white gloves, their towering mother sitting protectively next to them. Lawrence's words echoed back to Frisk: *You have no idea how scary you really are.* They'd all been told about DETERMINATION before but generally didn't take it seriously, especially when they were told they couldn't use it against the immediate threat. "Outside Context Problem to the max," one of them uttered, looking like he was going to fall down to his knees in worship for lack of better things to do. Trump's ego wouldn't let him do much more than look on in interest.

Sans' look of confusion turned to his usual skeletal grin. "now you know how most of us felt. welp. no use for me here anymore. i'm gonna go catch some rays. later." Seeming to blink in and out as he moved, Sans was gone before anyone could react.

"But it's winter..." Frisk said, too late, wondering if Sans was going on vacation too. They turned to the group. "Please stop." Most of them tried to stop staring. "I just have this one power. I can't do whatever that was, at least I don't know how to. I'm not God, or a god." Asriel, who had called himself that before, kept quiet. "I'm still just me. I just do what I can to save people, same as most of you."

"So you're Jesus," Trump said. "And man, is that going to wreck me with the evangelicals if this gets leaked," he lamented. "King Asgore! You and yours truly need to have a pow-wow with the UN. They wanted me to hand this to them, but if I did that they'd still be bickering. And, ah, Frisk, there's someone from FEMA who wants to talk to you." Phee-ma? Frisk and their family didn't recognize the acronym. Trump looked down at his laptop. "The rest of you are going to deal with this kid lashing out, looks like they didn't all get fixed. Get to it, chop chop."

Jenkins led Frisk out of the room, their brother next to them and their mother close behind, walking the near-empty halls. The White House was normally a lot more active, but everyone who wasn't cleared to deal with the current situation had been thrown out for the duration. "I thought I was the one protecting you," Jenkins answered. "But, if you all cooperate, I'm told we can save a whole lot of lives." He ushered them into the Red Room, where a woman with a pantsuit and a pair of piercing eyes sat waiting for them.

"Your Majesty, Your Highnesses," she greeted them, retrieving an extra seat for Toriel. "My name is Alice Bright, Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency." Alice had, of course, been occasionally teased about her name as a child, but she never felt so completely down the rabbit hole as she did just then, sitting in front of two things that by all rights should not exist and this sweet-looking child that had flatly impossible powers. *This is why he put me in charge,* she thought. The last Republican appointee to FEMA did not do such a heck of a job. "Tea, if you'd like," she offered, and the Dreemurrs accepted it graciously. "Before we begin, I'd like to see your ability in action," she requested of Frisk, who immediately stopped sipping their tea, staring at it suspiciously and looking around the room. *Mistake number one, Alice,* she told herself. Of course Frisk was worried when being asked to SAVE. They only got one at a time. "You're safe. It's just
ordinary tea." She took a large gulp herself to prove the point. "And if I did do something that foolish, I'm pretty sure your... mother and brother," she continued, barely avoiding mistake number two, "would do something unpleasant." Asriel chuckled, and Alice took that to mean _understatement_. She'd analyzed the video just as thoroughly as everyone else.

"Should I?" Frisk asked their family.

"Do it," Asriel said, and Alice was very much expecting him to sound like anything other than the normal child he sounded like.

Looking first at Alice (what does she see in me, it's like she's looking right through me), Toriel agreed, "Yes, my child," and her voice was so deep and rich that Alice found herself wishing that her own mother had sounded the same.

"Okay," Frisk said, instinctively pulling out their phone. "Oh, right. I can't even do this this time, because there's no way I can go back before that..."

"Do what?" Alice asked.

"Make sure my friends are okay before I SAVE." Alice smiled gently- this kid would have no trouble grasping what she wanted- and Frisk immediately looked at her with a somewhat different expression. "The first letter of your password is M, and the last digit is 3."

"What?" That had been true, but that was an old password that she hadn't used for decades.

"I said that I just did, and you asked me to prove it," Frisk explained. "I asked you for something that only you'd know that you'd never told anyone, and you asked if it had to be personal, and then I said no and then you told me that. Then I LOADed, and you don't remember it."

"Jesus Christ," Alice whispered very faintly under her breath. Asriel smiled a bit- he'd heard me!- and that was mistake number two. She couldn't afford screwups, not with something this big. "I'm sorry, I had to see that first-hand. Are there any restrictions on how often you can do this?"

"I only get one SAVE, but I can LOAD as much as I want," Frisk said. "Before, I only used to be able to SAVE when I was with something important, but now, well, I've got Az." Asriel looked away, and Alice was sure he'd be blushing if he'd had the blood to blush with.

She decided to make the formal request then. "Your Highness, I'd like to set up a system where you LOAD every day. And then, the second time around, SAVE an hour before you LOAD. I know that it'd be hard on your sleeping patterns, but we can work something out."

"You mean on a regular schedule?" Asriel blurted, spitting out a bit of tea. "Like Chara wouldn't figure that out!" _Strike three, Alice_, she told herself. _This is what making plans on no sleep gets you._

"The children shall not be awoken in the middle of the night," Toriel said between sips of tea.

"I'm not going to tell you when I'm going to SAVE," Frisk said, letting Alice figure out the many reasons. "Sorry. And yeah, Chara remembers too, and we'd have to actually remember. Me, Azzy, Sans, and Asmodeus, we're the only ones who can, and we can't bring anything back with us."

"Asmodeus has told me that he can give that ability to anyone." That conversation had been somewhat animated. Asmodeus had insisted point-blank that he be allowed to thoroughly judge every candidate for himself before casting something like that, and Alice had no choice but to acquiesce.
Frisk's eyes went wide. "Oh, right! Yeah, he said!" Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, mouths open.

Neither of them seemed to need Alice's explanation: "We intend to have, I suppose you'd call them rememberers, to be evenly matched against this current threat while we protect against other threats and ordinary crime."

"But that happens all the time, so it really has to be every single day," Asriel said. "And three times in a row for some parts. Frisk, do you really want to do this?"

"Azzy, little kids are going to get kidnapped and die if we don't. 'Ordinary crime' means people getting murdered. Yeah, it'll be annoying for us, but I can't let people get hurt if I can choose not to. Isn't that the first thing you learned about me? I save everyone." They looked at Alice, putting their empty cup of tea on the table. "Just, no tyranny, okay? If you try to use this for tyranny, everyone's going to have a bad time."

"No tyranny. I'll try my very hardest." Alice had been utterly unable to sleep last night and watched Minority Report three times in a row instead.

"Also, Asmodeus should cast it on only really good people," Frisk said. "They'll probably have to be, just to deal with it."

"Deal with what, the memories?"

"Yeah, they're going to have to relive chunks of their lives, and not when they want to. And it might surprise them." Alice's steel-trap mind instantly leapt to possibilities: a man out on a date suddenly finding himself at his desk, or in a pursuit, or...

"Yes. However, if we gave you a number to call, we could send out an APB. If possible, call before you LOAD."

Frisk's expression brightened. "Okay, yeah! I'll do that."

"Thank you, Your Highness. We'll call you with more details later," she said, shaking Frisk's hand, the white glove smooth against her skin. She looked up at Toriel, who was rising from her chair, and felt that she had to say it: "Your Majesty, I don't know how to tell you this, but you should feel lucky to have such wonderful children."

"I do," she said. "Every single day." Her large, furry arms went around the siblings.

"And, Your Highness... I don't think that most kids in your position would do what you're doing."

Frisk smiled. "They'd probably just do the casino thing." Alice did not need to be told what 'the casino thing' was. "But I already have everything I want, and I'm the only person in the whole universe who can do this. With great power comes great responsibility, right?" Frisk forgot whether that was from Batman or Superman. "Just make the most of your second chances." Alice nodded. "If I get asked to give third or fourth chances a whole lot, that's a bad time too. And if anything I really don't want to happen happens, I'm just going to LOAD until it doesn't."

"I understand perfectly. Again, I can't thank you enough for cooperating."

"It's you guys who do all the actual work. I just have DETERMINATION, that's all." Frisk and Asriel hopped off their chairs and left with their mother, leaving Alice relieved. Well, that kid's going to save thousands, maybe millions, of lives and give Donald another four more years.
Asriel was very much not relieved. "Frisk, I understand why, and I'm not saying it's bad, but I don't want to keep reloading over and over again. It just reminds me of..."

"Hey, we left the Underground weeks ago, remember? You're not Flowey, you're not going to be Flowey anytime soon," they whispered. "And think about it this way, it gives us twice as much time together. We don't have to do the same things the same way every time, right? We can even skip school days the first time, because-

"You will not skip school," Toriel interrupted. "Asmodeus will cast his spell on your father and I, and I will tutor you on school days that we only remember."

"Yes, Mom," Frisk and Asriel said together. "Anyway," Frisk continued, "it's not like we're going to run out of things to do."

"I'll gladly cast it on you, Toriel." Asmodeus said, stepping out of the bathroom. He'd been sitting down clenched in fear for the past thirty hours and had liberally used magic to evacuate himself. "It's a one-syllable change for monsters, not a problem. Frisk, it sounds like you accepted her offer, we'll get started tomorrow. I'd love to talk to you about what happened, about what that was, about what you are... but I don't know anything. All that's left for me right now is to check up on my daughter and go to sleep."

"I am certain she is safe," Toriel said, as they all walked and rolled out together. "Undyne has been watching over Kid for a very long time. She can handle your daughter, no matter how rambunctious or powerful she may be."

Victoria adjusted the oversized welding mask on her face, her fireproofed pink baseball uniform hanging loose on her body. A half-full bag of bulk candy was at her feet, and more empty bags were strewn across Undyne's living room. On the other side of the room, Kid, wearing a large neoprene catcher's mitt over one of his mechanical hands, stood behind Undyne, who had both hands on her spear and a huge grin on her face.

"C'mon, right across the plate!" Undyne shouted.

Making sure her hand was protected from the heat (one of the first things she learned when the barrier went down), Victoria summoned a baseball-sized fireball and launched it at Kid's head much faster than she could throw an actual ball. Undyne's spear lashed out, blasting the fireball to pieces and sending them all over the walls and ceiling, which other monsters had helpfully covered with fireproof material when they learned that Undyne and her cooking would be living there.

"Home run!" Kid yelled.
This time, their thoughts not dominated by the threat of nuclear holocaust or universal omnicide, Frisk and Asriel actually looked around the community they lived in. First was the military cordon; a brief flash of Jenkins' badge, an infrared scan of the vehicle, and a glance at Toriel's face got them through at once. Next was the service stores; a small grocery store, a Pizza Hut (having outbid its competitors for exclusive rights), and a military PX opened up for civilian use were near the sole, four-lane entrance. The town itself could have been any street in any hilly city in America. Roughly a hundred brand-new houses, made predominately of prefabricated materials, were lined up in neat, ordered rows. A road led uphill further, towards the two well-guarded entrances to the Underground. There was quite a bit of extra land, and Frisk had played Sim City enough to know that monster-focused industries would probably be built on it.

"Please drop me off here," Asmodeus said as they went down the street. "This is where my daughter's staying." He got out, letting an icy wind blow into the car, and Asriel chuckled a bit later; he could hear Asmodeus shouting "You were playing what?!
" just as the car reached the Dreemurr family mansion and the Dreemurrs quickly got out, waving goodbye to Jenkins, Asriel opening the door with his magic because it was too cold and windy to wait for Mom to use a key. Yet another fleeting hit of *I really don't deserve this* got Frisk; a hardwood foyer was just before the expansive, plushly carpeted living room, which most prominently featured an enormous, Asgore-sized couch, a truly massive television, a Toriel-sized rocking chair, and a fireplace. The dining room was similarly lavish, and the kitchen was thoroughly well-equipped, and that was just what the kids saw; other rooms with closed doors made Frisk curious whether or not they should open them and what sorts of secrets had been stashed within. *Later.* The house was so big that Frisk wondered if Mom and Dad could take care of it themselves. *Please for the love of God don't tell me we have house servants. I could not deal with that.* The only thing they didn't like was how cold it was inside, but why...

Frisk figured it out. "Mom, it's okay to leave the heat on when we're not here. Or there's stuff you can buy to remote control it."

She looked at her child with an expression much warmer than the house. "Of course you are right." The last house she'd owned did not have electricity or natural gas. "I shall do so in the future. For now, put on some warm clothes." Asriel and Frisk quickly rushed up the Dreemurr-sized stairs to their room and helped each other out of their formal wear, laying it out on the bed.

"There are no warm clothes in here!" Asriel lamented, putting on a pair of long-johns, and Frisk had to laugh while putting on a matching set; he was quite right, these clothes were cold like everything else! They huddled together, arms around each other, next to a floor vent belching out warm air, and Asriel softly bleated in relaxation, holding his face to it. Frisk laughed again.

"What?"

"You and your hair dryers."

Asriel gave another long, contented bleat. "My one weakness." They laughed together. "Frisk... do you think everything's going to be all right? I mean, all right all right. After everything."

"I think so. Whatever that was, I think it's protecting us. You're sure that sounded like me?"

"Absolutely you. You and someone else."
“Me from where? From another timeline, another dimension, from outside the universe, from the future? It couldn't have been from that perfect universe Asmodeus was talking about.” They looked at each other, not knowing anything. “But it's not me, at least not the me right here.” Frisk sighed, remembering how Trump's people treated them, but what people wanted to believe didn't matter. "If it's God, they could have decided just to sound like me, because they're God. And.. oh no. I just had the worst idea."

“What's that?”

“What if the other voice was you from the future, but as a human?”

Asriel looked like he'd swallowed a beehive and discovered how to poop. "Oh my God no! Please, God, if you exist, no!" Frisk laughed at Asriel's reaction. "I hope this doesn't make you mad, but I like being me. Being human would solve this," he said, holding up his braceleted wrists, "but I'd rather be connected to you forever than lose all my everything."

"I'd never want you to be anything else either. Well, except if I get really cheesed off. Then I want you to be something else."

"Hey, let that old stuff go. Chara did way worse than we did, and those two butt thugs are still alive." Frisk started laughing. "What?"

" Butt thugs? Did you just call my not-parents butt thugs?"

"What should I have called them, ass arsonists? Fecal felons? Rectal robbers?" Frisk started laughing so hard they got tears in their eyes. "Colon crooks? Hiney hoodlums? Lower intestine larceny lords?"

"How do you know all these words?!" Frisk sputtered out between laughs.

"We had dictionaries. And, well... I didn't have anything better to do."

Frisk immediately stopped laughing. "Oh. I'm sorry, I shouldn't ever ask you anything about the past. Don't tell me it's okay, Az, it's really not." Frisk's past was godawful, but at least its awfulness was limited by the laws of physics.

Asriel smiled a wide, gentle smile. "You win. From now on, the past didn't happen." Frisk started laughing again.

"Lunch is ready," Toriel called, and Asriel got on Frisk's back to let his human carry him downstairs, his floppy ears brushing against Frisk's.

"As of right now, anything that happened before you saved me officially didn't happen," Asriel continued. "Unless it was good."

"I like that, let's go with that. Happened before? There is no before." Asriel smiled as they walked into the dining room, Frisk putting him down next to a chair. "Mom, that's kind of a weird combination of food. Who serves chicken and rice with fig bars and bits of candy?"

"They said we should eat them when there isn't anything else. I did not have time to cook." 'They' would have to be... Frisk briefly visited the trash can to confirm what they knew: their mother had heated and served the contents of two MREs. "Are they palatable?"

Frisk and Asriel ate slowly, but it wasn't terrible and tasted entirely like things Frisk had eaten before. "Yeah, they're all right. We can eat these if you don't want to cook." Toriel looked at her
child a bit off-kilter and Frisk immediately realized how silly it was to say that.

"Come in," Toriel said, having heard Asmodeus approach the door, and he entered with his daughter in his arms and a deeply unpleasant look on his face.

"I should have known this, but your Royal Guard is an extremely poor caretaker of very young children," he said, putting her down.

"No she's not!" Victoria shouted, pouting and folding her arms.

"Honey, playing baseball indoors with fireballs is not safe." Frisk and Asriel started laughing, then Asriel started whistling the 'Take me out to the ball game' tune (How's he know that? Nope, not gonna ask) and Frisk started laughing harder. "And they gave you far too much sugar. Queen Toriel, I was going to bring something like this up later, but I have a great many things to do and I can't watch her. If you would, please? For a few hours."

"Of course."

"And, if I may be so bold, I still need to speak with your husband at some point."

"He should be home for dinner. I'll prepare a place for you."

"Thank you. Victoria, be good, okay?" he implored his daughter, but the moment he set her down on the floor she immediately started exploring the Dreemurr mansion at top speed. Asmodeus sighed and left.

Toriel sighed. "Far too much sugar, indeed. Undyne needs a stern talking-to. Victoria!" she called, and the girl came running at Toriel's rich voice. "Would you like to play outside? We have a new sled."

"Mom, you've got a sled?" Asriel asked eagerly. "I've never..." He remembered his agreement not to talk about the past. "I've just never." Frisk wanted to learn how to snowboard sometime, but how could you snowboard attached to someone who's never even been on a sled?

Frisk nodded. "We can go out and play with her, but it's really cold."

"That is why I bought these." Hanging in the foyer were two sets of snow outfits, and they were actually warm before wearing this time. The hooded jackets and overalls were white, with strange light-green patches on them and bands of light pastel rainbow stripes for Frisk and darker ones for Asriel. Both of them got snow boots with thick, grippy soles, and Asriel's boots fit his nonhuman feet and his hood had pouches for his ears, his mother gently guiding them inside. Striped, white mittens dangled from the jackets on strings, the same way Victoria's were.

"It's official, Mom's dressing us like four year olds," Frisk and Asriel realized. But there were worse things in the world.

"Be safe, you three," Toriel said with a slight wink, and Asriel smiled; they couldn't possibly be anything else.

"C'mon. I know exactly where to go," Asriel said, gesturing uphill. He jogged along, dragging the large sled by its cord, just slow enough for Victoria to follow him, and Frisk recognized the trail he was taking. It was the second time they'd climbed this way, but this time was a great deal more joyous than the first. One forlorn hike up a steep hill had completely changed their life.

Asriel barely left footprints at all; his light weight and wide feet meant that he would be wearing snowshoes even if he wasn't wearing boots. Every time Frisk or Victoria said that maybe this was far enough, Asriel would say to keep going, and he'd gladly carried Victoria on the sled until he
reached the point he wanted.

Frisk looked down the hill. "Az," they whispered very faintly because DETERMINATION was now a state secret, "you know I can't just LOAD when I want to anymore?" It hadn't struck Frisk until that moment just how much freedom they'd forever given up for the sake of everyone else. Even if Chara's power was one day annihilated, they'd have a lot of rememberers asking questions if they ever decided to LOAD outside of the plan.

"You know that I trust you completely with everything?" Asriel asked.

Frisk blushed a little bit. "Yeah, that's what you said."

"Well, I want you to trust me. We'll be fine. Victoria, get off for a bit." The little witch did. "Frisk, you get on first, then I'll sit on your lap, and then Victoria up front. Don't worry, the sled won't move." It didn't, even pointed at a fairly steep angle, as the three of them got into position. "Don't scream, okay?" he told the girl. "You'll hurt my ears." He took the rope, but that was just for show; he wasn't controlling the sled with his hands. "Okay. Three... two... one..." Victoria said the last 'one' along with him, and then he released his magical hold on the sled and they gradually started to accelerate downhill.

The sled careened downhill, over snow and dirt patches and a few oof-inducing rocky bumps. A tree was directly in front of them but the sled seemed to guide itself around it of its own accord. They were going fast now, snowflakes flying into their eyes. "Lean back!" Asriel warned, and they did, looking up to see low branches pass inches from their faces. They went around and down and through, the humans' hearts racing and Asriel's covered ears flapping in the wind, and then they were on a clear patch of dirt and snow and finally on a street, the plastic sled making a light grinding sound against the fresh, snowy concrete.

They kept going, all the way down, until it looked like they were going to hit a parked car- and then the sled slowed to a halt.

"What'd I say?" Asriel asked, smugly.

Frisk nodded. "That was way scarier than anything at Disney."

"How did you make the sled do stuff?" Victoria asked, lacking the right words.

"With magic, of course," Asriel answered her, smiling wide. "Do you know how to push things?"

"No..."

"Didn't your dad say something about fire baseball? Don't make fire! It's like the thing you did to throw it."

One of Victoria's mittens flew off and she put it back on. "Not like that!" she said out loud to herself. She briefly levitated and then fell onto her butt. "I do it and fall down!" she griped. Frisk noticed a fat monster with a jester's cap peering out of his window, and the monster saw Frisk looking at him and hid back behind the blinds.

"Well, you're always going to be falling down, but you just have to keep pushing yourself back up," Asriel explained. "It's not like standing on the ground." She jumped, higher than Frisk's head, and fell towards the ground as if she were on Mars. Giggling, she laughed, jumped again- too high!- and with a small shriek she slowly fell, letting herself be caught by Frisk and Asriel. She started breathing heavily; making baby Isaac Newton cry was not easy. "I'm tired," she complained, "I
"You're tired, so you want to sled? Okay," Frisk said. Victoria plopped down on the sled, and Frisk pulled the cord to carry it and her back up the hill again, Az next to them, going the way they'd gone the first time. It was a good thing they were used to walking long distances. On their way up, they noticed Undyne and Kid going down a different section of hill, and the groups waved to each other. Frisk realized that Asmodeus had probably strongly warned the two of them to stay away from his daughter because fire.

"I wanna steer!" Victoria shouted when they got back into position, holding onto the rope. Mine!

"Okay, be careful. I'll try to help you," Asriel said.

"Don't help!" she yelled confidently, and the Dreemurr kids sighed, and Asriel decided that he could just take over if it came down to it and decided to release the sled. They went straight forward, at first, but then the natural bend of the land took them directly towards a tree. Victoria grabbed the cord with her magic and pulled hard to the right, and Asriel tried to correct it back but they were already way too far over and the sled, sideways, poured them out. Intuitively, Asriel held on to Victoria, trying to take the impact of the fall, but by the time he could re-focus his magic she'd stuck her hands out in panic and landed on her left hand hard and at an angle. He stopped their motion, looked around- "Frisk!" he yelled, not seeing them.

"Yurf suhpudd lun-urrd murfurrur," Frisk said into the snow some twenty meters downhill. They'd managed to halt their descent by spreading out, flipping over, digging in, and grabbing what they could.

"What'd you say?" Asriel asked, knowing full well what they said.

"I said I'm fine, like you said we'd be," Frisk called back up, turning over and looking at the sled go down with no passengers. "If it wasn't out of range I'd tell you to go get the sled all by yourself." Victoria started to whimper and cry, holding her wrist to her chest, her face wrinkled up in pain and tears forming in her brown eyes, her auburn hair having spilled out of her hood and onto her face. As Asriel, ashamed, slowly led the crying girl downhill, telling her it'd be all right and that Mom could fix it and make it better, Frisk mulled over how they really, really should just SAVED before going down the hill because a few seconds couldn't matter that much. Well, there you go, Asmodeus. You try to kill us, we disappoint you later.

Victoria was screaming at the top of her voice (Asriel accepted it as appropriate punishment for being dumb) by the time Asriel opened the door. Toriel was already standing at the entrance, arms folded, looking at Frisk and Asriel sternly.

"I'm sorry, Mom," Asriel explained, as he and Frisk hung up their snow-covered clothes and took off their boots in the foyer. "I shouldn't have let her steer."

"And I shouldn't have let this happen either," Frisk said, not needing to explain.

"Let us see the harm. This way, child," she said, motioning the sobbing Victoria towards a large chair, headless of the girl's boots tracking muddy snow inside. She sat down, lifted Victoria up and coaxed her to hold out the injured wrist, gently pulling off her mittens. A few touches revealed what she'd suspected: "It is just a sprain, little one." She ran her hands over it, nodding, and Victoria's sobs subsided to giggles as she wiggled her hand around. Toriel sighed; she'd gotten melting snow all over her robe, but that, too, would pass.

"Come in, Asmodeus," Toriel called as she did before. "Your daughter is fine."
"She didn't sound fine," he said, carrying in the sled- it'd come right down his street- and accusatorily gesturing with it. "What happened?"

"I hit my hand, and she made it better!" she squealed, running towards her father to hug him, dripping snow all over the carpet.

"I've been on this earth way too long to believe in things like healing energy," Asmodeus said skeptically, leaning the sled against the wall. At least when someone isn't completely screwing with a pocket universe, Frisk thought, but didn't look at Asriel. "What'd you do, just dull the pain with something?"

"I sealed together the small tears in her tendon, then I drained the inflammation back into her blood," Toriel explained. "The pain went away on its own."

"That's incredible," Asmodeus muttered, equally shocked that she could do it and that she knew what those things were. He took his daughter's wrists in his hands, using careful prodding and his comparatively limited magic sense to try to detect any differences between them and finding none. "Do you know what you could accomplish with this?"

"Not by my lonesome," Toriel replied with a sad smile. If people started talking about her as a healer she'd have far too many patients far too quickly and things would get very bad very fast, and she simply didn't have the stamina for too many major injuries in one day. "Do you think you could learn?"

"No," he replied. "I can't see small enough." There were no microscopes for magic, and Asmodeus doubted there ever could be.

"And that is the pity," she said. "No one else can."

"Mom... I might be able to," Asriel said, drawing glances. "I don't know. I've seen Frisk. I don't know how small I have to see, though." He turned to Frisk. "You've got all that water, err, blood going around in this big maze, and your bones, and then your muscles, and the muscles on your insides, and your heart, but there's so much springy stuff and stretchy stuff and soft stuff, and then there's your brain and I am not going to mess with that, your SOUL's in there. There's all these teensy-tiny little things that move around in your blood, and so much of you is other little things that don't move around... I can't figure it out."

Asmodeus stared at Asriel in much the same way that Trump's people had stared at Frisk. "You can see individual cells... Asriel, I strongly advise you to consider a career in medicine, and Toriel, I strongly urge you to give it to him."

"Errr... that's... kinda up to Frisk," Asriel said, rolling back his sleeves, mittens dangling and bracelets exposed.

"Az, what's my opinion on saving people?" Frisk asked rhetorically, and Asriel closed his eyes and smiled in embarrassment. "Of course you can, Az, but... you're still just one person. It's the same problem with just Mom. You'd have the whole world asking for you, and the world's too big. Maybe if you went around invisible into hospitals and nobody knew it was you."

"You can turn invisible?" Victoria asked happily. "Dad, how do I turn invisible?"

Asmodeus sighed. "Later, sweetie. Thanks a lot, Frisk," he said, his daughter not picking up on the sarcasm. He leaned at Frisk's ear to whisper. "Just don't tell her how to-" But Victoria's ear was right there, too, and in alarm Asmodeus took a step back, looking at his little girl hovering a couple
feet above the ground. "You taught her how to fly." He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Should not. Have left her. Alone!" he quietly said to himself.

"Would it have been better if she had discovered it on her own?" Toriel asked, and Asmodeus looked up at her sharply. "Suppose she were to learn it while you thought her asleep. Suppose she were to open a window, believing herself to be Patricia Pan, and then, exhausted, plummet to earth?"

"This is why we sleep in the same room," Asmodeus said. "I was going to teach her when she was older."

"That's not what your original plan was!" Frisk snapped, and Asmodeus bit his lip to keep from saying something profane in front of his daughter.

"Asmodeus," Toriel said patiently, "you cannot parent your child as a flying machine. I have seen the terrible results of those who try. Adults woefully underequipped to deal with the world, as they have never learned responsibility as children. Fearing a small chance of permanent harm, their parents guaranteed it."

It took Asmodeus a moment to get it. "You mean helicopter parenting?"

"Yes, that is the idiom. You must allow her to learn independence. The dangers are minimal. In case you have not noticed, this town is heavily protected from foes." And, they all knew, any normal human 'foe' who attempted to kidnap Victoria would be in for an exceptionally lousy afternoon.

"Most kids can't set things on fire," Asmodeus pointed out, gesturing. "It was hard enough taking care of her when her mother left, before we got these powers."

"For a mother to abandon her child is a foul and cruel thing," Toriel said, remembering the times she had done exactly that. "But it does not change the way children learn." She kneeled down, and even hunched over her head was still well above Victoria's. "Dear child, when you first learned fire, did it hurt?"

"Uh huh. Now it doesn't."

"And when you... Asriel, what exactly did she do?"

"She pulled way too hard," Asriel replied. "That rope was hooked onto the tip, and when you take the tip of something, and you yank it over like that, this stuff's going to happen," he explained to the girl, using his hands to illustrate.

"Then you need to practice pulling more gently," Toriel said, smiling. "Ideally, somewhere a bit less steep?" This was with a raised eyebrow at Asriel, who nodded.

"I'm still not sure why I should be taking parenting advice from someone who isn't human," Asmodeus said, frowning.

"She was wished into existence to be a mom," Frisk told him. "And she's been one for a very long time. I think she knows what she's talking about."

"Asmodeus, please accept this as the way of things," Toriel said. "Moreover, you cannot parent your child in a way that causes her to one day rebel against you. Her powers are your own, except for size; what would happen if she one day did? That is the nature of children; they grow up, even
though they are still your children. And my children are already far stronger than I am. All of
them." A tear came to her eye.

"Mom, you can't blame yourself for Chara," Asriel said. "They were never complete. You couldn't
have taught them compassion. They couldn't have learned."

"Why is Chara 'they'?" Victoria piped up. "Is Chara many people?"

Asriel looked extremely embarrassed and unwilling to talk, and Frisk saved him. "Chara is a bunch
of people now. They're like..." Asmodeus was outright scowling at Frisk, who could read his
expression: I don't care what your powers are, if you say anything that's going to keep my daughter
up at night I will fry you. "There's a whole bunch of them, and they're bad, but they can't come
here, that's what all the people outside are for."

"Oh. Will I have to fight them?"

"I hope this is all over by the time you're old enough," Frisk said before anyone else reacted.
Except I'm not 'old enough', and I'm probably going to have a whole sub-department of government
just for me. They looked at Asmodeus, whose dour face reminded them of the first time they'd saw
him. "You know Mom's right."

He sighed. "Right or wrong, I'm going to have to trust her." He looked between the Dreemurrs.
"Given what my daughter can do, yours is the only other family that could possibly take care of
her." He kneeled down to look at his daughter. "Sweetie, it's not going to be tonight, maybe not
tomorrow night, but very soon your dad is going to have to go all over the country, all over the
whole world, to do magic." Victoria started to cry once she figured out what he meant, and he took
her into his arms.

"I'm sorry, you can't come with me. I'll be back home for Christmas and your birthday, I'll make
sure of it. And I'll call every single day. I'm not leaving you. I'm not giving up on you." He looked
up at Toriel. "I'm sorry, I would have loved to stay at your school to teach magic. But I have other
responsibilities." He chuckled a bit. "And as much as I'd like to teach my daughter how to steer a
sled while someone else scanned my books- should have done this years ago- these pages are even
more delicate than she is. By the way, invisibility's a verbal spell. Three wrong syllables and you'll
tell the universe to put you out of it. If you can even cast those. I'll give you a thumb drive when
I'm done. By the way, Toriel, I'd like to have a chat with your husband when he comes home. The
threat of global apocalypse didn't leave much time for reconciliation."

"Certainly. We'll have a formal dinner tonight," she said, and he bowed with a magician's flourish
and left.

"Daddy..." Victoria started.

"It's okay," Frisk said, putting their snow gear back on with their brother. "He's not going on his
long trip just yet. He'll be back in a few hours. Come on. Let's go practice in the backyard, and then
maybe we can go down some of the big hill again." They did, Frisk pushing the sled while Asriel
showed Victoria how to use magic (which involved quite a few practical lessons involving ordinary
physics), and after a short break to make snow angels (Asriel's ears made it very easy to tell whose
was whose), they went back up to the top of the hill.

"Okay, this time, don't pull at the tip, don't pull hard, and let me help you."

"Okay," Victoria agreed, being nearly out of excess sugar, and although their descent was full of
jerky motions and a few seemingly close calls, they made it to the bottom in one piece. Asmodeus
had finished by then, and when he saw the Dreemurrs and his daughter get ready for another try, he warmly greeted them and led his daughter back inside.

The Dreemurrs slowly went back up, but they were getting tired too, and instead of just going down for another run they laid down in a somewhat comfortable spot, leaning their feet against a pair of trees and hanging on to the sled by its cord.

Asriel leaned close to Frisk, laying his covered ears on both their faces to keep them a bit warmer and causing Frisk to giggle. "Every new experience, every single time," he said, "and I want to do something super embarrassing."

"There's nobody else here, at all," Frisk pointed out, talking through Asriel's ear. "If you really want to, you can, you know I won't tell anyone."

Asriel turned over, and the expression on his face was very similar to the first time Frisk had first seen him, and tears dripped from his eyes onto Frisk's chest to freeze. "Thank you, Frisk. Thank you and thank you and thank you. Thank you for letting me sled, thank you for letting me go to Disney World, thank you for letting me walk on a playground with my own two feet, thank you for lending me so much of your power. I owe you more than I'll ever repay, and now the whole universe does too. You don't deserve to become just a SOUL. You deserve to live forever, and I don't care if humans don't. Maybe you're not a god. But you should be. And here I am, doing stupid stuff like letting a four year old get herself hurt..."

"Azzy... I screwed that up too. And you saved me from Asmodeus, remember? If he didn't have the bracelets he would have figured something else out. And you did all that stuff with my not-parents. And if you weren't here Mom would never have come back to Dad. And if you weren't here I would have done all that stuff with everyone else, but they're not you, they're not my brother. But... it's not what people do and don't deserve, I mean, nobody who doesn't hurt others really deserves to die, and not even a lot of them. It's about what you can do to help people, because that's what everyone's supposed to do. But, if you give the wrong people the wrong kind of help, then you make things worse, especially if they can't or just don't want to feel compassion in return... it's just, what's best for everyone in the end. You, me, everybody."

"This stuff is what makes you you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I tried to do this before, but it didn't really work, but then I went down there, and now I have real powers so I kind of have to, it's just... right. So, Az, I guess... I messed this all up, this is coming out wrong... don't worry about thanking me. Worry about what you can do to get other people to thank you."

"You think I should take his advice, start doing medicine?"

"It's still your life. I didn't save it to take it away from you. But if you do, maybe you can make me live longer? Or save me from a lot of bad LOADs. My grandpa died, not-mom's side, way before I met you. A piece of something just got out of his artery and went to his heart and he died. I saw him, like three times, and he was the only one in that whole festering family who didn't care what I was, and grandma was already just... a vegetable..." That's what their not-father had called her.

"Hey!" Asriel reminded them. "No past, remember?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just saying you could stop that from happening to me or a lot of other people. Even though you're still just one person. And maybe you can... actually, maybe you and Mom can, right now..." Frisk's voice choked up.
"Hey, like you said, we're completely alone. I won't tell."

Frisk bit the bullet. "I'm sick of being a 'they'," they said. "I mean, I can rewind time for the whole universe and I'm still messed up down there. I could get a doctor, I guess, but they'd do anaesthesia sleep and I think I'd wind up automatically LOADING because my SOUL would be out of my body. And I don't want to be one of those weirdos with the strange gender stuff who are probably all going 'Ooh, Frisk is one of us!' I'm not, at least I don't want to be. Who would? I think they need to be saved too but I don't even know how to start. Anyway, yeah, Az. When you get the chance, after I SAVE tomorrow... it can't be complete all the way, but... see if you and Mom can turn me into a girl."

"Okay, sis," Asriel said as if they already were.

"See, Az? I've got the whole universe to worry about, and I still worry about stupid stuff like that. What does it matter? What kind of god does that? Hey, you really don't know how big everything is, do you?"

"I really don't. You said something about billions of light-years, but what does that mean?"

"Okay, look up, the stars are coming out." Frisk held on to Asriel to stop him from slipping as he turned over. "Every single one of those is a sun, like our sun. Nobody knows if anything or anyone is alive out there, but it's all so big that there probably is. These are just the ones we can see. There's billions of stars out there."

"Wow. This whole time, I thought stars looked like this," Asriel said, pointing to his overcoat. The bright green patches had revealed themselves as glow-in-the-dark five-pointed stars. Frisk looked down at their own coat and saw a matching pattern of hearts. Mommm! At least it wasn't flowers.

They looked at each other and couldn't help but laugh.

"This universe is great," Frisk said, still smiling. "I wish it didn't have that breach Asmodeus was talking about."

"It wouldn't, if those wizards wouldn't have screwed things up," Asriel replied.

"See what I mean? One screwup, one failure to save someone, and that's the end of everything. And that's for people who aren't... completely lacking compassion and want to do it."

"You can say evil," Asriel said, watching the stars appear. There was much less ambient light here than at the penthouse and many more visible stars. "Chara's evil. We always knew they were. So, if there are monsters out there on all those worlds... and someone's killing them... then Chara can probably..."

"I didn't even think of that," Frisk said, the enormity of it hitting them. "But they still need me to end everything." They started shivering, and not from cold. "Now I'm afraid. Of myself. I guess this is what everybody else who really knows me feels."

"Except me," Asriel reminded them. "And, Frisk, there's the other side. The universe is huge, and if it's gone nobody can experience it, but if you hadn't saved me I wouldn't be here experiencing it either. I'm pretty sure that's what death for humans is like, unless a monster takes their SOUL. You're just stuck, forever, or you don't exist here anymore, and that's another stuck. You're not here, anyway. You can't experience sled rides. So, yeah, Frisk, I will do that medicine stuff, because people need to be able to go sledding. Especially kids."

"Now you're starting to think like me. Or at least me when I'm not mad, or distracted, or worried
about stupid stuff, or focused on something stupid..." Asriel chuckled and put his ears over both their faces again, and they stayed like that for quite some time.

"Dad's coming home. And Mom's calling us for dinner," Asriel eventually said. Frisk realized how easy it was to stay within earshot of your parents when your ears were as good as his. "C'mon. We don't have Victoria this time. Trust me. Let's take the fast way down."

"It's too dark for that!" Frisk protested.

"And I say, it's not," Asriel replied, and a powerful, wide beam of light emanated from his hand. "Come on, Frisk, this is one of the first things monsters had to do after we all got shoved down there!" They set up the sled and were away in moments, and Frisk could have sworn Asriel was using his magic to push downward as he expertly navigated around trees to arrive squarely at the Dreemurr family home.

"Hi, kids," Asgore's booming voice greeted them. He sounded relieved and happy to be home after a trying day.

"Go and get changed into something nice," Toriel instructed them as they came in and smelled the pork dinner she had cooking. "Remember, we'll have company."

"Yes, Mom," the kids said at the same time, and chuckled a bit at that. Leaving their snow outfits in the foyer, they went upstairs and peeled off their long johns, and Frisk helped their brother with a button-down shirt and slacks before choosing a bright yellow calf-length dress, white knee socks, very comfortable black strap shoes, and- Mom really thought of everything- a white scrunchie for their hair.

"You're a very pretty girl," Asriel said as Frisk twirled in front of the tall mirror. "But, if we have to sleep next to each other, and you're a girl and I'm a boy..."

"We're not even in the same kingdom of life forms! And it's us. Nobody's going to mess with us because something looks weird, not even Mom. There's certain things you can abuse when people think you're God, and that's one of them."

"What are the others?" Asriel asked, clearly interested.

"I don't know, I'll think of them when they come up," Frisk answered as they walked downstairs, and Asriel laughed. Asgore was sitting at his place at the head of the table, Toriel's chair to his left. Asriel took the other place by his father's side and Frisk, of course, went next to him. "Hi, Dad. How was the UN?"

"Don't get him started!" Toriel warned, smiling.

"Useless gaggle of human roaches, fit only for the coal mines," Asgore grumbled. "Ceaseless whining, endless repetition, priorities backwards, constant demands for signs of obedience to them while offering nothing in return, at least Trump wears his ego on his sleeve. All of them thinking that I owe them explanations or some other such thing, asking me why I didn't see this coming- how could I have? And every time I would say something, they would answer with something that has no meaning to me." He almost said something worse, but not to his children at the family dinner table. "Many of them sounded as if their leadership had no control over their own countries. I almost told the lot of them that my children are more effective leaders than they are. And it'd be true."

"You don't mean all that," Toriel said.
"I suppose not all of it," Asgore said, "but there is little hope for humanity, if their diplomats are undiplomatic and their cooperation society is at each other's throats over idiotic taboos. They say they want to help people, but at the end of the day, who have they helped? I am told that there are many there who do useful work; if so, why didn't I meet them, rather than the people I did?"

"Maybe they were too busy doing useful work?" Frisk suggested.

"If so, then that was a fantastic waste of my time." He shook his large head. "The future of humans and monsters is still you, Frisk."

"Dad!" Asriel objected. "They've already got enough responsibility!"

"It is more than a responsibility; it is a fact." He lifted his great head. "Our guests have arrived."

The four came in together: Undyne wearing a somewhat formal uniform, Kid in a slightly different version of his striped shirt, Asmodeus in his robe and Victoria in a yellow and blue Disney dress she'd helped alter herself.

"You're really big!" she said to Asgore loudly before greetings could begin.

"And you are a little bundle of wizardry," the king replied. "Greetings, Asmodeus."

"Greetings, Your Majesty. I still feel obligated to meet with you directly, even if diplomacy between us has been rendered moot." He took his seat at the far end of Asmodeus, and his daughter floated into the seat at his left just because she could. Undyne grinned.

"That's a shame," Asgore rumbled. "You would have been the first person to conduct diplomacy with me all day." His wife sat a pig - a whole, small pig - on the table, next to the cranberry sauce, potatoes, corn, and string beans, and started extricating cutlets from it.

Asmodeus laughed. "Funny, isn't it? You and I are natural enemies, and we now lack any reason to fight. The only reason wizards ever wished to defeat monsters was out of self protection, and it's brought us to the brink of annihilation." He cut his daughter's meat into very small pieces.

"That is the nature of war," Asgore said, taking a tremendous bite and washing it down with tea. "Unusual as the circumstances may be."

"So all I have left is a promise to cast my spells only for the benefit of both our species." They couldn't be specific, not with a sensitive topic and young kids at the table. "I would say that I would teach my daughter to do the same, but... there is a favor I must ask of you." Asgore inclined his head. "It would be a bad idea to travel with my daughter, as young as she is, and the only family I trust to look after this little bundle of wizardry is yours."

"Ours alone?" Asgore asked, glancing at Kid's whirring arms. Despite being cavalier with fire, Kid was cautious around liquids, and he drank tea slowly and cut juicy meat carefully.

"You're the only ones powerful enough to deal with her in the long term," Asmodeus replied. "Even if your children and your wife have a habit of teaching her things well before she's ready to learn them."

"Then I would be pleased to foster her," Asgore said.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." He turned to Toriel. "Your cooking is excellent." And that was something on which everyone at the table could agree.
Discomfort

Asriel had been right, Frisk realized. Food becomes much better when you eat it with people you like. Even basic stuff cooked by marginally competent chefs becomes ambrosial in the right atmosphere. But this was Mom's cooking, and it was so delicious that Frisk found themselves eating as much of it as they could as quickly as they could, particularly since they had a tremendous appetite. The cranberry sauce did not come from a can; Frisk felt the texture of the shredded cranberry skins on their tongue. The potatoes were evenly sliced and extremely soft inside, coated with plenty of butter. They wouldn't have doubted if Toriel had shucked the corn herself, either. Frisk idly wondered how many calories they were consuming and realized that their daily needs could easily reach tens of thousands a day, should Asriel choose to liberally use his powers. The lunch itself might be free, but, energetically, there was no such thing as a free lunch for anything that didn't completely shatter the universe's rules. How many bites of potato equals how many seconds of flight time? Yup, we definitely have to go to school.

They were so hungry that they tried to swallow a too-large bite of pork and it wouldn't go down and it wouldn't come back up and it was blocking Frisk's breath and their panic was only matched by humiliation: Please don't tell me that after all this I'm going to have to LOAD from choking on food! Asriel, realizing the problem immediately, lashed his hand out and touched a single, soft finger to Frisk's throat, and they coughed up four small pieces, too embarrassed to talk, hoping that no one else noticed. "Small bites, chewed thoroughly," Mom reminded them. Asriel just smiled, wondering why human anatomy had such a critical flaw.

Frisk's next bite was small, and chewed thoroughly, but they almost choked anyway when Undyne said, "Yeah, Frisk, you shouldn't go hog wild like that." They groaned around their mouthful. "Pigging out's just not a good idea, unless you want your epitaph written in oink."

Asriel and Kid laughed and Frisk groaned louder, finally swallowing. "Undyne, please just stop..."

"Oh, is my hamming it up boaring you?"

"No, I just don't think they have the chops for it," Asriel added, and Undyne and Kid laughed while Asgore shook his great head and Frisk sighed. Et tu, Az? You're really putting the petal to the metal here, who are you even rooting for? I feel like I'm being pistil-whipped, and I don't have the stamen-a for it. But flower puns were way, way too harsh to ever say out loud, particularly at the family dinner table. Asmodeus glanced at Frisk with a small, conspiratorial smile. He knows I thought of something I won't say. Sitting at the table with an inseparable, mischievous brother who could hear everything they did, a supremely powerful magician who could read expressions, Undyne, Mom and Dad, and two young kids, one of who would never grow up and the other who could wish fireballs into existence, suddenly felt stifling, maddening, and the excellent taste of the food was suddenly spoiled with unpalatable memories and the sudden, blind desire just to get out of there. They say you can choose your friends but not your family, but I chose both in the most thorough way possible, Frisk reminded themself. I'm stuck with them. Especially Az. It wasn't until several more small, thoroughly chewed bites that Frisk figured it out: they were subconsciously waiting for something bad to happen, because Frisk had never once had an eight-person dinner that didn't end horribly (with Frisk being blamed in one way or another), but the things that had happened to Frisk Sholeas could not conceivably occur in the life of Frisk Dreemurr, and the dress their not-mom would have been screaming at them for had been bought, altered, and delicately hung up by their mom. All Frisk had to really worry about was simpler stuff with clear ways to react to it, such as an invasion by thousands of unstoppable berserkers possessed by the Devil.
Once dinner finished and the others bid their goodbyes, Asmodeus sent his daughter into the other room to watch TV and approached the Dreemurr family, reaching into his pocket. "Your Majesties? This is the memory spell. I need you to accept this, to make it part of you." They nodded. "One at a time." He cast it on Asgore first, then Toriel, and the two monsters did not feel anything. "Are there any other monsters you would like this to be cast on? Your royal guardslady?" Asgore frowned, and Toriel shook her head.

"She'd go nuts," Frisk said. "If half her life didn't even matter? I don't think she could take it. I was thinking that we could give Alphys more time to do her thing, but if we cast it on her and not Undyne..."

"Alphys heavily relies on her systems for her work," Asmodeus replied. "She would remember, but her systems would not, and I think in the long run she would become very confused." He turned to Frisk before they could even articulate it: "And no, there is no spell for devices. No such thing as enchanted items. Without a SOUL around to keep the spell going, it won't stick." That also applied to every video game Frisk would ever play, every school project they'd ever try to save to disk, everything useful they'd ever do. All that came back was memories, and Frisk briefly wondered what that was actually doing to their brain. "In general, it's a good idea to keep the number of rememberers to a minimum. The more people who change what they do, the less accurate our recollections of the future are. And with that, Your Majesties, Your Highnesses, it is time to go. Frisk, early tomorrow morning, please." Frisk nodded. "Victoria! We're going home, it's bedtime." He carried his daughter out.

"After you bathe, for you as well," Toriel said. The bubbles were relaxing as always, and the pajamas were cozy, and Frisk set their phone's alarm to 6:30 to give Asmodeus what he wanted, and they cuddled their brother to sleep.

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP

Frisk groaned, and wondered when their not-mom would start yelling at them to get ready for school before they awoke completely. Frisk didn't feel particularly determined in the early morning- what they really felt was the desire to just fall right back asleep- but they had a job to do, and they would be damned if they were going to screw it up, and Asriel would wonder what was wrong with them, and that filled them with DETERMINATION. They ran Checkup (with silent apologies for waking everyone up) and SAVEd. "Okay, Az, as of right now, other than what we remember, what we do officially does not matter."

They were expecting him to say something along the lines of 'Awesome, let's go back to sleep', but instead he said, "Dad's up. I wanna go talk to him." Their bracelets were still charging, and Asriel led his bleary-eyed sibling downstairs. "Hey, Dad? You have to do more diplomacy today?"

"Hopefully," his father replied, sitting at the table and eating an omelet. Toriel had managed to use several 'big and tall' business suits and quite a bit of magic to tailor one to fit his frame, but she hadn't prepared breakfast for kids she expected to still be asleep. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, I was going to ask, since today doesn't count, what are you going to do? Are you going to just do it the way you normally would, or are you just going to ask a bunch of questions, or try stuff that might or might not work..."

"You want to know how your father does his job?" Asgore asked, smiling, and his son nodded. As the Prince of Monsters he felt like he had to know these things. "It's all just agreements, conversations, and bargains. What I need from them is assurance that monsters will be treated fairly. What they need from me, well, sometimes they don't understand what they need from me, and sometimes they make demands without offering anything in return. And sometimes, the people..."
I'm dealing with, they don't have the authority to actually make bargains, so all I get are a lot of requests and well-wishings and kind words." He chuckled, eating his omelet with what, to him, were small bites; to everyone else they were heaping chomps. "That's what had me so angry yesterday. Diplomacy, you see, can only be conducted when both sides need something from the other side. If one side cannot make a bargain, or doesn't have anything to offer, or simply doesn't want anything that the other side has, no diplomacy is possible. Worse, they may decide that diplomatic means are unnecessary, that they have no need to bargain when they can simply take. Which is why I must always be seen as bargaining from a position of strength."

"It's probably better now that they know they can't kill monsters without getting possessed, right?" Asriel asked, realizing that Chara had inadvertently been a tremendous help to monsterkind.

"You would be surprised what humans and their weapons can do," Asgore said, his brow furrowing. "If no one is present, no EXP is gained, and humans have devised a lot of ways to kill without being present." His expression brightened a bit. "Fortunately, most of them have qualms about using explosions in their own countries." His smile grew. "And some of them have even attempted to put monsters in physical prisons." His whole family laughed, Frisk included. An imprisoned monster would burrow through the wall, whatever it was made out of, in relatively short order. The concept had been so foreign that Papyrus could be forgiven for not knowing how bars worked. "At any rate, it's made them somewhat afraid of us, which can be both good and bad," he said, turning to Frisk. "As for re-experiencing events, knowing what the other person will say, I fear, is of only middling value. This is a game of chess, not tennis or guessing." He smiled. "I must be off. Can't keep anyone waiting for things that won't happen." He gave his wife a kiss before leaving.

"Okay, we can go back to sleep now," Asriel said, and he and his sibling went back upstairs to do just that. Frisk had almost said something but took the chance not to say it and easily fell asleep again.

Frisk woke up to something soft tickling their face. They grabbed at it, and Asriel bleated in surprise. "Oh, that's your ear!" Frisk shouted, sitting up.

"Sorry, your breath just felt nice on it." Chuckling, Frisk exhaled a long phoooooo onto that ear, and Asriel laughed.

"Well, can't procrastinate forever," Frisk said, getting out of bed and snapping their bracelets on with their brother. What they were about to do filled with with some dread and some small-d determination. "C'mon, Az, let's do our morning stuff." The amount of stinky gunk between Frisk's teeth took longer than usual to extricate, and they were thorough about evacuating themself. Asriel's winter coat had grown back in, and he shed only slightly as Frisk thoroughly brushed his fur. As the siblings walked downstairs (each stair a small drop) to the smell of well-cooked eggs, Frisk took a deep breath, looked at their smiling mother, and hesitated.

"Mom? I..." Their determination fell away, replaced by trepidation. "I'd rather have her attack me with fireballs for a whole hour than have to say this. I'd rather have every single monster I've ever met try to give me a bad time all at once, Azzy included. Frisk audibly choked up, and tears came to their eyes, and Toriel's countenance grew increasingly concerned. After everything I've gone through, with everything I can do, with someone out there who can use me to put an end to the entire universe, why the hell am I so scared? "Mom, I want you and Az to change me into a girl completely," Frisk sputtered out in one quick breath.

"Come here," Toriel instructed, and Frisk ran into her waiting arms, tears dripping into her robe. I can revert reality and some people think I'm a god, why am I crying over something this stupid?
The tears kept coming anyway. "The answer is no, Frisk. I will not do it, and as of now you are not permitted to do it either, Asriel."

Frisk looked up, feeling shocked and a little betrayed. "Mom, I'm just asking you to fix what's messed up! And if it doesn't work out it won't have happened!"

"It will or will not have happened today, but what of the day after, and after that? I know you do not like to be the way you are, and I know it is unnatural for humans, but I will not start removing pieces, any pieces, from my daughter. Messed up or not. If the thing must be done, it shall be done when you are older, and more certain, and have a wise doctor to guide you. Then, and only then, may you ask our assistance. Before then, it is not necessary."

"But, Mom... what about when I'm wearing a bathing suit?" No one had been stupid enough to mess with Frisk at Disney World or at the hotel, but that hadn't stopped it from being weird.

"You did not thoroughly examine your wardrobe," Toriel said, smiling. "I will never give you anything that places your private areas on display. I know that it is lost to your culture, but young ladies, particularly young princesses, must practice modesty. Young princes as well," she said, turning to Asriel.

Frisk just sighed, in a bit of capitulation and a bit of relief; having monsters perform experimental surgeries without a doctor present was, after all, a bad idea. "It's all right, Mom. You can't give me what I really want anyway." Toriel did not ask what it was; she just kept on hugging. "To one day be a mom of my own," Frisk whispered, but of course both her mother and brother heard it.

"My daughter," Toriel said, "your species has developed many, many things over the past century. Abilities once thought wondrous are now taken for granted," she continued, gesturing with her cellphone. "Perhaps, one day, I will be a grandmother. Perhaps even of my own body."

"Mom, that's impossible!" Asriel blurted out. "I don't have my own SOUL!" Toriel gestured, and Asriel joined Frisk in their mother's hug.

"Just as growing new organs is also impossible," Toriel said, gently, "and this illimitable communicator that I hold is impossible, and horseless carriages are impossible, and harnessing the power of lightning is impossible, and Frisk is impossible. And we are impossible, these past few centuries. Come, my children. I have prepared breakfast." Breakfast was omelettes with bits of crisp bacon and green pepper in them, with sides of peanut butter-coated celery and carefully portioned chocolate-strawberry pie, with cups of somewhat thin but nicely warm hot chocolate to the sides.

"Mom! You're giving us vegetables on a day that isn't going to have happened?!" Asriel protested.

"What you eat for breakfast will affect you for the rest of the day," Toriel stated. "Both of you. Furthermore, I will not permit you to take up unhealthy habits."

"How does that even work?" Frisk asked, after swallowing a small bite, chewed thoroughly, of omelette. "I mean, for monsters. You turn food into fur, I know that, but Az gets a lot of his power from me, and we eat the same stuff..."

"We are not so efficient as you," Toriel answered, eating. "Magic is not always the most prudent answer."

"You have a whole digestive system that just does this stuff for you," Asriel explained. "We don't. We can't just eat food, we have to process it ourselves, and sometimes, if we expect one thing but
get something else, especially if that something else is bad... that's what Chara did to Dad." Frisk nodded silently, taking a soft bite of pie.

"I so wanted to believe they weren't awful," Toriel said. "That they had some spark of kindness or goodness that I could only set alight if I tried hard enough." Her large body was shaking with deep pain, and she sat down, grieving.

"Hey, Mom, it's all right, I wanted to believe the same thing," Asriel said, setting down his fork. "That maybe they'd just grow out of it, or decide to stop, and when they killed themself I thought it was out of genuine selflessness, but..." He suddenly gripped Frisk's left hand in both of his. "And now that I have a sibling who is selfless I just feel so stupid for tricking myself. It doesn't matter what I was, there's no excuse for getting the two of you confused." He laughed. "I mean, you don't even complain about eating vegetables."

"I don't know what your problem is, I thought goats ate anything!" Toriel suddenly laughed, snapped out of her brief despair, and Asriel's face screwed up in exaggerated offense. "Hey, Az, that was just a goat joke. If I wanted to be mean I'd say that eating vegetables would be cannibalism for you! "Besides, this is celery! It's not like Mom's feeding us Brussels sprouts or squash or cooked spinach or something like that!" She turned to her mother abruptly. "Mom, don't ever do that, by the way. I swear I'll puke." Asriel looked at his sister, confused. "If you don't know what that is I'm not going to show you! Digestive systems don't always work right." Frisk took a large bite of peanut butter-coated celery but still chewed it thoroughly, and Asriel reluctantly did the same before realizing it was good and taking another, and they both finished their meals quickly. "By the way, Mom, we might need to eat a lot of sugar sometime," Frisk said, wiping peanut butter off her face with a napkin. "Depends on what we're doing."

"And what will you do to require so much immediate energy?" Toriel asked, smiling.

"Yeah, Frisk, what do you want to do?" Asriel asked brightly.

"Well, what I want to do today is go to the mall to try on some snowboarding gear, and maybe buy a bunch of different kinds and ask a whole bunch of questions, and then for the day that actually happens we can just get the stuff we actually want and we'll already know the answers." Frisk got out of the chair, and walked slowly to the television and the couch, not noticing that Toriel had already picked up her phone and started texting people. Right square bracket, colon, hyphen, right parenthesis. "And then we could practice by ourselves today, and then for happening-day we can get an actual lesson, and maybe a couple more before school starts." Asriel's face showed that he liked the general idea, but Frisk turned away from him, plopping down on the couch. "That's what I want to do, but if we say, 'Hey Jenkins, get us a car, we're going to the mall', he'll go 'But there might be Chara or somebody there who can make you LOAD.' And he might be right, and if I do that, that might be Chara's advantage and a lot of dead people." She picked up the remote, turning on the news.

"technique in forensic analysis. And, Max, it has an absolutely negligible error rate. We know for an absolute fact that one of the two voices was from Frisk Dreemurr."

"You have got to be kidding me," Frisk said, very faintly. Asriel whistled faintly between his teeth.

"Absolutely fascinating. Thank you so much for being here with us today." "My pleasure." His pleasure to put me in an eternal spotlight. There's no coming back from this. "Coming up next, a formerly possessed man talks about his experiences, and claims that the possessing entity is none other than Asriel Dreemurr's long-lost brother."
Asriel leaned onto the couch from behind, his hands pressing into his face. "Oh, come on-" Frisk yelled.

The TV continued. "Later tonight, an interview with the Sholeas family."

"You cannot be serious." Frisk got up off the couch.

"And as for what button must remain unpressed, our senior correspondent Lense Warrp has conducted some surprising interviews with a janitorial contractor at the Pentagon, members of the House Committee of Investigations, and people on the street. Stay tuned."

"Yeah, like they're gonna know anything!" Frisk screamed, throwing the remote to the floor so hard it bounced off the soft carpet. "Like any of these people know anything about anything!"

The ads were starting to come on, and Frisk went to pick up the remote.

"This is a message from the Federal Emergency Management Agency," the TV blared, showing the message in highly contrasting red text on a white background. "If you, or someone you know, has harmed or killed a monster, is hearing voices, has expressed unusual or uncharacteristic desires, or is behaving suspiciously or erratically, do not hesitate. Call the number on your screen, or dial 911 for emergencies. We can help." More ordinary advertising followed, and morbid curiosity drove Frisk to change the channel instead of just turning it off. "that these are the end times and this doomed world will not be around much longer. The host of ungodly creatures appearing from nowhere. The fact that when they are killed, they deliver the killer's soul to their dark master. The King of the Monsters in all his satanic glory. In my new series, I explain how this was foretold in Scripture and talk about how you can get yourself and your family Rapture Ready today. For just three low monthly payments of $19.95, you can receive this vital sermon along with a free love gift, and for an annual payment of $99.95, you can receive the assassination of Kim Jong-un, who is rumored to have been possessed, may lead to the country's collapse, and President Trump has sent an emergency delegation to SUSAN, YOUR SITUATION IS NOT UNUSUAL. A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE ATTRACTED TO MONSTERS. ESPECIALLY GHOSTS, WHICH HAVE BEEN RATED 'MOST SMOOCHWORTHY' IN AN MTT" where things are, surprisingly, business as usual. Number three, Iceland. With only twenty-five confirmed possessions and fifty-three confirmed influences, this island country ranks as one of the lowest. "The same thing we do every night, Pinky!" Frisk finally clicked it off.

"Well, so much for that," Frisk said, looking down at the remote and placing the little bringer of bad news carefully on the table.

"Indeed it was," Toriel said, having checked her phone. "Go and get dressed. The mall itself does not open for an hour, but the store for snowboards opens in half an hour."

"You what?!" Frisk confusedly blurted. "We're going to walk into a public mall, just walk in, while people think my voice is the voice of God?!"

"Young deities should not allow themselves to be hidden from the world. And my young prince must be allowed to freely walk amongst his subjects, regardless of circumstances. Besides, there are some stores that I should like to revisit." Surprised and partially numb, Frisk clambered up the too-big stairs that made her feel so little, and went to the closet, taking a more careful look this time. Her mother hadn't been kidding about modesty; none of her dresses or skirts went above the knee, and all of her shorts were baggy, and in her dresser there were one-piece bathing suits that were melds of boys' swimming trunks and girls' one-piece suits. A pretty lilac dress caught her eye, but she didn't want to ruin it even temporarily if she had to do battle with some half-possessed psycho (or, worse, if Asriel wound up making a janitor's life harder), so she picked out a Dreemurr-
fur sweater and some light blue overalls with pink stripes, Asriel in a yellow and green sweatsuit. She started putting on her bright blue socks when her phone started ringing (doo, DEE, dah... doo, DEE, doh...). The caller ID just said 'Prez' and Frisk rolled her eyes.

"What do you want, Baldy?" Frisk asked the President of the United States.

"There's something you ought to watch on Fox. Keeping this secret has become a bust." Trump felt obligated to call Frisk himself for this, as the buck stopped with him.

"Keeping what.. oh no." Clutching her unworn sock in one hand and her phone in the other, Frisk started to rush downstairs until Asriel turned on the television in their room, changing the channel.

Frisk stared at the speaker in horror, and it felt like someone had pulled the drain plug on her life. "And these thoughts weren't really telling me anything," the interviewee was saying, a swarthy man in his mid-thirties with bad teeth who looked like and probably was a conventional criminal who the producers made barely presentable for TV. Then again, he was almost certainly trying to reform; demonic possession tended to change one's outlook on life. "All I knew is that Frisk needed to be there, and I needed to be there, and it was because Frisk had some kind of power relating to rewinding time. And after that voice happened, the thoughts went away."

"Well, we know that it was, in fact, partially Frisk's voice. So, do you think Frisk somehow went back in time and saved you after the robots were destroyed?"

"I really don't know."

"Thank you so much for being here today. Coming up, we've got" Asriel clicked it off. He didn't say anything, and he didn't need to, and Trump had since hung up, and Frisk and her brother stared at each other for several seconds, and Frisk fell backwards onto the bed, staring at the ceiling. She'd hoped, so desperately hoped, that even being the Princess of Monsters and Chara's target, she could keep her real power a secret and so lead a somewhat normal life. That was all gone now.

"The car's here, are you almost ready?" Toriel called up, and Frisk abruptly started laughing, finally putting her sock on. The world was going insane by inches, possessed people walked the earth, now everyone had a reason to believe that Frisk was some kind of god, and Mom was going to take her kids to the mall. Asriel and Frisk put on their roller shoes; Frisk knew that the mall cops wouldn't like it, but didn't worry because ten bucks an hour could not possibly be worth messing with her.

"Mom, if I swear, like really, seriously swear, will you get mad?" Frisk asked, her roller shoes bumpity-bumping down the soft stairs, her brother following suit.

"Such words are not for the mouths of young princesses," Toriel proclaimed. "But, given the unusual circumstances, a brief exception can be made."

Frisk unloaded a torrent of high-velocity, not entirely logical vulgarity that Flowey would have wilted at, including but not limited to extraordinarily painful events involving garden tools in reference to her own situation, deviant and incestuous sexual activities, extremely unhygienic items and activities that mainly involved scatology, farm animals, and immune disorders, and insults relating to canine parentage that were directed to no one in particular. Asriel started laughing halfway through. Frisk eventually ran out of words and hung her head in defeat.

"Do you feel better, sweet daughter?" her mother asked.

"Sort of."
"I fear you have chosen the wrong shoes," Toriel said, gesturing to the window; the ground was covered in somewhat deep snow, and more was coming down. "Perhaps you should briefly exchange them..."

"Or perhaps we can just get to the car without our shoes touching the ground," Asriel suggested, transforming and picking up his sister long enough to carry her into the car, his shoes returning to visibility as his transformed feet faded back into him. Jenkins was long, long past reacting to anything they did; he simply affirmed that Toriel would like to go to the same mall as before and began to drive once she got in, making no mention of anything that might be dangerous about the idea.

"Hey, Jenkins, you feeling all right?" Frisk asked, suddenly suspicious. "Shouldn't you be telling us that this is stupid?"

"I'm fine, Frisk. The President has recently given me very specific orders in dealing with your family. Don't contradict you, don't make anything difficult for you, and above all, don't annoy you." The Donald had actually used more colorful language. "Would you like to shop in a full mall or an empty one?"

The monsters didn't understand; Frisk did, and was horrified. "Jesus Christ! We can't tell you to just clear out a whole mall because we feel like going shopping! It's a couple weeks before Christmas! You can't cancel Christmas shopping for me!"

"You're going to cancel this entire day," Jenkins pointed out, and the goats heard his voice wavering behind his professionalism. "Unless you get killed, which might not be that bad here as it shows us who did the killing, we're just living in a full day that doesn't count. You decide that everything everyone else is doing doesn't happen, and then it doesn't, and I'm one of the few people who will remember it." Frisk wasn't surprised that Jenkins already had it cast on him. "So, you decide what happens." Sans' words came echoing back to Frisk: *Now you know how most of us felt.* The only one who couldn't know what it was like living in a timeline controlled by someone else was Frisk herself.

"We're just going to pretend everything's normal," she replied. "If that word even means anything anymore." The car stopped at Asmodeus' house, and Frisk figured it out before he came out carrying his daughter in a booster seat.

"Frisk, Asriel, this is yours," he said, reaching into his pocket for a thumb drive as they helped him attach the booster to the seatbelt. "I'll give 'another one' to you again 'tomorrow'," he said, doing finger quotes with a briefly free hand after he handed them digitized instructions on how to hack reality.

"It's not even a secret anymore," Frisk said, shaking her head, and Asmodeus just nodded, having gotten a similar call. "I'm surprised you're okay with this. What if somebody does something stupid?"

"Just as dangerous here as it is there, maybe more so, because all that's protecting this place is physical force," Asmodeus explained. "Although you probably shouldn't go to the same place 'tomorrow'," he said, doing the finger quotes with both hands this time.

"What's not a secret?" Victoria asked, and her father rolled his eyes: *see why you still have to be careful?*

"Victoria, I can return everything to the exact same way it was this morning. But if you say or do something bad because you know that I can do that, I won't have told you about it." The little girl
Asmodeus chuckled. "That's actually the same approach I'm using. I'm going to interview about a hundred people today, and if I don't like their answers or I don't like their backgrounds, I won't have invited them to the interview. Bet a lot of hiring managers would want to do that." They drove to the airstrip, which had a lot of partially built hangars, Frisk noticing the workmen installing their doors even through the snowfall and three jets already sitting in them. *Sweet love of monkeys, do they keep these gassed up and ready to go just for us?* No, there was no way, was there? Jenkins parked the car directly at the plane's entrance. "This is where I get off. Victoria, I'll be back tonight, you be good, okay? And don't eat too much sugar!" He almost said something like 'we don't want a repeat of yesterday' but realized that she enjoyed yesterday.

The trip to the mall was comparatively brief despite Jenkins' careful driving, and Frisk didn't miss that Asriel still looked out windows, seeing everything he possibly could, the same way Victoria did. Jenkins arrived slightly early, and other people were already there, waiting for the store to open. "Here we go," Frisk said, sighing, expecting pandemonium as soon as even this small group saw her. Fortunately, there were three Aarons in the group (to be expected; it was a sporting goods store), one lady with a stroller and a Gyftrot next to her, and a handful of other human patrons, talking to each other and smiling. A large monster stood on the other side of the door wearing a specialized not-quite-T-shirt over the face in the center of its body, its small head looking back and forth as it waited for opening time. *Ah, right, that's the one that gets tired.* This one seemed quite alert, however, and it was the first to notice as Frisk stepped out of the car. Her father's words came back to her: *them being afraid of us can be both good and bad.* She exhaled another long phooooo again, this time not pointed at her brother's ears.

*Humans and monsters have learned to deal with each other,* Frisk thought, *but can they possibly deal with me?*
"Hey, Frisk! Hey, Asriel!" Four words. Four words, spoken by one of the three winking Aarons, was all it took for Frisk's fear to evaporate and be replaced by kind familiarity. The curious look from the woman with the baby and the Gyftrot, and the downright shocked look from one of the other patrons, a balding man in his mid-fifties and with glasses, didn't matter. "Queen Toriel! And... who's this little cutie?"

"Victoria!" she piped up, running towards the Aarons, curious what they were.

"Heya, guys," Frisk said, waving, feeling her hand in the cold air as her brother did the same. She almost asked them about snowboarding but realized that, with their long tails in place of legs, they'd probably be the wrong people to ask. Someone, human or monster, had made large nylon-and-rubber winter coverings for the tails, and they made an odd sound as the three of them slithered towards the Dreemurrs, Victoria by their side. They were also openly carrying pistols, Frisk noticed with a start; in a state as deeply red as West Virginia, it had been no problem for them to find a gun show even before the state laws were altered for monsters.

Gun shows were, of course, something Aarons were very familiar with. "Ready for another flexing contest?" another one of them asked, his long face in a grin, winking. They always winked when they talked, and Frisk wondered what quirk of monsterdom made them do that.

"Are you sure you want to?" Frisk asked, laughing. "Remember what happened the last time we did that?"

"Why, what happened?" Asriel asked.

"Go on, try it," Frisk suggested, pulling the ends of her sweater over her cold hands. "Just, uh, make sure nobody's standing behind them." The balding man quickly moved out of the way, taking his friends with him, and Victoria ran to Toriel.

Asriel flexed. The three Aarons flexed twice as hard. Asriel flexed very hard. The three Aarons flexed thrice as hard, their not-quite-muscles straining, their tails coiling. **ASRIEL DREEMURR** flexed. All three Aarons flexed as hard as they could, and then the pent-up energy in their coiled tails sprung loose with an audible TWANG, flinging them backwards into the air as Asriel laughed uproariously and his mother gasped. One bounced off the side of the mall, one was catapulted fifty feet away down the sidewalk, and one of them landed on a car hard enough to trigger its alarm. Victoria shrieked in surprise.

"My car!" one of the balding man's friends, a slightly younger man in a blue snowsuit, shouted, running to inspect the damage. "Are you all right?" he asked as an afterthought.

"Fine, bro," the Aaron replied, still winking. There wasn't any damage to monster or car; the Aaron lacked human density and had hit the hood and windshield like a foam mattress.

"Wow. Did not expect that," the balding man said. "Hey, ah.. Princess Frisk? I don't mean to bother you, but is all that stuff, you know, that was on the news..."

"It's all true," Frisk snapped, knowing that he would never remember this conversation and wanting to see what people did. "Everything you heard on the news is true. I really do have some control over time, Chara really was Az's sibling, and half of That Voice really was my voice. But I never **said** those words and I have absolutely no clue what did." He looked like he was going to say...
something, then realized that even the risk of annoying someone with Frisk's kind of power was an incredibly poor life choice and kept his mouth shut, and so did everyone else. Except, of course, the three Aarons, who were laughing as they returned, saying what a great flexing contest that was. Frisk decided that she still preferred the company of monsters to most humans.

"Something for your hands, my daughter," Toriel said, ignoring the humans' stares and pulling out a pair of Dreemurr-fur gloves in Frisk's size. She'd noticed her daughter walk out the door without them. "Should I have brought something for your face?"

"That's okay, Mom," the princess of time said, letting her mother help put her gloves on in front of everybody.

"I should not have left without something for your ears," she said, covering them with her magically warm hands and towering protectively over her daughter, as if to guard her against the humans looking her way and prevent her from hearing things said against her, despite how ridiculous that was. "Either of you." Victoria had her hood up.

"We're just out here for a little bit," Asriel said. "See? He's opening up now." It still wasn't opening time, but the Knight Knight had been given a heads-up from his manager that letting the royal family stand out in the cold was not something he really wanted to be doing. Frisk got in the door first, everyone else having embarrassingly got out of her way, holding the door for her brother and mother. "Woooaah." Asriel had reacted in a similar way at the aquarium, but instead of staring at the different kinds of fish, he stared at the different kinds of stuff, branded clothing most prominent. Frisk belatedly realized that this was his first time in a mall. *Another Azzy's First Experience*. "Hey, Frisk, the capital has a football team, right?"

"Yeah," Frisk answered, not understanding why he was asking.

"So, uh, if Pittsburgh is north of here, and Washington's to the east, where's all that team's stuff?" The balding man and his couple of friends turned to stare at him even harder than they'd stared at Frisk, the manager who was coming out to greet them staring just as hard, and Frisk laughed abruptly; messing with the fabric of reality was one thing, but you don't mess with football!

Unbidden, a vision came to her mind, of Asriel's god form with its accented shoulders wearing shoulder pads, and its demonic visage covered by a football helmet, and Frisk laughed again. "What?"

"Az," Frisk said gently, "I don't think I could ever explain all the different social regions, what fans live where, but this is Steeler country."

"Oh. Is there a map?"

Frisk chuckled, thinking. "I bet there probably is, a map of what areas buy what gear, and the CEO of this place probably has it." The manager who was originally going to greet them abruptly decided that he had other things he needed to do, and Frisk wasn't sure what scared him off. Then again, quite a lot of things could have done that, such as the eight-foot-tall goat monster following them around and their bodyguard, who was standing a few paces away, looking nonchalant and being anything but.

"So how does this work, anyway?" Asriel asked. "I mean, like the way you get stuff. How do humans bring all your stuff to one place like this?"

Frisk's not-dad, despite being a jerk, had taught her many informative things over the years. "I don't know, exactly, but people make it in China and other countries for cheap, then they put a logo on it to make it expensive," Asriel, having sat through more than his fair share of MTT as a flower,
understood perfectly. "then it comes here on a boat with a lot of other stuff, and then they unpack the boat and drive everything all across the country on trucks, and then somebody puts it up here." The balding man laughed and looked like he was going to say something, but one of his friends led him away.

"Everything in this building is like that?" Asriel asked, looking around, his and his sister's roller shoes bumping on the roughened tile, Victoria staring at them.

"Everything in this world is like that. Except for people who live where they make it. How do you think we can buy chocolate in a store?"

"It was not always thus," Toriel explained. "When this was still a colony, humans made what they could, had it brought to them by traders, or did without. Sometimes," she continued, looking around at the plentitude, "I fear your species, having lived for so long doing without, does not truly know how to do with. And sometimes, I fear it may extend to you as well."

"Having more money, fame, and supernatural power than we know what to do with is really an okay problem to have, Mom," Frisk said, as Asriel examined the rows of bicycles, running his fingers over their tires, trying to ascertain the differences between the thick-rimmed mountain bikes and the thinner road bikes. He called Frisk over, excitedly, pointing out the one he wanted: a tandem bicycle with an extraordinarily complicated dual-gear system.

"We are totally getting this," he gushed.

"It's too big!" Frisk pointed out. "Even if you lowered the seat all the way, you couldn't reach the handlebars!" Of course he could, and demonstrated it. "Without doing that, obviously!" She lowered her voice. "Az, you know I can just carry you. Or you could get your own, we wouldn't get that far apart." She waved an arm towards a row of bikes that could actually fit each of them.

"Yeah, I know. I just thought that you could teach me how to ride it." Asriel did not understand, even in the slightest, how something with only two wheels and no magic could possibly stay up all by itself.

"Teach you?! Why would you think I know how?" Her voice grew very, very quiet. "What makes you think those two ever got me a bike? I've never even sat on one. Or ridden a snowboard. I can't even remember if I sat on a sled last winter. Outside of gym class I don't know when the last time I kicked a ball was." But talking about this stuff was stupid. "Come on, we can look around all day, but we can't really use bikes until the weather's warmer, not unless we get a ride somewhere first."

Inside the Mt. Ebbot military cordon was a microcosm of a small town, but outside was a lot of cars-only road with no sidewalks, which Frisk figured was a good way to earn a couple of LOADs.

"Then that's what we do," Asriel suggested, checking out a bright green kids' bike in his size. "Mom's right, you don't know how to do with." Frisk chided herself. Of course she had people who would instantly take her anywhere she wanted; she could come home from school on Friday and go bicycling in a city in Texas on Saturday morning, doing her homework and sleeping on the plane. It was so easy to forget that she could do that, mentally going back to being half-invisible Frisk who never made trouble for anybody because doing otherwise was dangerous. Frisk took all of those feelings, all the pointless fear and helplessness, all the dithering anxiety and crippling uncertainty, all the worries about how much things cost and if she was asking too much, and wrapped them up in a box marked From: Frisk Dreemurr, Princess of Time - To: The Void, and mailed them express.

"Can I help you with something?" the Knight Knight asked through both of its mouths. The
"Yeah, I want to try this out," Asriel said, pointing to the bike he'd picked out, and the large monster unhooked it from its mounting. He sat on the bike, and it was a good fit, and the monster knew why the bike, without its kickstand deployed, was standing still. Fiddling with the gears, Asriel began to slowly pedal down the hall, then very slowly turned around and pedaled back.

"Weiiird... it's like it wants to stay upright when it's moving. Hey, Frisk, try it. I'll help." Frisk climbed on the bike (I dodge impossible things, why am I worried about getting on a bike?) and Asriel climbed on her back. The pedals spun too easily as she pushed them, and she almost pushed the handlebars to the side trying to get the bike into a higher gear, but Asriel righted them and she went forward. Trying to turn a corner, she turned the handlebars at a sharp angle and Asriel stopped them cold before they could fall.

"It doesn't work that way," a human employee helpfully said, hiding his shock at the flagrant violations of momentum. He, too, had seen the video, which was sitting at more than three billion views and rapidly climbing. "You can't turn the handlebars like that, you have to kind of lean in. It takes practice."

"Let's buy it for practice," Asriel suggested.

"I'll get my own, too," Frisk said. Being able to bike with Asriel's power was nice, but carrying her brother around on her back wasn't something she wanted to have to do, and she picked out an identical model in light blue. "Do you know anything about snowboarding?"

"No, but let me take you to someone who does," he said, and as the Dreemurr kids rolled along Victoria stared at their shoes again.

"I want those!" she said suddenly, pointing at them excitedly.

"We actually have those here," the employee said. "Down the hall, make a right." Holding her hand, Toriel took her in that direction. "Hey, Jack? These two want to know about snowboarding."

"Sure, just give me a- woah!" Jack said, almost dropping the merchandise he was hanging up as he saw who he was serving. He'd reacted similarly the first time he saw a monster in an employee uniform. "Okay. Wow. Um. Let me see what I can get you. Are you going to want it for your normal size or something else?" He'd seen the video too.

Frisk and Asriel looked at each other and laughed. "Normal size," Asriel said, and the employee helped them pick things out, starting at the expensive end of the rack. There was a cute pink board Frisk liked, but it had flowers on it, so she chose a snowflake-decorated bright blue one the same color as her new bicycle and matching goggles and highly flexible snowboard boots to go with it. Asriel got a pair of goggles and a red board covered in spiky stars, but he couldn't possibly fit into any ordinary boots and decided to simply fuse his boots to the board when he was using it.

As they went to check out their purchases, Jenkins stepped up and beckoned another man with a finger; when the employee at the cash register, terrified of being fired for not doing this by the numbers, asked if they needed help taking their purchases to their car, Jenkins said to the other man, "Hey, Bill, unlock the car for him." Frisk suddenly realized that of course Jenkins was not alone; he was the only bodyguard walking around who looked like one. The others had trickled in, posing as customers, watching the growing crowd of surprisingly oblivious Christmas shoppers who were nearly as determined as Frisk in not letting strange circumstances affect their consumerism. With Bill watching them, the employees walked out the door with the Dreemurrs' purchases and Victoria's old shoes, as of course she'd immediately wanted to wear her new ones.
As Victoria excitedly rolled along beside the Dreemurrs towards the rest of the mall, Frisk felt a twinge of guilt: her power erased the good with the bad. None of this will have happened. Everyone's joy and fear, pleasure and pain, wished out of existence to return things to where they were. She resolved that Victoria should feel just as much joy the second time, if not more, as she did now.

Asriel smelled something and stopped abruptly, pulling on his mother's robe. "Candy store." Toriel gave an exaggerated sigh and followed them in. It was highly upscale, with walls covered in enough multicolored candies (and chocolate, chocolate, chocolate) to give everyone in the mall diabetes, and Frisk mused on what would happen if she, Asriel, Asmodeus, and Victoria all ate as much as they could and decided to have fun in an auto wrecking scrapyard. Asriel would have the most fun, she thought. "You may purchase what you like, but you will not be eating it all at once," Toriel said, mostly to Victoria. Fortunately, the store was otherwise empty save for the two employees; Asriel figured that if Chara was going to keep minions around to wait for Frisk, this would be the place they'd hang out. On general principle, Frisk gleefully filled a bag half-full of cinnamon candies and the other half full of butterscotch (it's twelve bucks a pound and I don't have to care), then looked at the glass display case in the counter and the goodness embedded therein.

"White fudge," Frisk said. She'd forgotten this stuff existed. It was thick, and chewy, and very dense. "Let's get.. five pounds of it. Don't worry, Mom, we'll save plenty for later." The employees immediately hastened to serve the whims of the god-child, cutting it up into neat squares and placing it into a bag, which was nearly exactly the requested weight. Frisk pulled out a single cube out for herself and a single cube for her brother, breaking off a piece of a cube for Victoria, who had become used to very small servings of sugar and did not complain. Asriel immediately popped the cube into his mouth. "Just chew it slowly, Az, it's fudge," Frisk advised as his eyes lit up, actually glowing a bit. She'd never, ever been offered this by her not-parents but had had it at school, and savored every small bite. I can have this as much as I want. In fact... But that was for later.

Asriel was wondering how a society where you could just buy this stuff could even exist when Victoria said, "I gotta go pee." Frisk showed Toriel where the bathrooms were, and Frisk and Asriel uncomfortably stood outside waiting, Jenkins further down the hall and pretending to look aloof, each of the Dreemurr kids sipping a bit of water from the water fountain and trying to look nonchalant when a passing mall employee did a double-take. The crowd somewhat dissipated-ordinary people still won't follow kids to the bathroom even if they're beyond celebrities, especially with someone like Jenkins there to look tough- but it picked back up as soon as they came back down the hall. More people were coming into the mall, many of them stealing glances or outright staring at the Dreemurrs, a couple pulling out their phones to take video (and suddenly making Frisk glad this won't have happened), and Frisk suddenly realized that this was well beyond ordinary Christmas shoppers; some of the humans, perhaps some of the monsters, had told their friends that, holy cow, the Dreemurr royal family was going shopping! Where they lived, right in front of them! These people had nothing better to do, Frisk realized, and they would tell their friends, who would tell their friends... and there was a very good chance that some people getting invited would not be friends at all. She looked from person to person, trying to judge their intents, sizing up how quick they were, wondering if any of them were possessed or influenced and if they were carrying things that could hurt her before Asriel ended them. I bet this is how Jenkins sees the world. She really, really didn't want to have to see the world in that light. "Mom," she said nervously, standing protectively next to Victoria, "I think we better get out of here."

"We will do nothing of the sort," Toriel said, leading her children into a craft and fabric store. Extremely few of the people following them around the mall followed her in, and the ones that did looked like they belonged there. Frisk didn't felt like she belonged there, though, and she and her
brother gradually realized that their mother had, in fact, dragged them along shopping. At least they had butterscotch and cinnamon candy (one of each at once!) to suck on, although Asriel didn't use saliva the way Frisk did and slowly unmade the candy in his mouth, savoring the taste. Victoria, at least, was having fun, sucking on candy while poking at fabrics and grabbing a handful of velvet to feel it against her skin, using her magic to fool with it when Toriel remarked not to do that and undid the damage. Toriel was also playing with the fabric, picking up cloth samples and shaking her head more than once, putting them down, asking her children which fabrics felt better against their skin, clearly having something in mind. She looked at a few metal, jingly bells, then at her children's jaw-dropped looks (*what's she going to use those for?!*), put them back with a chuckle. She slowly lingered, and the staff neither approached her nor complained, knowing that having the Queen of Monsters patronizing them (which was not the same as the patronizing she was doing with her increasingly bored children and their young friend), and she came across a row of appliques as she reached the counter. "These are perfect," she said, taking a stack of red hearts in a plastic case. She placed the other items on the counter and opened the package with magic, taking a single red heart and gently melding it to the front of her daughter's overalls. It felt right, somehow, and Frisk smiled. "Would you like one, Asriel?"

"Mom!" he protested. "I don't want a red heart! Anything with red hearts on it is obviously for girls!" The clerk chuckled, and even Frisk could hear the relief in that chuckle: *they're people.* "Oh," she said, mildly disappointed. "Victoria?" The little girl accepted it, and Toriel took off her too-warm coat, putting it in a pouch in her robe and sealing the heart to her pink long-sleeved shirt. "Now we're like sisters!" the little girl gushed, and Frisk smiled in reply. *We are, aren't we? The small family of humans with supernatural powers.* Although she was very glad Asgore was her father and not Asmodeus.

Toriel paid with her card, putting her purchases in her robe, and when they left the store, only a handful of people were still waiting for them to come out. Suddenly, Frisk realized her mother's cunning: she'd bored them away, and Jenkins standing outside the shop hadn't helped them stick around either. Nobody except the truly die-hard paparazzi, of which there were few, wanted to watch *anyone* shop for fifteen minutes, especially in a store the watchers didn't care about. "Where else?" Asriel asked, also bored.

"This mall's almost totally clothing and food stores, there's one game store," Frisk said. She'd still lost her taste for video games, and Asriel picked up on that in her voice. He had better things to do, too. "Come on, let's get out of here before the crowd comes back." One erstwhile member of the crowd picked up on that and sheepishly left in a different direction than the Dreemurrs, Victoria happily rolling along all the way to the car, pushing herself with magic without anyone noticing. The kids ate some more candy (*white fudge, as much as I can stand!* and played in their backyard for a little while before realizing that they needed a better hill. Asriel might be able to dodge the trees on the mountain, but Frisk, without magical assistance, could not. In short order, they found the closest skiing place (very close; they were on a mountain range after all) and were being driven there, Jenkins' breath smelling of a hastily consumed meal.

As small children do when seeing people do more grown-up things, Victoria had become dissatisfied with sleds in favor of snowboards, but fortunately the place had rentals; the renter was a habitual pot smoker and consumer of psilocybin, and he assumed that he only thought he was talking to an eight-foot-tall goat monster. Frisk and Asriel played around on the bunny hill with
Victoria for a while before they were approached by someone who looked like he knew exactly what he was doing. "Heyo, I'm Clark. I just talked to your guy, and he said I'm okay to teach you if you want to learn." His mask of professionalism was even better than Jenkins'; he had a friend with a camera nearby, and he fully intended to use this in advertising material, figuring that the guy who taught the Dreemurr kids how to snowboard could earn triple digits in an hour just by asking nicely.

"Teach her," Asriel advised, gesturing to Frisk. "Us two, we don't move the same way." Clark turned to Victoria, wondering if she was a very human-like monster, and she smiled at him. He was a decent teacher, as the three kids discovered, and he pretended not to notice Asriel and Victoria's liberal use of magic in steering, although Victoria got tired within fifteen minutes and returned to the lodge. With the littlest one gone, Clark swiftly moved into more advanced techniques; Frisk's natural, practiced agility made her an excellent student, and she was doing small jumps and landings in short order, braking and turning naturally. Frisk eventually called for a break; it was cold and windy up there, and her face felt numb.

They returned to their mother sitting inside, who was chatting with a few humans about their children; Toriel always seemed able to strike up a friendly conversation, even while waiting patiently. Frisk suddenly realized that Toriel ought to be infinitely more bored than her kids were in the craft store, having sat there doing nothing but taking care of a magical little girl for hours. And she hadn't ever said anything about needing to repeat days, or any sort of toll that being a mother took, or anything negative about her own situation, even once. As long as she had children whom she could take care of, she would take care of them, reality-warping powers or not. Frisk wasn't sure whether that made her mother less than a human being or much, much greater. They ate lunch together, some fast food-style burgers that could not possibly be good for them, but Toriel overlooked it with a smile.

By the time Frisk and Asriel were done, the expert having shown them everything he could possibly teach in one day (they planned on surprising him some other day by showing him that they already knew these basics), they were completely beat. Frisk's legs felt like the Dragonforce drummer had gone to town on them with a sledgehammer. Asriel was snoozing, his head lolling over into Frisk's lap, and he only awoke when Jenkins pulled up to Asmodeus' house to drop his daughter off. As the Dreemurr kids trudged from the car into their house, they immediately agreed to grab a bowl of cinnamon and butterscotch candy and relax. Someone had left a box on the doorstep; it was probably Papyrus, judging from the "I HOPE YOU LIKE THESE BOOKS FROM PAPYRUS! NYEH HEH HEH AND LOVE (BUT NOT LV) PAPYRUS!" label. The books were the complete collection of Calvin and Hobbes, and the Dreemurr kids wasted no time in sitting by the fireplace to read them, Asriel lighting it up with a wave of his hand, the two cuddled up together in their long johns.

Toriel brought out her project: a specially shaped blanket made from several combined fabrics and a generous amount of Dreemurr fur. She carefully draped it over them, and Asriel bleated softly while Frisk hummed in comfort. It was thick, and silky, and velvety, and she did not feel that she would sweat despite the blanket and the nearby fire. Frisk and Asriel opened the first of Bill Waterson's classics and laughed, and wondered where the cell phones were, and made comments about the silly scenarios, Calvin's vivid imagination and weird ideas (Asriel laughed at the 'stupid flowers' strip), the demonic bicycle, the monsters under the bed (there actually were certain monsters of that variety, as Asriel informed Frisk, and neither of them wanted to know how much EXP terrified children had ended up earning) and the implausibly morbid snowmen, although Asriel thought that 'Deranged Mutant Killer Monster Snow Goons' was kind of racist.

"I bet I could do that," Asriel said, smiling. "Melt some snow, and freeze the sticks solid, and
freeze the snowman's head to them. We should totally do that tomorrow. You know what I mean."

"Well, yeah, we have to do it on a day when it counts. Otherwise, we couldn't leave Azzy and Frisk's House of Snowman Horrors up all winter," Frisk said. They laughed and kept reading, although the undertone of Hobbes being maybe/maybe-not real was disconcerting enough that neither of them wanted to mention it directly. They knew what Az's 'stuffed tiger' form was like and did not want to ever see it again.

"I'll keep believing in you," Asriel said, "if you keep believing in me." Frisk snuggled closer to him.

They had gone through nearly half the collection when their father came in, and they would have rushed to greet him except that they really didn't want to get up. "I had an unexpected surprise today," Asgore said, letting his wife take his greatcoat. "Someone driving a bomb had attempted to blow me up."

Frisk and Asriel turned their heads around, but there still wasn't any point in getting up. "Dad! Did anyone... no, it's okay," Asriel realized.

"It is," Asgore agreed. "Three. Three humans perished, not counting the driver. When you rewind, Frisk, you will have saved at least three." A very old label on a very old media format came unbidden to Frisk's mind: 'Be kind, rewind!' Being from the digital age, she had no idea what that meant. "What are you two reading?"

"Literary classics," Asriel replied, and Asgore huddled over to read with them, his two great arms adding another layer of blanket.

"This boy reminds me of another child," Asgore said after a bit.

"Dad! Calvin's not Chara!" Asriel replied.

"No," Asgore said, getting up as he really did not want any more reminders, "a child you never knew." Silence, until Toriel called her family to dinner, a full repast of onions and egg noodles and ground beef. Only Frisk recognized it: Mom bought Hamburger Helper?! But it wasn't sodium-infused anything that came from a box; the only premade ingredient was the noodles, Toriel having made everything else from its most basic ingredients. But it was delicious and filling and they had fudge with it, and when Toriel sent them to bath and bed they were more than ready for it, falling asleep at once.

Frisk was awoken by her phone. Alice had sent her a Warning app, very similar in principle to Checkup except in reverse; all Frisk had to do was press a button and, per Alice's request, wait five seconds before the LOAD if possible, and she'd sent a text requesting for it to be done within the next minute or so as the few rememberers were busy memorizing what they needed to know through repetition. Too much global tragedy, not enough people to remember it all.

"Oh, okay- wait, I almost forgot! C'mon, Az!" Frisk rushed downstairs to the kitchen and its spacious, well-stocked refrigerator, her brother following quizzically behind, and pulled out the entire bag of fudge. Asriel, getting it immediately, took the bags of candy from the shelf where they sat.

"What are you children doing?" Toriel asked, getting up from the couch and shaking her head.

"It doesn't matter, Mom!" Frisk exclaimed, picking up several cubes of fudge and putting all of them in her mouth at once, her eyes rolling back at the taste and texture. Her brother had grabbed
the bag of cinnamon and butterscotch candies and threw a huge handful in his mouth, plastic wrappers and all, spitting out the plastic in one large melted glob while gleefully dissolving the candy. "Fee haff to eat it faff," Frisk half-explained, rapidly unwrapping several candies and shoving them in her mouth with half-chewed fudge, as her brother ripped the bag open to grab even more fudge, not caring in the slightest that some of it spilled onto the floor. Savoring the taste, Frisk pressed the button on Warning, and five seconds later, just as the throes of pure sugary bliss were beginning to subside, replaced by disgust at eating way too much of it,

==LOAD==

Frisk and Asriel sleepily walked downstairs together yesterday morning, somewhat embarrassed smiles on their faces, as Asgore was sitting down to breakfast. It was still too early. "Sorry, Mom, sorry, Dad," Frisk apologized, giggling although there was nothing left of the candy in her system but memories. "I just had to do that."

"It was not the most prudent use of your ability, but it was understandable," Toriel said, sitting on the couch in much the same way as she had tomorrow morning. "I recall each and every one of your purchases. Shall I visit the mall today and pick them up for you?"

"That'd be great, Mom, and you should buy Victoria a snowboard too, but what if her dad was right?" Asriel asked, his sister nodding. "What if Chara shows up and tries to hurt you?"

"They will not," Toriel said, simply.

"You can't be sure about that! You really can't. Not with Chara," Asriel argued. "You remember how they were before, and that was without being everywhere at once."

"We will not live our lives in fear," she declared. "And if they do, I will not go a third time," she said, smiling.

"Mom!" Frisk protested. "You're not supposed to... no, it's fine." She didn't have to explain, and there was a brief moment of silence before a knock on the door.

"That," Toriel said, "did not occur before." She moved quickly to open the door before her children could get in front of her, prepared for the worst, but it was only Sans, standing in his bathrobe with an annoyed look on his face.

"what's the big idea?" he asked. He'd just got done sleeping and was going to spend all day in the sun tanning bed he'd slowly set up. Now it hadn't even arrived yet.

"Boop, boop, boop," Asriel replied, and his mother frowned at him. "We're sorry, the Dreemurrs aren't here right now, leave your name and bone number and we'll get back to you as soon as we feel like it."

"kid... i expected something different, okay? yeah, i was trying to control things. didn't work," he explained, as Toriel waved him in from the cold.

"So what are you here- oh, you weren't around when we talked about what we're going to do," Frisk said. "A lot more people are going to be able to remember now, and they're going to save a lot of lives by preventing bad things before they happen."

"so you think you're doing the right thing?"

"Is there any way she's not?" Asriel asked. "We know Chara can remember, but these other people
are smarter than Chara and there's going to be lots of them."
"you're right. many lives are more important than one."

"Whose life are you talking about?!" Asriel asked, annoyed.

Sans almost answered but closed his eyes instead. "nothin' you could do about it."

"Nothing we could- Sans, my dad is the King of Monsters." Frisk said, looking at the skeleton eye-to-eyesocket. "You know what Az can do. I've got pictures of the President bald. I'm going to wind up with an entire department of the government just for me. I have the phone number of the last wizard in existence. Even Alphys might be able to help."

"alphys. heh. you know she wasn't always the royal scientist?" he asked, opening his eyes slowly.

"Yeah, Mom threw her out before she made us our bracelets." Toriel looked a bit sheepish.

"no, before that. you ever heard of w.d. gaster?"

Frisk shook her head. Asriel scrunched up his face. "That name's almost familiar. But no, I can't."

"that was my dad. he tried injecting DETERMINATION into himself. but he tried SAVEing right away before he melted. he kept melting anyway, even while he was trying to LOAD. eventually he stopped going back and forth and went sideways. and now nobody but me and papy can remember who he is. that jump's why i'm the way i am. it's why my bro is the way he is. i can hear dad sometimes. he sees all the branches, all the possibilities. but he's messed up. he's messed up bad."  

"So every time I LOAD..."

"you just add another one. another aborted timeline that nobody remembers, nobody inhabits. nobody but him." Sans closed his eyes again for a bit. "you're going to actually do it, aren't ya? frisk, listen to me. if you manage to meet him, through whatever shenanigans you get going, you don't hesitate, all right? DETERMINATION itself might break down around him. so do him a favor. kill him. and kill him quick." Toriel was shocked but chose not to interrupt. "and SAVE as soon as you do. no mercy, not this time. he's gone, frisk. just let him go. for his sake and yours."

"Sans, a while back, someone else was telling me to let him go. That he couldn't be saved, that he couldn't come back, that he'd have to stay in his own little world forever. But his family missed him a lot. So I did save him, even before I realized I had. Now I wear clothes made out of his fur and he helps brush my teeth."

"Don't doubt Frisk, Sans. She saved us, remember? She beat a wizard trying to steal her DETERMINATION, remember? The one living human in the whole world who could actually hurt her, and she wouldn't even let him stay dead. And then she turned that eternal enemy of our whole race into a lifelong friend. In a donut shop. And then she, and I still think it was her, beat Chara's whole army. She finds a way, and when there isn't one she makes one."

"Sans, we will save your dad," Frisk proclaimed. Heroine time had come again. She turned, going up the stairs to get ready. "C'mon, Az. We've got a wizard and a scientist to talk to."
After calling Asmodeus and Alphys, Frisk and Asriel put on their bracelets and long johns and rushed downstairs for their snow gear while their parents looked on in silent concern. "Oh, hey, Mom," Frisk said, "make sure you get me a whole bunch of those heart things. I want to put them on a lot of stuff. And remember to get Victoria a snowboard, too. I don't think we'll really have time to go to that hill place today."

"I understand, my daughter," Toriel said, nodding slowly.

"Come here, children," Asgore called, still eating breakfast. "Am I to understand that you intend to place yourselves in harm's way for the benefit of a monster who you did not know existed?"

"Dad, if you're going to say it's dumb..." Asriel started.

Asgore smiled his wide smile, and for a moment Frisk spotted the father/son resemblance even though Asgore had never been a child. "No. It is noble. A trait sorely lacking in this world. These governments may elect, and appoint, and delegate; and others may falsely claim to be elected or crown themselves king; but to be truly royal, you must first be noble, and that begins with making sacrifices to better serve your subjects. Sacrifices of comfort, of convenience... even of safety, should circumstances require it." The doorbell rang. "Go on. You may never be King and Queen, but you are truly Prince and Princess." His children hugged him deeply (right in front of Sans, who said nothing) before answering the door, and of course it was Asmodeus, his sleepy daughter in his arms. He left her with Toriel as the kids got dressed to go out for a walk in the snow.

"Take care, my children," Toriel said as they left.

"So, Frisk, Asriel, what'd you think of the books?" Asmodeus asked. Frisk and Asriel looked at each other in confusion; Papyrus had sent them the books, not... oh, those books. Asmodeus sighed. "You didn't even look at that drive, did you?" he asked, handing Frisk the same one again.

Somewhat embarrassed, the Dreemurr kids shook their heads. "I didn't think I'd have to study to save someone!" Frisk remonstrated, and it sounded silly as soon as she'd said it. "School's coming up, who studies before school starts?" That, too, sounded silly, and Frisk kept her mouth shut while Sans explained to Asmodeus what and where Gaster was.

"Sideways. Not forward or back, sideways." He furrowed his brow. "Frisk, there's only one of us who can go anywhere through these methods. You understand, don't you?"

"I figured it had to be me. It always is. And you're going to tell me I shouldn't go," Frisk said, nodding.

Asmodeus exhaled. He clearly didn't think this was going to end well. "No, I'm saying you should. You have to. We can't leave something, someone, stuck between the teeth of reality like that. Not if he's still able to communicate to here. Sans, you said that he lets you see the future, right?"

"yeah, only, after that thing with frisk's voice, he's been wrong."

"Maybe we're looking at a time loop scenario," Asmodeus said, "and if we don't close that, that might just be it for all of us."

"no kids where dad is, though."
"Then I don't know. I really don't know." He took another slow breath. "Frisk, I wish you had some inkling of the things you were really dealing with here. Where Gaster is can't even be called a place. He's in another dimension, a dimension not of sight and sound but of mind." None of them knew where that was from, and Asmodeus felt very, very old. "There won't be any air to breathe, and a spacesuit won't help. Just the base stuff that makes you, you, won't be there."

"Then why aren't you saying 'don't go, you can't live there'?!"

"Because there isn't anything saying you can't exist, either," Asmodeus explained. "That's what a universe is: a place with rules. Here, if you don't have oxygen, you suffocate and die. There, who knows?" Asmodeus saw the kids' curious faces and sighed again. "Going outside of the universe to deal with an unknown entity? How could a kid like you be scared of something like that? Just the phrase, 'going beyond space and time', sounds like an adventure, doesn't it? If you understood, really understood, you'd be terrified. But for you..." He sighed again. "for you, it's just a game."

Frisk didn't react, but Asriel was visibly offended. "that's uncalled for," Sans said.

"Is it? Is it really?" Asmodeus stopped in front of them, and there was a subtle shift to the way Sans moved. The wizard made a visible effort to control his temper. "Frisk, you do the things you do because you're a kid. You don't have a frame of reference, you don't understand how fundamentally weird, how fundamentally broken this all is, you know how important you are but you still don't really grasp it. You've seen how my daughter is, she doesn't think about how weird, how strange it is to be able to use magic, she just does it. And you, your life was completely turned around, you have a real family now, you don't care if they're not entirely made of matter- that doesn't mean anything to you, like it would an adult. And you figure that since you're helping people, you can do what you want- and, really, that's not wrong. If everything goes right, we really are going to save a lot of lives and a lot of grief, even while you play with whatever you choose. But all our helping hands won't mean anything if this goes poorly."

"you're talking about my dad like he can end the world."

"He's outside the universe," Asmodeus answered, starting to walk again, the others next to him. "As far as I'm concerned that gives him as much power as Chara if not more. And God help us if Chara finds a way to get to him. I mean that literally, by the way; God, if you're listening, please help us if this goes wrong." God did not reply. "Frisk, I can't tell you what to do. Nobody can, and they all know it." Frisk was starting to get the same desperate-worship vibe from Asmodeus as she'd been afraid she'd get in the mall, and she didn't like it one bit. "Don't you understand? Why do you think Toriel just said to be careful? Do you think she wasn't worried? She's your mother, she's worried sick about you, you're about to do something extremely dangerous, but she knows she can't stop you. I can't stop you, and I'm a God damned wizard. If you really, really want to do something, all of us put together can't stop you. Your DETERMINATION, the power of your will, against all of us- and that's a hell of a name, by the way. That's the right human emotion to correspond to it." They continued up the hill, the wind blowing in their faces, and Asriel intuitively huddled closer to Frisk for several reasons. Frisk wondered if Sans, in just his bathrobe and slippers, was cold; but then again, Sans was a skeleton, and since when did skeletons get cold? "If you read what's on that drive you'd understand. Magic is the impingement of desire on reality, and for verbal spells, it's codified. In a perfect universe, emotions would be sent to our souls, entirely one way. Nobody could reach out with desires and make things happen. But we live here instead. And so whatever desires a magical creature has become paramount, given enough power." Frisk and Asriel weren't sure whether all of these things made sense together or Asmodeus was just ranting out of fear. "Sans, what are his desires? What does he want?"

"i don't know."
"Your dad doesn't tell you what he wants?" Asriel asked, amazed.

"He doesn't tell anything. He shows. Futures. Experiences. Sometimes it's easy. Sometimes it takes figuring out. Sometimes it doesn't make any sense at all."

"Can he see his own future?" Frisk asked.

"'Fraid not, kid. He can only see in. He has a hard time seeing himself at all. Look. You can't just go in and say 'I wanna save you' and then he'll be saved. He sees you and he sees his ticket back in here, and it doesn't involve you two singing kumbaya."

"You make it sound like I'm not used to people trying to kill me," Frisk said, almost casually. "Maybe it is a game to me. I'm sorry, I can't help it if that's how I see the world. But it's not a game I want to win for myself. It's for your dad and for everybody."

They had reached the entrance to the Underground then, and the guard post there had been dismantled once the entire town was guarded.

Hotland and the Lab were no place for kids in snow gear or even warm long johns, and Frisk resolved to wear better clothes next time she came back here. Surprisingly, Alphys was working and not watching anime, although she seemed to be working on an ordinary commercial freezer rather than something more science-y.

"Oh, hello, Asriel, hello, Frisk, hello, Sans, hello, um, I forget your name!" she called. The next part sounded rehearsed: "The next version of your bracelets will be available by the time you get to school, but I won't be able to restore your phone's extra function."

"Extra function?" Asmodeus asked.

"Oh, you mean the box storage!" Frisk remembered. "I totally forgot about that. Yeah, there was some portal thing in the phones. I could put stuff in and take it out."

"The outside world is t-too big," Alphys explained. "It's astronomically easier to fold spacetime when there's so much less of it to fold. Not everything we did here works there. So, ah, what can I do you for? Get it? Instead of 'do for you', it's 'do you for', it's a joke."

"Sans, you can tell her now," Frisk suggested, and, reluctantly, the skeleton did, and his lazy speech was interrupted by a lot of gasps and 'oh my' from Alphys.

At one point she looked down at her hands and started to cry. "I didn't bui-i-i-lid it!" she wailed, dropping to her knees. "I-I-I knew I never built the CORE! Why did I ever think I did?" But she recovered quickly, and started talking to Asmodeus and Sans about what Frisk might be able to do to get Gaster back, and Asriel, despite his many, many resets as Flowey, only understood about one word out of three, which was one more than Frisk understood. To her it sounded like every Starfleet engineer to grace one of Gene Roddenberry's teleporter rooms was having a Treknobabble championship, with the prize being the right to toss Wesley Crusher out an airlock.

"Do we need to be here for this?" Frisk asked after a few minutes.

"Apparently not," Asmodeus replied. "Go home and study. Today's homework is to plug in that drive and learn everything you can about DETERMINATION." The Dreemurr kids shared a chuckle. "I'm not joking. The information is there; use it."

Frisk and Asriel walked home, Frisk feeling a slight bit of the worry and fear that every reasonable adult would expect her to. Their mother had, in fact, been worried; she smothered them with hugs as they came back in, even before they took off their snow gear, despite how short of a time they were gone. There were nothing but PNG images on the thumb drive, and Frisk opened up the first;
it was just a picture of the book's cover, which was uninspiringly titled "How to Use Magick". She'd expected something with a bit more pizazz, like "The Necronomicon" or "The King in Yellow" or maybe "How to Break Reality for Fun and Profit Without Really Trying", and she wondered how many people would buy a nonfiction book with that title. All of them, probably.

The second image was the first page, and there was none of the introductory material that precedes modern books, the author's name signed loosely at the top. "What language is this?" Frisk asked, staring at the unfamiliar script. She hadn't realized that Asmodeus had a jokey side; he'd apparently handed her something written in Arabic!

Asriel laughed. "It's English, it's just really, really old." Asriel hadn't seen cursive since before he became a flower, and he closed his eyes briefly, trying not to let the memories hurt him. Opening them, he pointed to the text, his soft finger brushing against the screen. "Here, it says, and it uses a lot of capital letters since that's what they did back then, Magick- with a K- is the Impingement of Will upon Reality. It talks about emotions, and minds, and mental states, and all kinds of weird stuff. Frisk, I'm not sure if all of this is true."

"If it's just the intro, skip ahead, try to find where it talks about time travel. It's not going to say DETERMINATION because that's not what they called it back then."

"Okay, The Mind Drives The Mass, we know all this stuff, it's what I can just do, here we go, Syllables, Their Meanings And Use." He opened up several images in turn, trying to get a handle on something, as Frisk stared at the relevant text, trying to pick out English letters from the strange, flowing script. "Sorry. I can't even read most of this, and I'm afraid to even say these to see if I can pronounce them right."

"There's really no way to say these by mistake, is there?" Frisk asked.

"Maybe if you choked on something while snorting milk up your nose and doing a p-b-b-b-t with your tongue at the same time? I don't even understand these words. What's a 'fricative ululation'?"

"Are you sure you're reading that right?"

"I think so? That's what it says, I don't know what it means."

"Just try to find something descriptive, what it is, what it does kind of stuff. Oh, yeah, look in the back, try to find an index." There wasn't one, and the two of them hunted down all the meaning they could find. After more than an hour (with a brief sojourn for the breakfast they'd had 'yesterday'), flipping through multiple books to find something, anything, of any use that they could understand, Frisk had nothing but a headache. There were a couple of things with the word "time" in them but Frisk couldn't puzzle them out despite her iron determination. Frisk had heard of stories that involved someone going insane by understanding the contents of books, but she decided it was the other way around; it was not being able to understand that brought confusion, rage, and madness. These particular books were like reading a college-level chemistry text written by alchemists three centuries ago, and the authors' handwriting wasn't the greatest, and they didn't organize things the same way (one of the books was just a collection of essays), and try as he might Asriel couldn't remember the near-Shakespearian terms these people used.

"Why are we even doing this?" Frisk eventually asked, annoyed. "We're not getting anything, we're not learning anything. We can't even find what he's talking about." She couldn't believe he'd be dumb enough to do this to her. Either she was being intentionally trolled- and there was no way he'd be dumb enough to do that- or he was dumb enough to believe that anyone could immediately grasp a subject that he'd been studying for a lifetime.
"I'm glad you said it," Asriel replied. "I thought maybe you were putting it together while I couldn't figure it out."

"No! How could you think that? I can't learn anything by randomly flipping through books trying to find something I understand! That's why it's called teaching. You can't just throw books like this at people and say 'go learn,' we don't even know what these words mean. We've never done anything like this before except the simplest stuff, this isn't even science. Maybe if we read through the whole book really, really slowly, we might figure something out, but that'd take years. Where's his notes? Didn't he take notes?" Frisk reached for her phone.

"He might be busy," Asriel pointed out.

"It's just one question," Frisk replied, dialing the wizard with a few button presses. He picked up right away. "Asmodeus! We've been trying to learn how to hack existence, but we need the Cliff's Notes! Didn't you take any?!"

"...No?" he replied, slightly confused. "I didn't say you should read the whole thing, I just said find the right ones so you know more about what we're doing."

"I'm so glad you're not going to be a teacher at our school," Frisk replied. "Did you ever bother copying any of this stuff down into readable modern English?!"

Asriel held up two fingers and Frisk rolled her eyes at him: Fine, it's not just one question.

Asmodeus sighed. "I should have known it would be a little obtuse. Never mind, then. I suppose I'll add some explanations in the future."

"Try getting someone to copy it so it's not cursive, not full of words nobody uses anymore, and with a lot less old-timey fake-chemistry mumbo-jumbo in it!" Low on sleep and patience, Frisk angrily hung up when Asmodeus didn't reply right away. "You'd think if his daughter can cast the stuff he'd at least have translated some of it."

"Maybe that's why he didn't," Asriel suggested. "He doesn't want her using stuff that might hurt her."

"I might have said this before, but if someone's trying to get kids not to know things then he really shouldn't be a teacher," Frisk grumbled. "We woke up way too early, let's go back to bed." Asriel agreed immediately, and they barely remembered to take off their bracelets before sleeping next to each other in their long-johns. Frisk wondered why it was so hard to understand magic when the effects were so simple. The goat's fur was wonderfully fuzzy and soft, she could feel his warmth against her cheek as they nuzzled together, why didn't she understand what made her brother what he was? Even if the crud in those books was cleared up, all the words that she couldn't grasp and all the antiquated belief crap of people long dead, she knew it'd still be a challenge. Why would that be, though? Asriel was magic, and there wasn't anything so terribly complicated about him, any more than Frisk herself... but that was wrong. "I think I know a little more of what it's like to be you," Frisk said under the blankets, and Asriel gave an inquisitive bleat. "You sense all the cells running around inside me, and neither one of us knows what they all do. I'm reading a book about what makes magic work, but we don't understand it. Humans don't know everything about how humans work. I didn't think it'd be the same for you."

"I do know how I work, Frisk," Asriel replied. "But I don't know it in your words, I know it in my own. Humans, you have so little control over your own bodies. And that scares me sometimes, because you can't stop yourselves from getting really bad stuff inside you and not being able to get it out. He's right, I need to do medicine. Not just for everyone else, but so if something bad gets..."
into you, I can get it out. Stuff that's so small you can't even see it, can hurt you." Frisk felt him shudder. "That's scary."

Frisk chuckled. "Az, I promise I won't die of Ebola or malaria or flying pig disease or swamp sewer crotch rot."

"Wait, how do you get swamp sewer crotch rot?!"

Frisk started laughing. "In a sewer in a swamp, I guess. I just made that up!" Asriel laughed giddily, and Frisk caught his laughter like a disease until the two of them fell asleep.

While Frisk and Asriel slept, ten heavily armed and armored SWAT members shot tear gas canisters through the windows of a suburban house in Columbia, Maryland before kicking down the door. Both of the terrorists who had spent the last few days in absolute secrecy building a car bomb were overwhelmed immediately, hauled out in plastic cuffs while other police secured their weapons and explosives. "How did you know?" one of them asked, and received no answer. King Asgore would not be attacked that day.

While the Dreemurr kids dreamed gentle dreams, an ambulance arrived at the house of Alice's cousin's fiance's father. The man was told that he was at immediate risk of a severe heart attack and should come with them immediately, and his wife shouted at the EMTs and their Whimsun companion that it was ridiculous, right before her husband, shocked at their arrival, clutched his chest and fell over; the EMTs had anticipated this and immediately started administering thrombolytics and performing CPR while the Whimsun reached in to dissolve the clot. Her other relatives had to restrain her. "How did you know?!" she screamed at everyone, and got no answer. "How in Jesus' name did you know?!" There was only one thing that made sense as an answer, and it was about that one girl on the news...

"Mom's home," Asriel said, waking Frisk up. Toriel had come back from the mall with a giggling Victoria, who Asriel could hear happily rolling around the kitchen. Her father still had his day job making rememberers, and there were a couple of UnderNet (why am I even still on that? At least it's not as bad as Facebook) status updates from Alphys showing that she was working on it. They finally did their morning ritual despite it almost being afternoon. "So, what do you want to do today? In this universe, I mean."

"You want to try to study those books again?" Frisk tentatively asked.

"No!"

"Good, me neither."

Asriel laughed. "Hey, I know what we can do. Well, let's do some snowboarding first, then we can do that stuff we read about."

"Read about where... Oh, that! Yeah!" The Dreemurr kids got ready- this time, Victoria had her own little, pink snowboard- and played outside for hours, carefully snowboarding around trees, refusing to care about the danger they'd face, stopping for a delicious lunch with small portions of candy and fudge. Gaster, I hope you're watching us, if you can even see us now, Frisk thought. That brought up another uncomfortable idea- exactly what could Gaster see? Frisk spent about five seconds thinking of the implications of that before deciding to stop. At least he wasn't human, with a human's desires.
While the three of them played, a man near D.C. carefully shoved a thin bar inside the door of an old car, popping the lock. He didn't know that someone on Trump's Security Council lived only a few blocks away, and wouldn't have cared if he did. As he started work on the ignition, four cops came around from behind corners and rushed him, arresting him quickly. He didn't say anything at all to them, but only one thought dominated his mind: he didn't tell anyone, not even his gang, that he was going to go lift this car, so who could have snitched on him?

Asmodeus came by earlier than expected, as actually casting the spell was very quick, and he briefly stopped to visit his daughter before heading to Alphys. He didn't comment on Frisk and Asriel spending all day playing, which was just as well because Frisk was going to castigate him if he did. Sans honked his horn a couple of hours later, and Frisk stopped to change clothes. She'd need things she could move quickly in; T-shirt, loose overalls (bright red heart affixed in place), roller shoes for a dodging option. Her brother followed suit.

"Where are you going?" Victoria asked as they left her with Toriel, who carefully showed no outward signs of concern.

"We have to save a hidden monster who threw himself out of bounds of everything," Frisk tried to explain. "We're going outside reality for a little while, don't worry, we'll be back."

"Can I come?"

"Sorry, we can't take you with us, it won't work and your dad might get mad," Asriel said, and Victoria started to pout and sniffle. "Hey, c'mon. When you get old enough, you'll probably be able to travel to an alien dimension whenever you want. Well, maybe. I'll try to bring back something for you, but no promises."

"You promise?" she asked anyway.

"No promises, I promise," Asriel replied. They jumped into Sans' car for the brief drive up the hill.

"I HOPE DAD DOESN'T GET MAD AT ME FOR MY POOR CAREER DECISIONS," Papyrus worried.

"Papyrus, you're a lawyer!" Frisk replied.

"I KNOW, DON'T REMIND ME!"

In the Underground, the well-traversed path of New Home behind them, they rolled confidently together to their next adventure. Asmodeus, Frisk thought, had been a little bit right and a little bit wrong. This was not a thing to be taken lightly, but the more she and her brother distanced themselves from fear, the more they could act appropriately. If a thing needed to be done, then the right thing to do was to do it, regardless of perceived risks. Worrying never helped anything.

A deceptively simple-looking machine had been built in the center of Alphys' lab. There was a platform, and tubes going to it from a control panel, and a big red switch, and a startling number of Pocky wrappers, all sorts of other snack food packets, and a lot of empty cans of Monster Energy Coffee scattered around. (Does caffeine even work on monsters? Or does it work on monsters that think it does?) Alphys greeted them nervously, somewhat exhilarated, happy for the chance to try something new. "Oh! There you are. Y-you see, we can create an extra space. Like where Gaster already lives, but made by us. And y-you. S-so we have this beacon, here," she explained, gesturing to something that looked like a cheap plastic toy with six long bits of plastic sticking out of it and
clumsily painted with household paint, "and as long as a human is holding onto the beacon, um, you can use it as a way to return. All you have to do is just SAVE to the beacon." SAVE to an object? Frisk ran Checkup (causing four phones in the room to ring) right before a dose of paranoia hit her.

"If I don't come back, who picks up the DETERMINATION I leave behind?" she asked suspiciously.

"I could, or Chara would," Asmodeus answered. "Wait- you think I'm going to betray you?"

"It crossed my mind," Frisk said. She intuitively mistrusted poor teachers. "For the good of the universe, wouldn't you think it'd be better for you to have it? Tell me why you wouldn't."

"Let's... let's just start with 'my daughter would never forgive me' and go from there," he answered, a bit shaken by the demand. "Also, I can't. I physically can't. I won't have time."

"T-th-that's the truth," Alphys sputtered, slinking back.

Frisk nodded. She was loaded with DETERMINATION and SAVEd, focusing on the object in Asmodeus' hands, and found that it worked although it didn't feel like a normal SAVE at all. "It's done." She stood on the platform with her brother.

"I know you won't be able to explain them to us like you want to, but are you absolutely sure that this will work?" Asriel asked. "Frisk can pull us back with this?"

"The theories are mathemagically bulletproof," Asmodeus explained. "Alphys is a natural savant at machinery. For you, it's just a jump to the left."

"Did you just use the word 'mathemagically' because you felt like it?" Asriel asked.

"This job has perks, and that's one of them," the wizard replied.

"Ooh, then do I get to say it? This device will work perfectly, and absolutely nothing will go wrong," Asriel said confidently.

"Az!" Frisk shouted.

Asriel's grin widened as he tempted fate some more. "Flip the switch at any time, Alphys, the device is perfect and requires no extra checking. Unforeseen consequences aren't going to happen. We can rest assured that everything will be fine."

"Daijobu," Alphys said, one of her favorite words.

"Let's just focus on," Asmodeus was saying, and then the Dreemurr kids were in the same place as they had just been. The equipment Alphys had used to send them here was missing, as were all the spare parts and all the mess Alphys left lying around. The conveyor belt wasn't moving, and the screen was blank, and there was a grainy, blurry texture to everything, as if they were watching the world through several takes of an old film. Asriel held his ears briefly, wincing, but what he was hearing was not sound. Frisk suddenly realized that she couldn't feel her own body- shocked, she waved her hand in front of her face, and found that she could move freely and quickly, but it was as if she was waving a stick, her proprioception gone. She felt neither vertigo nor gravity, sensation nor numbness. Are we even really here? Or are our bodies just back there while we dream? She spun around slowly, trying to get an idea of what this place was like, and as she spun what she thought was a full turn, all the way around she wasn't looking at the same spot in the lab, and in startlement she immediately spun back around until she could see her brother again. "Az! Did I
"No, I just saw you spinning. But, when you did, you weren't... going around?" He tried the same thing, and Frisk watched him spin 360 degrees yet she only saw his back, and he immediately spun back around as Frisk had. "Okay, this place is really, really weird, let's just find him and go."

"This place is really what?"

"Weird. It's like something's messing with us."

"It's not that thing, is it?" Frisk asked, pointing. On the far side of the lab, a six-inch-wide nothing slowly ripped a strip, just as wide as itself, out of the wall, having already ripped out many more, and, reaching some predetermined end, moved down to do it again, totally unconcerned with Frisk. On the other side of the portion it had eaten away was nothing, nothing at all, and Frisk wondered how much volume this space really was and had a wild series of thoughts: Are all of Alphys' anime DVDs even up there? Would the TV even turn on if I tried? If I turned one on and played it, would it play Mew Mew Kissy Cutie, nothing at all, or something else entirely? She took a breath but felt no air intake. Asmodeus was right. That's not air I'm breathing, if I'm even breathing at all. It's magic. By his logic, she should be able to do literally anything here in this subspace without rules, but she felt it hard just to keep her sanity intact, her brain looking for signs that her body still existed and not finding any, and something at the back of her mind told her that she was dreaming, and of course she couldn't wake up-

"No, it's not. That's just a garbage collector. I think," Asriel said. Something in the environment scared him and he hugged his sister, unable to feel her; his awareness faded for a split instant and he blinked. "The remains of reality, I think. Or maybe the ghost of reality. I don't even think it's alive."

"So what does it eat?" Frisk asked, inspecting it from a safe distance, although there wasn't much to look at. It was just a black progress bar moving side to side on a wall.

"No to both, but just stay away from it," Asriel replied, holding his sister close.

"So what is it, anyway? A minion of some kind? It's not dangerous, is it?" Frisk asked. Suddenly, she winced, holding her head and trying to remember what she'd just said. "Speaking of ghosts of reality, where's Gaster?"

"He's here, he's right here!" Asriel yelled, and Frisk felt the presence, looking around frantically to see where Gaster was coming from. "It's useless, she real#ed, useless because this lab isn't really a lab and this space isn't really a space-

The slimy black something came out of nowhere, its other side connected to emptiness. Frisk reflexively dodged, and it whirled in the air like a helicopter, striking nothing it touched, and Azzy screamed and something app*ered halfway in*de Frisk's I+g and as she jumped in terror she felt something run *rough her back, and suddenly a lone white skull appeared in front of her and she leaped out of the way as it breathed a beam of death-

- and she arose above a huge mass of bone spikes, leaping from platforms that couldn't exist as another skull came to fire its beams-

- and she was falling sideways through a maze, these skeleton heads at every turn-

- and she was back in the courtroom but this time it was not Judith Saib_ncho but Gaster himself doing the judgment and Papyrus was not there, only an endless wave of gasterlasters.
"GASTER! Cease this battle, and resume your normal form! I, **ASRIEL DREAMURR**, SON OF KING ASGORE, COMMAND YOU!"

The things passing through Frisk stopped cold, and Frisk jumped away from them, horrified. Gaster's face, a white, cracked mask, slithered out of nowhere. His body followed, and it was amorphous, melted, as if a frothing lunatic had placed that mask on a man-sized blob of writhing jelly and called it a person. He undulated to and fro, stealing a glance at the thing off to the side slowly deleting this forgotten bit of unreality.

"asRiel?" Gaster's voice was like a blob of putty thrown into a saucepan and left to boil. He spoke slowly, as if he were trying to translate whatever nonsense language he called his own into something that the Dreemurr kids could understand. He moved his head back and forth, around, and **through** Asriel. "in thE paST timE\n\nIn thE paST timELInE YOU aRe DEceaSeD. thIS IS nOt YOuR fORm. yOU haVe NO soUL."

"Frisk's keeping me alive. That's the human, with the DETERMINATION."

"YeS. THe ONE whO hAS pICKed It UP. YoU wisH mE To REturN to mY fAMily. GiVE mE YoU r SOUL So I mAy lEAve thIS plAcE."

"I'm not giving you my SOUL, but I am taking you home," Frisk said, and Gaster looked at her askance, his head upside-down. "Az, hold onto him." Reluctantly, he tried, but there wasn't anything to touch, and she took the beacon in one hand and Asriel's hand in the other, and to her shock neither of them seemed really-real or felt like anything either, and with all the fear and DETERMINATION she could possibly muster, she focused on the other beacon, and hoped and prayed it was enough to

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"getting you where you're going," Asmodeus said, and then stopped as he and Alphys stared at what had appeared alongside Frisk and Asriel. The kids turned, and there was Gaster, his cracked-mask face in a smile. Sans and Papyrus rushed to greet their father, but as Gaster tried to say something he **coughed**. Oily, black gunk came pouring out of his mouth and around the edges of his mask, and as it ate its way through the metal floor it reeked like several mutant skunks had built a chemical weapon out of battery acid and selenium compounds. Asmodeus immediately fled the room. Frisk gagged at the stench, rolling backwards and trying to blow out as much air as she could while not breathing in any more, wondering if that mess would give her cancer quickly or slowly, wishing she had a Geiger counter. Asriel pushed the air away from Frisk, and Gaster's form rippled in the magical breeze. Sans immediately went to his father's side, comforting him, and Papyrus rushed towards him with outstretched arms, screaming in joy.

"Is that what puke is?" Asriel asked, disturbed, still retreating.
"If I ever puke up something like that, get me to the hospital or just rip my stomach out," Frisk said, and it came out funny because she was pinching her nose. "Are you all right?" she called from the other side of the lab.

"I apologize," Gaster said, and his voice was deep, rich, and smooth as silk. He sounded like an old, confident professor in a very expensive college. "Before I crossed into the border world, my experiment nearly destroyed me."

"dad, you're not gonna melt, are ya?" Sans quietly asked as his brother bawled uncontrollably and both of them hugged him deeply.

"The time for melting is done, my son. In the border world I had managed to seal away my DETERMINATION until such time as I rejoined the world of matter." He nodded his head down at the still-sizzling pool of gunk he'd puked out, DETERMINATION and monster-mass gone rancid. "Injecting it into myself was a foolish decision, it seems. I deeply regret all the trouble and the alterations of memories." He only then seemed to notice that his skeletal children were hugging him, and he hugged them back with his robelike arms, not used to being constrained to a finite number of physical dimensions. "Frisk, how did you change the patterns of truth? By what method did you apply an impossible future to this universe?"

"I keep having to tell people this," Frisk said, slowly releasing her hold on her nose (bad idea- the stench still filled the room) "I don't know. I thought maybe you might." Alphys had found a bottle of Febreze and a small box of Arm & Hammer; she ripped the tops off both and upended them onto the pool of gunk, causing it to bubble even more before quieting down.

"Then we shall find out, in... the fullness of time," Gaster said, and he stiffened up as if he expected it to happen right then. "I must retrain myself. It will take some time for me to become accustomed to this world again."

Papyrus started gushing unreservedly, talking about how much fun they were going to have and if Dad would like to watch Papyrus cook and how they were going to throw a huge party for Frisk and how he was very very sorry that he had to be a lawyer. Asmodeus came back in halfway through it; he'd taken off his coat and wrapped his long-sleeved undershirt around his face. He looked as if he planned on blowing air away from him, but seeing Frisk on the far side of the room he chose not to.

Gaster laughed good-naturedly, hushing his son. "Then we shall, Papyrus. Frisk, I must thank you for sharing your essence with Prince Asriel. Many of the futures in which you did not were disquieting."

"Did Chara win?" Asriel asked, suddenly afraid. "In those other futures?"

"Some of them, yes. Others, no. A few were worse." Frisk and Asriel shared a look: worse?! "Leaving him behind would have taken a great toll on you, a toll that here, you did not pay." Gaster smiled, even as Frisk and Asriel worked it out; exactly how far could Frisk fall? What if Flowey slowly poured poison into her ear, or what if she were released onto the world with sorrow in her heart and made some sort of pact with Chara? If she really didn't care about what she had remembered, and lost faith in her parents, how many futures could she burn through before she found the one she wanted? "I must... spend... time... with my sons now. I shall see you again... tonight." Concepts relating to time management came slowly to him.

Asmodeus didn't even need to look at Frisk, although he did anyway, staring at her as if she were some sort of supreme empress who could order a man's head to be severed at a whim without consequence. Gaster lived beyond time and space in a world outside the reach of physics, and I'm
still the dangerous one.

A dangerous one who needs a bath.

"Thank you so much for doing this, Alphys," the snowman said, as the very thoroughly bundled-up lizard helped it into a freezer, Greater Dog carting it onto a dolly to be wheeled along through Hotland and to the surface. She'd even helped restore the missing piece that Chara, wearing Trump's body, had gobbled up. Water in any phase was not a common substance for monsters to build themselves out of, and this one had used so much of it, it couldn't even move. Like most monsters, it was at least somewhat contented with its limited existence, and it was very pleased for its small piece to have played such a critical role in espionage. (Maybe they should call me... Frosty the Snowspy.) The forecast for Mt. Ebbot for all of next week was in the mid-twenties, and it didn't have any separated pieces to magically keep cold this time, so Frosty the Snowspy and Alphys agreed that it was safe enough and Frosty wouldn't get any unexpected surprises.

The freezer didn't have any glass, however, so it had to guess where it was from the feel of the wheels. A bit of squelching, some rumbling, some more rumbling at a different pitch, the elevator's motion; Frosty enjoyed the sensations, and its smile grew big. It couldn't wait to be let out to play with monsters and human children on the surface. The motion grew slower and more precarious as Greater Dog slowly walked downhill; Frosty was worried that the freezer would tip over, but it didn't.

"I-it looks like this is a good place," Alphys said, and Frosty kept on smiling with its coal-button mouth as the other two monsters helped it out of the freezer. Its smiling mouth froze into a rictus grin, its coal eyes staring at the nightmarish scene before it. "These snowmen sure are unusual," she continued, making sure Frosty's carrot nose was set right, and Frosty could not speak for shock. The snowman to its left was holding onto its own decapitated head, its mouth in a perpetual mask of horror as it stared at its own body. Another snowman was built upside-down, its face smashed into the snow. A third looked to be trying to put its own eviscerated snow back into its belly with frantic twig hands. Yet another, to its right, was neatly cloven in half, the two sides separating but never falling down. Frosty couldn't see behind itself to know what terrors lurked there; all it could do was look past the macabre sculptures inside the house, where Frisk and Asriel were sitting on a couch together, enjoying cups of hot cocoa with their own family and the skeleton family, watching The Polar Express while a bright fire roared nearby.

Greater Dog barked amicably, and the dog and Alphys left Frosty alone with its surroundings.
Papyrus, being Papyrus, had gotten deeply invested into the kids' movie and cried when the
generic Christmas music started playing near the end. Sans was just Sans, although if he didn't hold
Frisk in high regard that morning, he certainly did sitting by his father's side. And Gaster... Frisk
found W.D. Gaster weird, and even Asriel was slightly unsettled by him. More than once, Frisk
looked at him, trying to figure him out, but he was hard to look at. It wasn't clear how many hands
he actually had under his mass, and she figured it'd be rude to ask. At times, he looked fluid, like a
blob of the black slime he'd puked out; other times, he looked like what Frisk had expected the
father of skeletons to look like, and he appeared to be wearing a dark waistcoat and white pants,
extra hands floating around him, flickering in and out. Gaster showed unusual interest in the movie,
not because of the weird CGI or the strange ideas, but because it had scene changes, moving
camera angles, and a beginning, middle, and end, and he was not used to any of those things.

Adding to the weirdness, Toriel had allowed Papyrus to cook, under strict supervision, and Undyne
came in halfway through after putting Kid to bed.

"HEY UNDYNE!" Papyrus greeted her. "TORIEL JUST GOT DONE SHOWING ME WHAT
CHILI PEPPERS ARE! I'VE GOT A NEW RECIPE FOR SPAGHETTI, I CALL IT 'BURN
DOWN YOUR MOUTH BUT NOT YOUR HOUSE' SPAGHETTI! ALSO FRISK AND ASRIEL
RESCUED MY DAD GASTER FROM LIMBO."

"Oh, that's your dad?" Undyne asked, looking at Gaster.

"yup. mine too."

"Really? Well, I've got to hand it to you two, then," she said, looking at the Dreemurr kids and
grinning widely. "There's no masking your courage, you ran headlong into the jaws of disgaster."
She turned to Sans and Papyrus. "Being skelesons without your father must have been amorphous-
trating thing than I could imagine." Sans had nothing to reply with, and Undyne flipped up her
eyepatch and stared at him with one eye and one laser beam. "I told you my day of victory would
come." Everyone was confused, then Asriel and Frisk suddenly remembered what she was talking
about, and they shared a long laugh.

The spicy spaghetti was surprisingly edible, if a bit on the hot side, and Gaster, taking polite and
even forkfuls, soaked his share up through all the holes in his mask.

Just before bed, Frisk ran Checkup out of habit (although the odds of any of her friends dying on a
repeated-day were very slim and most of them were right there anyway), SAVED (after having
rescued someone from beyond reality, DETERMINATION was in ample supply), and hit another
button for "I just SAVED". Rememberers would want to know when they were going to reappear
at.

Frisk and Asriel had very weird dreams that night, and Frisk twitched in bed, knocking the covers
off, but a slender ghost tucked the Dreemurr kids back in. She woke up slowly before the sun rose,
taking stock of her surroundings. The ability to feel her own body? Check. Goatbro next to her?
Check. She gently petted Asriel's ears, and he bleated giddily as he was tickled awake. He tickled
back, and the two of them wound up rolling off the bed into a puddle of blankets, her face firmly
planted in his warm, fuzzy chest.

Asriel untangled himself and made a show of stretching, something he'd never need to actually
do, going back over the bed to snap on his bracelets, smiling and saying, "It's a brand new day
today!" Frisk laughed; from anyone else, that was an empty platitude, but mornings weren't always
guaranteed to be new ones for them. She glanced at her phone, looking at the time (early AM, but
that wasn't too bad anymore; they'd need to start getting up early for school) and saw a message
from Alice titled simply "The Count". The count of what county? Count Dracula? Or was it the
Sesame Street count? Intrigued, she read it out loud:

"Fatalities: 59. Injuries: 105. Crimes: 78. Foreign policy activities are not part of the Count." Frisk
swallowed.

"Why would she, why would anyone tell you that 59 fatalities happened?!" Asriel shouted in
disbelief.

"No, Az. That's not how many happened. That's how many didn't happen. Because of me."

"Holy crap," Asriel muttered. **Fifty-nine human lives.** And it'd just begun. Frisk looked at some of
the appended notes. Somebody's dad didn't get shot for his wallet, which had far, far less money in
it than Frisk's. Somebody's little girl didn't get into the medicine cabinet. Somebody got arrested
for DUI before he even left the parking lot of a bar and so never flattened a married, expecting
couple. "Wait, how's it so many? Asmodeus couldn't have made that many before the project really
even got started?"

"They can still watch the **news**, Az, and they've got to have special access to cop stuff," Frisk
reminded him. This was what those handful of people were frantically trying to remember while
Frisk was shoveling candy down her gob. Did her extra few minutes increase or decrease this
number, or do nothing at all? She would never know, and it filled her with guilt until she
remembered that if it weren't for her, all of them would be dead. In fact, if she'd taken another path,
all of them, everywhere, would be dead. She didn't want to think about it. "C'mon," she said,
swallowing, snapping on her bracelets. "I smell French toast, but I have to go to the bathroom." They started
their morning ritual, and Asriel playfully remarked from the other side of the door that what had
come out of Gaster's front end was only slightly worse than what was coming out of Frisk's rear.
While the spicy spaghetti hadn't been so bad going down, it was not agreeing with her in the other
direction.

"Do you know what not being able to poop makes you?" Frisk asked rhetorically. "It makes you
full of..." Asriel laughed. Frisk sighed after a bit. "This is going to be really, really awkward."

"You need help?" Asriel asked.

**He's a monster**, Frisk reminded herself. **He doesn't even have these digestive organs.** "Can you just
kind of push it out? Go easy." Asriel came in, and he reached down to touch Frisk's abdomen; at
first, there was nothing, then there was a volcanic eruption of boiling lye shot out with 12-gauge
shells, then blessed, blessed relief, and it took the savior of monsterkind six sheets of toilet paper to
clean it all off.

"And just think, we get to do that again tomorrow," Asriel said, grinning, and Frisk gave him a
very recognizable gesture that even he knew the meaning of. "C'mon, let's finish up before Dad
leaves." They'd gone to bed before he'd come home last night, and he greeted them heartily as they
came down the stairs.

"Are you beginning to understand what I told you?" he asked.

"About nobility? Yeah, I'm glad we saved W.D.," Asriel said, sitting at the table next to his sister,
where plates of buttered, homemade, cinnamon-coated french toast waited for them. **How does she
know? Frisk wondered. Without school, the Dreemurr kids got out of bed whenever they wanted; how could Toriel know when they'd come down to eat breakfast? Sure, she could hear them, but Frisk hadn't been on the toilet that long! Frisk wondered whether her mother had some sort of time powers of her own or a sixth sense relating to motherhood and decided it had to be the latter. The first bite, followed quickly by a second and a third (small and chewed thoroughly!) confirmed it.

"No," Asgore said, chuckling, "about being the future." He turned to Frisk, and smiled, and Frisk didn't know everything he was smiling about. Since the car bomb had never gone off, the late-night meeting had, and the foiled plot had dominated the evening news and had been brought up in the round-table conversation. Someone had asked how the perpetrators had been discovered, and Asgore only had to utter the words 'Because of my daughter' for the room to erupt into a torrent of questions and a legendary shouting match. In moments, the humans had reduced themselves to squabbling children, and His Majesty, Asgore Dreemurr ruled over them all (save for the American ambassador, who was made from the same mold as Trump and had smugness to spare), and there was saber-rattling and accusations of blasphemy and many, many angry and desperate votes. By the time the dust cleared, there were six permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, despite Asgore not controlling a nation-state. "You are the future of humans and monsters," he said yet again. "You may not understand what that means yet. One day, you will."

"Do you understand it?" Asriel asked his father. Frisk was about to ask how he knew it, but chose not to. To her it seemed more like a statement of faith than a statement of fact, and she didn't know how to deal with that.

Asgore chuckled again. "I'm afraid I don't, not completely. I've even asked Dr. Gaster. Not even he knows what Frisk will do." What I will do. Not what everyone else in the world will do, not what 'we' will do, but what I will do.

"Dad," Frisk protested, "I have one power. I can LOAD to one SAVE. That's all I can do! Everything else is other people. Okay, that voice thing, but that was just once and I don't even know what that was. And I got all this from falling down a mystery hole! I'm not... I'm just not, okay?"

"There are at least fifty-nine humans who have reason to believe you are," Asgore replied. "'Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.'" The kids didn't even realize he was quoting something, but Asgore knew the play very well; the First Folio had come to the colonies at roughly the same time he had formed. He finished up his relatively small breakfast, which would have been days' worth of French toast for both of the kids combined, and leaned down and gently kissed his children on the tops of their heads after getting up. He had a plane to catch; a fifteen-foot Japanese mini-kaiju was destroying property, and ten minutes ago, Shinzo Abe himself had requested Asgore's assistance in quelling the beast without committing the sin of killing it. (Which Asgore couldn't promise. Sometimes these things involved ritual combat.)

"Oh? What's this?" Asgore asked, picking up a package left at the door. It was a brown box about four feet cubed, and Frisk suddenly feared it was a bomb before realizing it really didn't matter. But the package was labeled as being from Gaster and Alphys, and it contained two sets of matching bracelets, two chargers, and two other devices that plugged into the wall and featured a jumble of long antennae. Asgore left to assert his dominance while the kids unpacked it.

The difference between Alphys and Gaster, Frisk found, was in their craftsmanship. Alphys' bracelets looked bulky next to the svelte, deep-red ones Gaster had produced, and Gaster's felt like they weren't even there, to the point that Frisk kept checking her wrists to make sure she was wearing them. When Asriel exchanged his, their entire color changed to lime green. There were actual instructions, in extremely adept cursive by a flowing hand (or set of them) that Frisk swiftly
figured out how to read. The bracelets themselves had only slightly greater range, but the antenna-bearing devices, as the instructions described, were repeaters; they kept the bracelets connected in a roughly one-kilometer radius, even through buildings, but the repeaters could connect to each other. Theoretically, with enough of them, Frisk and Asriel could be on opposite sides of the country. "They finished all this last night?" Frisk asked, and then read the last line of the instructions; Gaster, of course, could remember unhappened events, and he'd be collecting feedback to make them again. "He did this in one night, knowing it'd just be gone?!" Frisk asked, amazed.

"We did kind of save him from eternity," Asriel said, raising an eyebrow.

"I am never, ever going to get used to this," Frisk said, reading further: Alphys (judging from the handwriting) had suggested that the cellular network of the entire world could and should be rejiggered for this functionality, and it dawned on Frisk that they'd all probably for-real do it if she asked nicely. Frisk couldn't imagine how many people would have to climb cell towers (but if they fell off, they wouldn't have) to let that happen. An entire world-spanning system, altered just in case Asriel wanted to go to the beach while Frisk was at home. "Never, ever." She sighed, going back to her French toast with her brother while Toriel looked over the discarded instructions, smiling. "They're all going to know," Frisk said after eating some more and washing it down with orange juice. "Everyone in our class, I mean. They're all going to know the video, they're all going to know about DETERMINATION, or they'll figure something out- Mom, I'll have to show up for school every day!" Toriel shook her head at that. "If I don't, they're going to figure it out, oh, Frisk didn't come to school today, maybe this day isn't going to actually happen!" The last bites of sugary French toast were a nice contrast to the worry.

"Young princesses should harbor little concern with what others may think of them," Toriel said primly, "and they should harbor less concern with things that, strictly speaking, do not happen at all. They ought to show more concern with their education."

"What do you mean, Mom?" Frisk asked, puzzled. "We're going to be educated in school, but we don't have to worry about that yet, do we?"

Toriel frowned. "I fear I was remiss. I had sent an informational packet to all the other families, but I had neglected to give one to you." She speed-walked into another room and came back with a thickly packed, unclosed envelope with no address on it. The kids took it out and flipped past the stuff that wasn't important to them- there were lots of details on bus schedules, arrangements for differently aged children from the same family, and how getting through the military cordon worked- and read everything else. There weren't any school uniforms, thank God, but of course there wouldn't be when many of the students didn't even have the same number of limbs. There were detailed, in-depth guidelines for lockers, the belongings of younger children, and nearly everything else under the sun. Frisk looked for any mention of her own name or Asriel's, but of course neither Toriel nor anyone working for her would ever be so crass as that. Everybody already knew, anyway.

"Frisk!" Asriel exclaimed, gesturing to one part, his eyes wide open. "Classes will be determined not by age but by aptitude." Frisk reacted immediately, knowing what that meant. "Every effort will be made to allow students to attend classes relative to their own skill levels in different fields..."

"Yes, my son," Toriel said, confusing the look of panic on Asriel's face for one of simple surprise. "It is quite fortunate that your bracelets have been improved. You need not sit beside one another or even attend any of the same classes at all." Frisk and Asriel stared at her, mouths open in shock, and she looked back at them. There was a brief moment of confusion before Frisk turned to the
paper Asriel was holding. "Okay, lemme see. We've got math, English, science- oh no- social studies- aww, no- P. E. slash M. E... what.. oh, Physical Education and Magical Education. I get it."

"Yeah, there's no way we can be in the same class for that," Asriel said. "These classes happen at the same time? That's good, then we can... but wait, Mom!"

"I am fully aware of the implications," Toriel said. "Consider it a lesson in using your abilities more frugally." If Asriel borrowed too much of Frisk's energy while Frisk was already exercising, neither of them would find the good times they sought. "I hope that each of you does well on your tests... where are you going?" The kids had started walking upstairs.

"To study!" Asriel called back.

"I am glad to see you so eager," Toriel said, with a wide smile.

"Mom, you just said that if we don't know the same things we won't be in the same classes!" Frisk exclaimed, gesturing with her hands and causing Toriel's face to wrinkle in confusion and, finally, realization. "Okay, Az, do you even know what Congress is?"

"I know what a congress is..."

"Okay, let's start there." The two of them spent a great deal of time looking things up online. The Supreme Court, the bicameral legislature, the Constitution, the Electoral College and what was so special about the number 538, although California was still making noise about dividing into two states and Puerto Rico was still waffling on statehood. They looked up history, but at Frisk's age the tests would be just facts and numbers and names; the two World Wars ("Your species did what?!" Asriel shouted), the Civil War and slavery (Asriel was befuddled as to why anyone would enslave any hated ethnic group; if you didn't like them, why bring them to your country?), the American Revolution (Frisk was expecting Asriel, as a born prince, to want to take the side of the Redcoats, but he held that George III should have been forcibly dethroned for failing to properly support the colonists), and Frisk judged that they weren't likely to be asked too much about anything in America before that. Good thing, too; the person to ask about that stuff was their father, and Asgore tended to get misty-eyed when remembering the distant past. Which Frisk also gave Asriel a crash course in, right along with herself; she had no idea who the actual Martin Luther was, she thought that the Holy Roman Empire was the same as the original one, she only vaguely knew that the Mayans had built pyramids, she'd never even heard of the Three Kingdoms, and everything relating to the old Hellenic city-states was all Greek to her. Prehistory was an even more interesting subject, and of course Asriel loved reading about dinosaurs.

"Hey, Az," Frisk asked, "were there monsters from dinosaurs, do you know?" Dinosaur monsters, how cool would that be?

"I don't think so, the only animals that make monsters now are you, and they wouldn't leave fossils, anyway," Asriel answered, and the kids grudgingly moved away from the subject and onto other scientific topics. Taxonomy was something that Frisk understood nearly as little as Asriel; chemistry, roughly the same; but basic physics was something that Asriel intuitively grasped. As a magical creature, he directly applied $F = ma$ to create $a$, and he knew very well what friction and gravitational acceleration were. Being curious, they moved on to topics above their presumed grade level, and when they read what Einstein's famous equation actually meant, Asriel was singularly unsurprised.

"Well, yeah, matter is just bound energy," he said, shrugging. "You didn't know that?"
"I think I might have heard it before?" Frisk replied, trying to remember something from an old sci-fi show. Oh, right, that was what made antimatter so powerful- "Hey, you can't unbind that energy, can you?!"

"Maybe? A little super-tiny bit? If you ate a whole bag of sugar and I really, really tried?"

"Don't ever do it," Frisk said, with more than a little fear in her voice. "That's worse than nuclear bombs. Maybe right before I LOAD but even then don't do it." They moved on. Asriel found geology and hydrology endlessly fascinating, and Frisk remembered things about plate tectonics and the water cycle she'd been taught in simple terms in the fourth grade. Longitude, latitude, time zones, Daylight Savings; Frisk made a point of learning about these things, in detail, not because of school but because, as the princess of time, she had to understand everything about how humans everywhere experienced it, whether they were on the other side of the planet or above the Arctic Circle. Asriel found these things fascinating, too, and the idea that not only did the entire planet orbit its own star but some other ball of rock orbited the planet (and he could just look up at the right times to see each of them!) was jaw-dropping. There would be a total lunar eclipse in the middle of next month, right above the United States, and Asriel said that he wanted to watch it. Twice. Maybe three times. There would also be a total solar eclipse in the summer of next year, but that would only hit South America, and they looked forward to traveling there to see it.

Mathematics was easier to handle, because they both understood generally the same amount: not much. Basic solve-for-X algebra was pretty simple stuff but anything beyond that (what's a quadratic, and why is there an equation for it?) went right over their heads. Frisk worried that Asriel didn't know the mechanics of long division, which he didn't, and she was in the middle of giving him a crash course when their mother approached the door.

"C'mon in, Mom," Asriel said, working out a problem with Frisk's help. It didn't help that he didn't have multiplication tables memorized very well.

The look on her face was apologetic. "I wasn't aware that the two of you wanted to stay together so badly," she said, having heard their constant, determined studying for the past couple of hours. "I had thought that, after so long being stuck together, the two of you would have enjoyed some time apart."

"Mom, I know you said not to worry, but right now I might be a bigger religious figure than the Pope," Frisk said, and Asriel had just learned who that was. "I'm not doing this alone unless I have to." What Frisk didn't say was that the idea scared her so much that, if teaching Asriel didn't work out, she'd seriously considered outright cheating, from faintly whispering answers under her breath to breaking into the school building and memorizing the test right before a LOAD. With Az it'd be easy.

"I've never been in a classroom at all," Asriel added. "I really want Frisk there to help me."

"Can you just put him in whatever classes I get?" Frisk asked, and she knew both of them could hear every drop of barely concealed desperation in her voice. "Or, actually, if he gets better classes than I do, put me in those classes? Because we've got a lot of time to catch each other up."

Toriel smiled. "Is this really what you want?"

"Mom, I really, really don't ever want to be alone again," Asriel said, moving closer to Frisk, and it did not take any deep thinking to realize why. "I know it'll be a class, with other kids, but they won't be anyone I know."

"I've got an actual brother now," Frisk said, hugging him close, feeling his soft fur against her
cheek. "I don't want to be apart from him, not for stuff like this. Maybe when we're a lot older."

Toriel closed her eyes and smiled wider, her hands folded in front of her against her robe. "The two of you have become inseparable in truth. Come along, my children. It is time for lunch." Lunch largely consisted of cucumber sandwiches, one of which Victoria, wearing her hastily brushed-off snowsuit, was already eating; Frisk worried that they wouldn't taste very good, but the cucumbers were crisp and unsalted and the bread was thick and fluffy. "I will make every effort to do as you ask," Toriel explained, and she did not need exceptional ears to hear the relief from both of them. "But you should continue your mutual studies. I do not wish to commit nepotism." Neither of them knew what that was, and they resolved to look it up.

"Frisk? Asriel?" Victoria piped up. She actually said 'Asriel' and it was to his credit that he didn't laugh, although Frisk had to suppress a chuckle. "Play with me and Frosty," she requested.

"Tomorrow," Frisk said, and Asriel knew which kind of tomorrow she meant. "We really have to study for school."

"Do I have to?"

"No. All you have to worry about is not setting any of the other kids on fire," Frisk explained. Kids Frisk's age knew better than to mess with someone with supernatural power. Preschoolers and kindergarteners were less astute, and it didn't take a genius to realize what might happen if some brat took one of her crayons.

"Dad said that!" she complained, and Asriel and Frisk laughed. Her father had also told her lots of other things, such as not to wish anyone into a cornfield, but of course she had no idea what he was talking about. "I'm done. I'm going to Frosty. I can't set him on fire." It was only as she ran out the door that Frisk looked out the window and realized who Frosty was and what surrounded him. Making all those horrifically mutated and mutilated snowmen really had been a lot of fun, and that only made it worse.

"Uh, Az... I think we messed up, and someone else really messed up." "You think we should try to apologize?" Asriel asked, as Toriel figured out who he meant and covered her mouth in shock.

"Well, he's looking at us now, so... I guess. Even though he won't remember." Frisk smiled despite herself. Fifty-nine humans whom she made not die in one day, and she was worried about having traumatized a monstrous snowman.

"Go study," Toriel commanded. "I will handle this myself."

"Mom, we're the ones who-" Asriel started.

"Go. Study." She put her foot down, and it sounded like a hard hoof despite being a padded foot, and the kids decided that it was good not to have to deal with this and went back upstairs to study. They jumped from topic to topic a lot when they got bored, which happened frequently. They tried to memorize facts and figures of basic stuff that they thought might be on a test, and Frisk practiced reading cursive (if only everyone who used it could write like Gaster!) and Asriel practiced long division and multiplication tables (basic video games were far harder than this), and eventually the two of them discovered that they could not tolerate any more of it and laid back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Asriel couldn't get headaches the same way Frisk could, but he was swiftly beginning to
understand the concept. "Is this what our life's going to be like now?" he asked. "Studying and worrying about tests?" He enjoyed the world he'd found himself in, but that enjoyment was starting to sour after several hours of trying to cram down information about it.

"Some of it, but Mom's better than my old school. We had to do a lot of stupid stuff, and projects, and the teacher didn't understand half the stuff she was handing out."

"How's that possible?"

"She didn't write the worksheets, she just handed them out. 'Here, do this project.' And it had to have all these different parts, and each part had to be a certain way, and I'd never even heard of National History Day before. I had an assigned partner, but she didn't know anything either. And I went home, and who there did I have to ask for help? Mom's school has got to be a lot better than that. We helped make it, remember? Besides, we kind of have to study, you know?" Asriel didn't know. "I mean, we've had so much greatness thrust upon us that we better know how the world works. Otherwise we might screw up or do something stupid."

"Is this what growing up is?" Asriel faintly asked.

"I guess so? A lot of grown-ups aren't really grown-ups either. Their bodies are, but they just don't grow up, grow up. My not-mom was kind of like that."

"So you're saying that either we study or we end up like her?"

"I don't think anything would make that happen," Frisk said, and they shared a laugh. "I'm just saying that... I mean... nothing can make us go to school, Az. If we decided we really, really didn't want to, who'd say we had to? The government? Mom?" Asriel turned to look at her, not saying anything. "And that's why we really should."

"Okay, but not right now." They gleefully wasted the rest of the day playing video games that didn't strongly feature progression, as that progress would not be saved. Mom called them down for dinner, and everyone was there: Undyne, Alphys, Gaster and his children, Undyne, Kid, and of course Victoria, as her father was on the other side of the country, conducting interviews. "Thanks for the bracelets, W.D.," Asriel said.

"You are quite welcome," he said, his voice oily yet comforting. "Have you tested them?" He reached over Victoria's plate of grilled, lemon-infused catfish; the stiff bones fell upwards into his hand, and he crushed them to powder, which he sprinkled back onto the fish.

"No, we should go do that," he said, glancing at Frisk. "Hey, Mom, did you plug those repeaters in?"

"I have," she replied. "One is here, and the other is at school. Just in case." It made sense; the school itself was at the edge of the repeaters' range, near the Pizza Hut (which would surely be doing a fantastic amount of business) and the PX. Asriel de-boned Frisk's fish in much the same way Gaster had, and it was delicious and filling. They finished their meals and went out to test Gaster's system; Frisk stayed at home, and Asriel went to the far side of the school, and the bracelets remained a cheery color of bright green while the two talked on their phones. They could hear each other's unease at being apart, and it was kind of embarrassing. Mom was right; we really are inseparable now. There might have been another word for it, but neither Frisk nor Asriel knew what it was. Asriel swiftly flew himself back home when Dad called with video; the left side of his face and body had been burned, and he clutched his spear in his right hand as his left arm was nearly gone. His face and voice showed grim triumph, and he stood with one foot atop a barely-alive lizard that could easily have been Godzilla's baby brother. "Next time," Asgore grated, the
"Why was it fighting?" Asriel asked.

"Humans had chosen to build on a location that it felt was an environmental sanctuary." He gave something that could have been a chuckle or a scoff. "The humans have now chosen not to build there- **after** I defeated it. And I can guarantee this is the way it'll be again."

"At least you'll do better next time," Frisk said.

"Yes," Asgore said, grimacing a smile, "that I will. Be safe, my children. Your power does not always save you from pain." He hung up before his wife could see him maimed.

Even though they knew he'd be all right, the kids went to bed uneasily that night, and Toriel made an effort to ease their anxiety, hugging them and gently tucking them in for the night. She sang something wordless and comforting that only one human had ever heard before. Frisk had no idea she could sing, but Asriel remembered and nearly cried his eyes out. "Mom, please stop, don't ever sing that again," he begged, sobbing into the sheets.

"Oh... I should have... I am so sorry," she said, leaving the room and closing the door. Frisk did not need to ask about the song or the last time Asriel heard it, and Asriel desperately clung to her as he slept.

It was time for the test, and Frisk looked up at the teacher, who was staring at her, judging. The first question: **If these people will die in ten minutes, and you can run at twenty miles an hour, which of these routes can you take to save them?** But all of the routes were more than a thousand miles long. Confused, she decided to skip it, but the next question was unreadable, in something that looked like cursive of a foreign language, so she decided to skip that one too, and got to the third question: **Who have you forgotten about?**

Frisk looked up at the teacher, about to ask how crazy the test was, but the teacher was half a foot away and **her face was melting** and-

"GAAAAAH!" Asriel and Frisk screamed awake together. Asriel shivered in terror, and Frisk panted heavily. "That was bad," Frisk said, and Asriel did not reply. "Look on the bright side, at least the actual test can't be that bad, right?" Asriel's shivering turned into scared laughter. "We saved Gaster, we're saving the world, we haven't forgotten about anyone!" Frisk protested to whoever or whatever gave them that shared dream.

"We really haven't," Asriel agreed, still shaking. They did not dream again that night.

Their next few repeated days were spent much the same way. Toriel moved the snowman as soon as Frisk LOADed. Asgore did do much better the second time, and the enemy monster fared better as well; it'd surrendered after a few well-placed blows and wondered how Asgore knew all its moves, and it had understood when Asgore explained that it'd get the environmental protection it wanted. Frisk and Asriel studied geography and then went back over material they'd studied before, making sure they remembered everything. The Count increased dramatically, and the growing ability of police to respond to crimes before they happened was quickly making a lot of bad neighborhoods safer and starting no end of conspiracy theories, only one of which was true.

And then school started. On the day that counted, Frisk and Asriel walked there with their mother, arriving early; Frisk would have worn a dress, but it was way too cold, and she wore her heart-decorated striped overalls and matching shirt under her snow gear (and there was a place to take that stuff off), and Asriel's shirt and pants matched hers. They wore their roller shoes; perhaps in
other schools, they might have gotten yelled at for that, but the number of yellers in this school could be counted on the fingers of no hands. It was one thing, Frisk realized, to see a building on paper and from a distance; it was another to be in it, rolling down its halls. It was clean, and airy, and had skylighting throughout. Frisk's last school had felt like a prison; this one felt like a university.

Toriel left them by themselves in a classroom, and they sat next to each other up front; there weren't any distracting posters lining the walls, the chairs and desks were separate and had storage (thank God!), and there was a long whiteboard up front. "Welcome to school, Az," Frisk said, and both of them were filled with the urge to run, to go 'We're really not going to do this, sorry Mom' and go home. But they chose not to do that, and the teacher came in and very politely introduced herself as Mrs. McNulty, and other children filed in behind her, every last one of them staring at Frisk while pretending not to, just as she knew they would. Kid was also there, surprisingly enough, and he didn't know why nobody sat next to Frisk and sat there himself; another boy, deciding to look daring, sat next to Asriel. Frisk was worried that they'd all have to introduce themselves ('Hi, I'm Frisk Dreemurr, Princess of Time! What's your name?'), but instead, Mrs. McNulty said that today would be a very short day and talked about the placement things that the Dreemurr kids already knew, and she handed them all pencils and surprisingly thick tests, and the room was silent save for the light whirring of Kid's mechanical arms.

A lot of the social studies stuff was simple questions: Where does the U.S. President live? That was an easy one for someone who almost got frogsplashed in the Oval Office. What are the five branches of the U.S. military? Five branches? Fortunately, it was a multiple-choice question, and she'd heard of the Coast Guard before so could arrive at the right answer. Who is the King of Monsters? Frisk's face fell open: Seriously?! It was nice to have a question involving monsterkind, but anyone who didn't know who Asgore Dreemurr was didn't belong in that school! At least that one wasn't multiple choice!

Frisk noticed Mrs. McNulty staring at Asriel and glanced over; her brother, not knowing the right way to hold a pencil, was writing with magic, holding the pencil in place and depositing the graphite where he wanted it to go. The teacher, noticing Frisk's look, immediately stopped staring and looked down at something on her desk. Frisk just smiled.

Other questions featured geography, and Frisk was glad she went over the topic with her brother, although she was sure she knew more about the fifty states and the world's countries than he did. What is the tallest mountain in the world? Everest, of course, and Asriel had mentioned wanting to climb it sometime. There was an easy math section and a somewhat hard math section and a couple of math sections that she had no choice but to completely skip. (Sines? Cosines? Tangents? What the heck were those?!) There weren't any questions about dinosaurs, but there were some questions about the differences between mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles, and there were a few physics questions that she knew Asriel would get right even if she had a bit of trouble recalling the answers.

But nothing beat the very last question on the test, a one-paragraph essay question, one that everyone in the room knew the answer to. Frisk almost laughed, even though it wasn't funny at all, and Asriel heard her almost-laugh and was reading the same page. Whoever put this question on here was either completely clueless or had a sick, merciless sense of humor. Clenching her pencil in her fist, Frisk worked up the determination to truthfully answer it.

The question was Who is the most important person in history and why?
Frisk didn't even want to ask Asriel what the bad news was.

There had to be some, judging from the way Asriel stared at his feet as he and Frisk shuffled home together, their roller shoes making unique footprints in the slowly deepening snow. More than once, he turned to her, as if he wanted to say something, and then he didn't. There was only one thing that the bad news could relate to: the only thing they did so far that day. Tomorrow (or, as the Dreemurr kids would experience it, the day after tomorrow) marked the actual start of school; today was just for the test. Az didn't remember what we learned, Frisk figured. He saw all the stuff on the test, and he panicked and froze up, and now he's going to be in elementary classes because of it. How could she blame him for that? It was the first written test he'd ever taken in his life!

Frisk wanted to just go back for a redo, but she couldn't anymore, not with her mother remembering everything and The Count exceeding five hundred yesterday (most notable: a famous BASE jumper was told to exchange his parachute). Several dozen remembers in multiple countries would be affected if she did. In fact, to avoid repeating any part of school, Frisk intended to time her power to have tripled segments of weekends, mornings, and afternoons, and she wasn't going to let some stupid test change that. She'd just have to talk her mother into committing nepotism, a word she'd looked up.

As they reached the front door, Frisk reached for her key, but Asriel put his hand on the lock and the deadbolt opened up. "Hey, Frisk," Asriel said, helping her out of her snow gear, "let's do something that doesn't involve school. At all." He had said things like that a couple of times after hard study sessions, but it was not surprising to hear him say it now.

"We could snowboard, but that'd be kind of like taunting everyone if we go right now," Frisk thought aloud. All the other human children had to follow a specific routine to get on the buses, a routine that involved roll calls and waiting. Frisk and Victoria were the only humans who could just walk home, and Victoria hadn't even had to take a test. Instead, she sat in the Dreemurrs' living room, watching Disney Junior ("I was a girl in the village doing all right, then I became a princess overnight!") and wearing a dress matching that show's main character, and Frisk wondered who'd been watching her when she looked down onto the couch and spied a bony, bald head.

"heya, frisk, asriel. need anything?" That wasn't an I'll order pizza if you want 'need anything', Frisk knew. That was a You saved my dad, I'll move bodies for you 'need anything', the kind of thing that by some measurements put Sans in the category of real friends.

"Yeah, order some pizza," Frisk said, and Sans pulled out his phone. Lazy as he was, he'd immediately discovered the joys of online ordering. "Mom's not gonna be home until way late." Toriel and her staff had a lot of tests to evaluate and schedules to create, and she'd probably expected her children to make their own lunches, but Frisk didn't feel like doing anything at the moment, not after that test and that last question. She had many words for that question and its creator, none of them good.

"whaddaya want on it?" They began the venerable Pizza Toppings Ritual. Victoria shouted for anchovies, something that every little kid does once in her life (but only once), Sans also wanted anchovies (leaving Frisk astonished), Asriel had absolutely no idea what could be put on pizza, and Frisk decided to go whole-hog tempered by sanity and wanted pepperoni, black olives, green peppers, bacon, and pineapple. Her not-parents had, predictably, screamed at her the last time she asked for pineapple on pizza; she'd savor every bite.
"no jalapeños?"

"The last time I ate something spicy was when your brother's spaghetti turned me into an exploding turd fountain," Frisk replied, causing Asriel to laugh and Victoria to hysterically lose it, her show eventually distracting her from her laughter. Well, at least someone's having fun. Even after that, Asriel still looked like he needed someone to commiserate with, and as painful as the question would be, Frisk didn't want to wait for her mom to get home to ask it. "C'mon, Az. Just tell me. How bad did you do?"

"I did pretty good, I think. On the parts I could answer."

Frisk inhaled in sharp relief; she'd done the same, so they'd be in the same classes after all. "Then what are you so sad about?!"

Asriel pursed his lips and gritted his teeth. "I... I couldn't think of anyone else. On that last question." A wide grin grew on Frisk's face, her eyes nearly shut. "I really couldn't! Maybe the wizards, or maybe somebody we've never heard of, or one of those nation leaders, but they didn't free all monsters everywhere, none of them had your..." He hung his head down as Frisk could no longer suppress her laughter. "Yeah, I answered you! I'm sorry! It's okay to laugh at me..."

"No, Az, I'm not laughing at you..." He looked up, meeting his sister eye-to-eye. "I wrote down the same thing! I answered me, too!" It was Asriel's turn to smile. "I even wrote down, all those famous people should win, but they didn't have actual magic powers! I even mentioned Chara as a close second, even though they are the Devil." She paused for a moment, worrying if she'd regret doing that. "That stupid question! I gotta ask Mom where that came from."

They stood there for a moment in mutual embarrassment before Victoria abruptly got off the couch, heading for the door.

"where ya goin', kid?"

"To get a rock!" the little girl replied, and Asriel got in her way, kneeling down.

"What do you need a rock for?" he asked.

"To turn it into a ruby!"

Asriel looked confused, one not-quite-eyebrow raised. "You can't turn a rock into anything, was that on TV?"

Victoria nodded. "Ah-huh!"

"Didn't your dad ever tell you that the stuff you see on TV isn't real?" Frisk asked, also kneeling down.

"Yes, but, it's magic," Victoria replied, pouting.

"Yeah, but it's not your magic," Frisk answered, standing up. "Geez! You'd think whoever made these shows would put a Do Not Try This At Home warning for the magical kids!" When Asriel realized that she wasn't quite being serious, the two of them started laughing, and Asriel took a few minutes to explain to Victoria, in very simple terms, how and why you can't turn something into something else very easily. Frisk wondered if Asriel could turn coal into diamonds but classified that as 'school stuff' and put it off.

Asriel opened the door before the pizza guy could knock. The deliveryman had a big smile on his
face even if he looked nervous, and it clearly hadn't occurred to him before that, despite being within a few blocks of the Dreemurr mansion, he might actually be asked to deliver pizza there. Sans had already bought the pizza, the breadsticks, and the very large chocolate chip cookie (which neither Frisk nor Asriel knew existed), and Frisk tipped him with a twenty because a Benjamin would have been excessive and what else was she going to do with them all, and Asriel opened the boxes to reveal cheesy goodness.

Frisk knew it would happen: Victoria spat out the first half-bite of anchovy she'd taken, pursing her lips at the salt, and Sans graciously picked out the rest to add to his own slice. Even after so many dinners together, it was still weird to watch him eat. Frisk couldn't take small bites of her own pizza, not of something this good, but she still chewed them thoroughly. She visualized what someone must have shouted in the Pizza Hut boardroom: "If you make the pizza too greasy or if you cook it wrong in this location, I'll turn you into a topping!" Asriel wasn't even bothering to chew, his magic on full blast as he opened his mouth and fed pizza into it like a paper shredder. They dug into the chocolate chip cookie, and the older kids had to eat as much as they could (a clearly laborious and unwanted task, judging from the way their eyes lit up) before Victoria could go nuts on sugar. She got a full fourth of the thing anyway. Sans put the leftover pizza into the refrigerator when it was clear nobody was going to eat any more, and Victoria ran back to her show, but she was clearly having trouble sitting still.

"Come on," Frisk said. "We better go outside and burn that energy." She patiently helped the little girl change into her snow gear. How'd she get roped into helping babysit a little kid, again? Oh, right, that kid's dad was helping Frisk save hundreds of people from murder and gruesome accidents. Every rememberer Asmodeus made would mean another daily paper with far fewer uses of "is survived by" except in the obituaries of the very old. Frisk wondered what problems that might lead to, when people started to act like they had a safety net, but she was too young for them to be her problems and they couldn't possibly be worse than "30-year-old father of three falls into shredder (click here for HD video)".

They trudged up the hill, snowboards in hand, Victoria flying for some of it just because she could. Their plan was to try this steep hill as a trial run, holding hands and going slow, as even Frisk with her agility didn't like the idea of doing something with this many obstacles on it without some magical help. They took a break at the top, looking down at the small town and the cities far away. How many of them are looking back? Frisk wondered. She recalled something about some devil showing someone all the kingdoms of the world, but Chara wasn't there, the world was round so you couldn't see all the kingdoms from any mountain, and for Frisk to know the true extent of her power she had to look up.

"Hey, something's going on," Asriel said, running towards the entrance to the Underground, Frisk and Victoria close behind. It wasn't long before Frisk could hear it too: Alphys' stuttering, Gaster's polite requests, and two drake monsters, all shouting for something to stop. What came out of the barrier didn't look like it was ready to stop. Screaming about horrible cold with one voice and searing heat with another, the amalgamate that Snowdrake called mother was dripping, oozing, covered in the same black grime that Gaster had puked out the other day. Its body was less melty than when Frisk had seen it, but it was falling apart, the Vegetoid on its left falling onto the road with a disgusting splat. Gaster, his slender legs running with surprising speed, immediately picked the dropped monster up and intoned something specific. Frisk recognized that spell- that was the one Asmodeus had tried to cast on her when they'd first met! But it wasn't quite the same, and upon casting, the Vegetoid puked up even more of the black gunk and a stream of magical, rotten cucumbers that faded to dusty glop shortly afterwards, the vile mix burning a smoking hole in the pavement. Frisk would not be able to eat turnips for a very long time.

Victoria's shock broke and she screamed, an ear-splitting shriek that had Asriel wincing, and the
amalgamate turned her way. Panicking, she launched a small fireball at it- Frisk couldn't hear everything the thing shouted, but somewhere in it was a "Thank you"- and it unloaded a torrent of poorly aimed slime-coated blades at the little girl in response. Frisk, next to her, tumbled to the ground, Asriel batted a couple aside, and Victoria threw herself far out of the way with a magical push, rolling in the dirt ten yards away, still shrieking and running for a place to hide in the trees.

"No! Hey! It's me you want! C'mon!" Frisk instinctively shouted, getting up but not getting its attention. "Az!

"Stop. NOW." ASRIEL DREAMURR commanded, picking the amalgamate up in one large hand, suppressing its attacks with pure power. He reached into its back and for a moment Frisk thought he was ripping its spine out right up to the eye in its forehead, but of course monsters didn't have spines and what came out was a shivering, gunk-covered Pyrope, wrapping itself around his hand for warmth. Obligingly, the Prince of Monsters lit it on fire- Frisk felt a sudden jolt of vertigo- and released it. It headed to a nearby pile of dead brush, and Frisk followed it, trying not to breathe too much of what it was burning, tossing some branches at it and some away from it because only she could prevent forest fires. The Amalgamate collapsed, the other Vegetoid falling out like a rotten tooth. Gaster, Alphys, and its family rushed to its aid, Gaster spellcasting furiously. Asriel transformed back, sludge falling where his clawed hand used to be. "You need help?"

"All are separated and all shall live," Gaster said, drawing the last of the putrefied DETERMINATION from Snowdrake's mother. "Your mother shall see... the next sunrise," he told her family, despite the fact that she didn't currently have eyes. They were squatting down next to her, lifting her out of the brush where she'd fallen, telling her it'd be all right.

Sans was telling Victoria the same thing, leading her back to the road, as she clung to his bones. He had carefully, delicately removed the urine from her pants with magic. "Hey, Sans, you want to tell your dad that maybe he should have picked a better time to do this?"

Frisk snapped, wrinkling her nose against the toxic reek, looking back to make sure the Pyrope wouldn't inadvertently burn more than a campfire, and when Gaster just stared at her she stood on tiptoes to whisper into his mask. "On the first time, do this stuff on a day I undo."

"You are correct. That would have been advisable. I apologize. I wished to conduct at least one separation... before... the beginning of school, however."

"I guess for Snowdrake that matters a little bit, but why's it so important?" Asriel asked.

"You were not informed? I am your magic teacher." Asriel bleated in surprise. "Your mother the Queen would have done it herself, but she and I agreed that she already has too many responsibilities." That surprised Frisk, who thought her mother practically inextinguishable, but even Toriel couldn't be in two places at once.

"That still shouldn't matter," Frisk said. "Even if you have one thing to do, you should still have time to be careful with this stuff." His mask frowned a bit, but he nodded. She hoped he'd relearn the concept of linear time before he wound up doing something worse, but time management wasn't a skill many humans had, either.

"Can't see. Hungry," Snowdrake's mother garbled out, turning to stare at the group with two empty eyesockets. Sans had looked at Frisk with empty eyesockets before, but he never looked so vacant, so wrong. If Victoria wasn't going to have nightmares before, Frisk thought, she sure will now!

"We've got leftovers in the fridge," Asriel said. "Sans, you'll have to share your pizza." Sans
reluctantly obeyed, taking the family with him down the hill, and Victoria stayed with Frisk because she was still too scared of the eyeless monster. "Hey, Gaster, get those two planted, the ground's way too frozen out here," he commanded, and Gaster rushed back into the Underground with both of the hungry Vegetoids, his long legs springing. "A Pyrope and an Icedrake, Alphys?" Asriel contemptuously stared at the cringing Royal Scientist, and Frisk found herself doing the same. No wonder that amalgamate had been so cold, the first time they'd met. No wonder it had been yelling those things when it was broken apart, no wonder it had ran.

"They, um, they were in the same room, and..." Alphys sputtered out. "Ohh... well, all's well that ends well, right?"

Asriel was torn; on one fluffy, mittened hand, he really wanted to give her the once-over for letting this happen, but on the other, if it weren't for her DETERMINATION experiments he wouldn't be there to give it to her, and she was trying to make up for what she'd done. "Alphys, you're the Royal Scientist. You're supposed to know what you're doing," he settled on, and she cringed away. He turned to Victoria, who had been shirking away from Asriel's princely voice. "This is what happens when you waste your life watching cartoons," he told her in a more gentle voice, and the girl just nodded.

With Victoria still clinging on to her, Frisk walked up to the cowed lizard, who had retreated to feeding the resting Pyrope some small branches. Frisk wanted to tell her to try to do the separation herself, but how could she? Gaster was obviously casting Asmodeus' verbal spells to do it (without the aid of technology, even), and asking Alphys to do anything requiring speech was a cruel joke. "Hey. Don't feel too bad. You can make stuff that no human can make, faster than any human can make anything. You redid my phone in seconds, remember?" Alphys had just added some premade modules but accepted the compliment anyway. "You did our bracelets, and not everyone can say that her robot has its own TV network. But, just, be careful, okay? Especially with those things with the heads. I don't even know what monsters those are made of. And, ah, see if you can do something about these potholes." Alphys just nodded, and Frisk walked Victoria back to where they'd left their snowboards.

"It'll be okay. I had to do that stuff a thousand times down there, and I can't even do that kind of magic," Frisk told her.

"Really? You had to fight all the monsters?"

"Well, not real-fight them, but get them to stop. And I didn't have to fight all of them."

"Did you have to fight your mom and dad?" Frisk and Asriel winced away at the question. Victoria, who was beginning to grasp the subtleties of nonverbal communication, gasped. "Did you have to fight Aswiel?" The question, asked like that from a not-quite five-year-old, made the Prince of Monsters cringe with visible guilt. He was starting to understand how Alphys felt. "That was bad," she proclaimed with an absolute sense of justice.

"Yeah," Asriel said, helping strap Victoria's snowboard to her boots, "I know." The three of them went down the steep hill together, Frisk and Asriel holding onto Victoria's shoulders and facing each other, Asriel slowing the three of them down. They caught up to Sans and the drakes halfway down, Snowdrake's mother much more alert, apologizing for the trouble and talking about how nice it was to be out in the cold. Frisk smiled at life's absurdities: they must have made quite a sight, two groups of three holding on to each other, a small skeleton separate from them all.

The Drake family wanted to stay outside in the comfortable cold instead of going into an unpleasantly warm house, so Sans brought out a slice of refrigerated pizza for Snowdrake's mother, and she started to blow on it to cool it down further. "Geez Louise, it's not like she sees, don't make
her sneeze and wheeze in the breeze, you sleaze!" Snowdrake complained. "Freeze the cheese please!"

"those discs were a risk to frisk and you can't settle for brisk?"

"Can't you hear her moan and groan? Atone for your tone, bone! At least put it on a stone before she falls prone!"

Sans set the slice down on the frozen path, and she took small bites. "i heard, don't be a word turd, bird nerd. i'll get another third."

"This is making me retch, let's go back up before we catch this sketch," Frisk suggested. "Aww, for-" She shut her mouth like a trap.

"Hey, it's not the clime or the time to be a mime," Snowdrake said. "It's no crime to rhyme."

Asriel looked at Victoria, who still didn't want to get close. "She just wants to hide, so we're going to stay outside to ride, slide and glide," he replied. "She could have died."

Snowdrake shrugged. "If your wizard woulda taken one to the gizzard, blame's on the lizard."

That was quite enough for Frisk, and the Dreemurrs and their charge walked back up the hill, boots trudging in the snow. "Is she going to be blind?" Victoria asked in the simple, straightforward method of small children.

"For a while," Asriel said. "A few hours, maybe the rest of the day."

"It's not like that for humans," Frisk added. She turned to Asriel, who was messing around with his board, whipping it back and forth in the air. "There's just so much I still don't understand about monsters, just basic stuff. Like, what makes a monster one type or another, what gives you one form or another, what makes a monster want to be cold or hot, if it's monster genetics or if those even exist."

"The short answer is magic," Asriel said. "You want the long answer?"

"Yeah, please."

"Maaaaaagic." Frisk laughed. "Seriously, I don't know exactly how it works. If Gaster tells me in magic class I'll tell you, but I don't know if even he knows. I think it's all just based on congealed human thoughts, there's no rhyme or reason to it, well, okay, there might be a lot of rhyme." Frisk laughed again.

"Then here's..." Frisk realized that she didn't want to ask him this question, but now that she started asking him she had to finish. "How do you inject DETERMINATION? I mean, what, exactly, did Alphys inject?"

"Exactly what it says. The will to live."

"But how do you inject that, how do you inject a concept?" She held up her braceleted wrists. "How do you move it around?"

"We just draw it out of the SOUL and put it in something else," Asriel replied. "For you, an emotion needs something to hold it in, like a brain, so it can go to your SOUL. It's not like that for us. An emotion outside a body is almost like a little piece of a monster. So if we get overwhelmed by strong emotions, it changes us, changes our minds and messes with the way we do stuff." Frisk
knew exactly which strong emotions her brother meant. "And when we've got drawn-out DETERMINATION mixed with something physical, and without any kind of control..."

"It turns into Gaster puke," Frisk said. "That stuff's alive?"

"Not for very long," Asriel replied. "It's too incomplete to stick around by itself. Also, there's more than one, I guess you'd call it, flavor of DETERMINATION." His face and voice suddenly turned very serious, and Victoria, who was following the conversation as best she could, gasped. "The stuff you're giving me right now is not the same flavor as what Alphys injected Flowey with. If you ever become seriously depressed, if you ever lose the ability to hope... I will too."

"Woah, I was not ready to hear that," Frisk said, disturbed.

"That's okay, I wasn't ready to say it," Asriel replied. "I really am your dream now. And, for me, that's really okay."

Victoria happily led the way down the hill, the day's fears forgotten, as Asriel kept up to keep her from wiping out and Frisk followed behind, her agile reflexes on autopilot and separate from her thoughts, using the techniques the snowboarding instructor had taught her in a timeline that never happened. She stuck to the generally unused road, which had more than enough snow for a smooth ride and easy transitions to the snowy, rough grass for better non-magical braking. She didn't mind having to nourish Asriel forever, his smile and warmth more than repaid anything she might possibly be losing, but the idea that she could somehow turn him back to Flowey without even trying terrified her, even worse than transforming him into a god of death. At least she didn't live in Asmodeus' 'perfect universe' in which there were no monsters or magic.

"C'mon, Frisk. I know you can go faster than that," Asriel told her past the end of the steep part, Victoria sitting down with her snowboard still attached to her feet.

"Yeah, you're right." Frisk marched back up next to her brother, pulling Victoria on her snowboard by the hand, and Frisk was only a few yards behind them the next time, and the time after that she was right next to Asriel the whole way without the aid of magic, and the fourth time it was just the two of them as Victoria got tired. By the time they were done, they couldn't even remember how many times they'd gone, and Frisk felt a warm joy in not having to know, in not needing to care, because it wasn't even dark yet and they didn't have any homework that night. But that brought her thoughts back to school, which filled her with worry. It was the unknown unknowns she was worried about, something that maybe her mom had totally forgotten about and she never knew, something that would make things very awkward very fast. But there was no point in worrying about things like that, and the Dreemurr kids went home and relaxed by the fireplace (perhaps a Pyrope could live in it? No, probably not the best idea), making up silly scenarios like what would happen if they could convince Bill Waterson to come out of retirement.

"He'd probably draw us," Asriel noted, and Frisk started laughing, suggesting that it'd be even funnier if there were comics that came out on days that never happened. Or a whole newspaper, the Rememberer Times! Publication date: Technically, never. "Wonder what would be in the classified section," Asriel said, smiling.

"I think the whole thing would end up being classified," Frisk said.

"What.. Oh, right!" They laughed some more, and Asriel got a call on his phone; Asmodeus, the Eiffel Tower behind him, was asking to talk to his daughter.

"Daddy!" Victoria shouted when he got the news, and Asriel was very glad he didn't have eardrums to shatter. He handed the phone gently to Victoria, who levitated it in the air so she could make
gestures with both hands on the video call.

Their mother came home then, a large briefcase under her arm. "hey, old lady," Sans said as she came in, and Victoria told her father on Asriel's phone what was going on. "there was a little scuffle up the hill. it turned out okay." **Thanks a lot for bringing that up, Sans,** both Frisk and Asriel thought.

"Yeah, Gaster and Alphys broke up an amalgamate, but it went a little berserk halfway through," Frisk said, distinctly not mentioning the part in which Victoria almost got carved to random chunks. "It's all right now."

"Anyway, Mom, what was with that last question?" Asriel asked, changing the subject and getting it off his chest.

"Seriously, why was that on there?!" Frisk added. "Where'd it even come from?"

Toriel held her hands in front of her, eyes half-closed. "I had chosen the question from a list of supposedly thought-provoking essay questions suitable for children of all ages. I had envisioned that the word 'historical' would have limited answers to people considered part of history, that is, who perished before you were born."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're making history."

"Maybe it was kind of egotistical for me to say me, and I should have answered someone else, but... I mean..."

"I know. I read your answers. They agreed in large part with a third of the student body. Many other answers mentioned you."

"Oh boy, Az! We get to go to school where a third of everyone there thinks I'm the most important person, ever! I'm sure this'll be such great fun!" Asriel started laughing, Sans grinned, and it took Toriel a minute to realize Frisk was being sarcastic.

"I apologize, my daughter, but that is your burden," Toriel said.

"I know, Mom. I know. So, uh... what classes are we in?" Frisk suddenly got the wild idea, swiftly quashed, that if she didn't like the classes she got she was going to LOAD and damn everything else.

Toriel handed them their school schedules, which, as they discovered to their joy, matched: English, World History 2 (they'd done so well, they got into '2'?), Geometry, Lunch, Chemistry, Magical Theory, and the only time when they had to be split up, Physical and Magical Education. Frisk smiled at her mother, who definitely had some sort of sense about these things. Magical Theory was the class that had the things Frisk really wanted to know, and since it was separate from the practical portion, she'd be able to fully participate.

Asriel smiled and laughed, just staring at the header. "I'm seeing a school schedule... with 'Asriel Dreemurr' on it." Frisk understood why it was funny and started laughing along with him. "A school schedule. And it's got my name on it!" He abruptly stopped laughing for some reason. Frisk looked at her own name- despite everything that had happened, there was something comforting final about having official-looking paper labeled 'Frisk Dreemurr', like those words she'd spoken to Judge Saibancho had come back as a solid object.

She also handed each of them four books, which Frisk was surprised were physical objects and not files on laptops. There was no Magical Theory book; no one had written one, and Toriel said that
nobody with common sense would give kids Asmodeus' tomes to study. Gaster would simply have to wing it.

"Daddy wants to talk to you!" Victoria shouted, and Asriel, having heard their conversation, knew why.

"Yes, it happened the way she said it did," Asriel told him. *Oh. No wonder he stopped laughing.* "We had no way to know that was going to happen. She's **fine**. If you want to blame somebody, blame Gaster, or blame Alphys, everyone else does. Besides, Frisk won't let it happen. Yeah, I know she shouldn't, but she would. You know she would." Frisk knew she would, and it wasn't just because Victoria Riddle was one of the two last wizards. "Yeah, we start school tomorrow. Well, we'd be cheating on tests if we **did**. Okay. G'bye."

"He got mean?" Frisk asked.

"He's..." Asriel put down his phone and walked to Victoria, abruptly picking her up and letting her bury her face in his fur. *Here I am*, Asriel thought, *holding the child of my father's ancient enemies.* "Victoria, your dad loves you very, very much. And he worries about you. And maybe one day, when you've got kids of your own, you'll have to worry about them, too." *The way Mom doesn't need to worry about me anymore. I'm Frisk's problem now.* He put her down, and Toriel began fixing dinner, her children helping prepare for their father to come home.

Asgore was jovial; the plane from Japan had taken him straight to San Francisco, and for the second time around he'd managed to keep an appointment with the nation's leading liberals, a smattering of supposed luminaries from well-known technology companies and a handful of supposedly famous personages Frisk didn't care about. He'd come out of that meeting feeling like an insane clown had given him tasty pie instead of throwing it in his face. With only one chance to do it, he'd successfully given a speech that made them consider monsters- even the unintelligent ones- a protected class, as he had swiftly learned their lingo and learned to couch his arguments in their terms, and he could even do it without laughing. They really believed that a Moldsmal or a Loox could be considered equal to a human. They really believed, wanted desperately to believe, that a nearly 400-year-old Boss Monster, who'd read Shakespeare when the publications first came to the Americas, was taking the entirety of their silly little value systems seriously. Some of them had even emphasized that meeting’s contributions to history and extolled his contribution to it; Asgore knew who the most powerful person in history was, and she ate at his table and called him dad.

He told his family about it, an endeavor that involved a lot of unfamiliar words like 'intersectionality' (as if being a monster intersected with anything!) and 'ableism' (which he'd used in the right places but couldn't actually wrap his head around; he was the King, of course he'd want the more able beings serving him). Frisk was the only one who even partially understood any of what he was talking about. "Just to warn you, Dad," she warned, an eyebrow raised, "if I ever get told to check my human privilege, I'm gonna go talk to Chara." He broke out in a royal laugh, his huge frame shaking his chair, and Frisk found herself trying and failing to explain what any of it meant to her brother in the Jacuzzi.

The Dreemurr kids did nothing the next non-day, the kind of nothing that people do when they don't really care. Mom and Victoria were at school, Dad was at work talking to yet more people he was only pretending to like, and Frisk and Asriel had time and space to themselves. With unlimited everything, they blatantly played hookey, Jenkins eagerly driving them to the mall to buy as much candy as they pleased with a vigorous lilt in his voice. *He worships us now,* Frisk realized. *Maybe a LOAD saved someone in his family.* She wasn't going to ask. The Dreemurr siblings recognized the people at the candy store but of course they only recognized the Dreemurrs from TV, having
never seen them in person before.

Sitting on the couch with a bag of peppermint candy in her hand, her mouth tingling with the taste, Frisk added Sans to the 'now we know how that person's life feels' list; there wasn't a lot of point in doing things when they'd just be undone, and they'd done quite enough studying recently. They played video games, mostly a silly one that involved picking up objects with a growing, sticky ball. They watched the news, and one of the local anchormen seemed positively elated to report on a murder/suicide, the on-the-scene reporter trying to hide her glee that finally something violent was happening and that there hadn't been anything stopping it. "Sorry, guys," Asriel smugly said to the TV. "You're just going to remember another slooooow news day." Two more for the Count. I wonder when they'll find other things to report on. Or when the not-happening things become the news. It was, of course, possible or even likely that someone might figure it out on an unremembered day, that there had to be a reason that things had suddenly gotten worse, but of course that day would be unremembered, the figuring out undone. Would that cause people to commit crimes on those days but not remembered ones? Somebody else's problem. International news was more interesting to watch; Chara's forces were waging guerilla war around the Middle East and West Africa in clandestine platoons, pulverizing ISIS, Boko Haram, and a lot of groups that began with 'al-'. Frisk looked at Asriel, confused. "I have no idea." Then again, Chara knew the score; they could be as suicidal as they wanted today and much more conservative tomorrow. What they wanted or why, though, wasn't clear. Somebody. Else's. Problem. Asmodeus was going around interviewing lots of somebody elses, adult somebody elses who had been to college and some of whom had military ranks before their names.

But school wasn't somebody else's problem, and the Dreemurr kids agreed, laying awake in bed together, that they'd probably have problems like no other kids ever did.
SAVEing right before they had to get up to go to school probably wasn't one of Frisk's better ideas, she figured. She woke up to an alarm on a morning that didn't happen, LOADED, and then she was right there on a day that would happen for-realsies this time, and she was still a little bit tired and she hadn't pigged out on candy yesterday because her yesterdays didn't work like that anymore.

She reached out and killed her phone's alarm with her right hand, petting Asriel's ears with her left. Of course it'd woken him up too, but he pretended to sleep, his very light head resting on Frisk's chest right next to her heart, moving up and down as she breathed. She couldn't imagine how soothing those sounds must be for him.

"Come on, Az, clock's ticking," she said half-heartedly, although she still reached for her bracelets without getting up. Asriel kicked his foot out towards his own, and in a surprising display of magic and dexterity he unplugged them from the wall with his foot and flung them towards himself, and he reached a hand out from under the covers to catch them without really looking at them, his head still on his sister's chest.

"Why didn't we do homeschooling, again?" Frisk rhetorically asked, although she could think of plenty of good reasons not to, isolation first among them. "This is going to go horribly wrong, I just know it."

"Hey, you're supposed to be optimistic," her brother reminded her, still resting his head.

"That is optimistic, pessimistic is someone wants to call up Chara so starts gaining levels," she said, patting her brother twice. "Pessimistic is, us being there somehow leads to a monster freaking out and taking somebody's SOUL. I don't want to be pessimistic." She remembered what her brother had told her about despair, and that scared her on a much more fundamental level than anything that could happen in school. "C'mon, get up. We have to go, let's go."

He reluctantly got up, and they carefully engaged in their morning ritual. Yesterday... two days ago... whatever it was, they'd just engaged in a test. Today, they'd actually be in school, and for her first day Frisk felt obligated to look like royalty, so she meticulously, evenly brushed the excess fur out of Asriel's coat and told him to keep loose hair on her head from sticking out, and he was extra careful with cleaning her teeth. Sweater, pants, and socks of purple, tightly fused Dreemurr fur for her, the embedded red heart merging with the Delta Rune in the center, and a short-sleeved green shirt and loose jeans for him. She popped on her hairband and stuffed a pair of purple Dreemurr-fur gloves in her pockets, chuckling. "I feel like I'm living a sitcom. The Dreemurr Siblings Go to School! Stay tuned to see what wacky hijinks ensue!" Asriel, who had never heard the phrase 'wacky hijinks' before, started laughing.

"Morning, Dad, Mom," Asriel called down as they walked down the stairs.

"Good morning, children," Asgore rumbled, and they sat down to his table and enjoyed his wife's cooking, a traditional repast of bacon and peppered eggs. The two of them were clearly nervous about their schooling, and Asgore had no idea how to encourage them. But he had a poor habit of coming home after his children had gone to bed, and this was often the only time he got to talk to them in person, so he felt an obligation to say something: "What is it you fear the most?"

"Somebody asking me what I can do and how often I do it," Frisk replied. She'd memorized a lot of plausible lies and then decided just not to talk about it. "Somebody figuring out that a day I don't come to school is a day that doesn't happen." She chewed her lip for a moment. "And somebody
getting killed because things were different between days, and then I'd either have to triple a day just for one person or let him stay dead, and then I'd probably just stop going to school forever because me being there would have made someone die. And maybe people will beg me, and worship me, and treat me like a deity and I don't know if that's wrong."

Idleness clearly gave her too much time to worry, and Asgore didn't know how to respond as his wife comforted her. He had the opposite problem. In the West, the word 'monster' had lost any fear or reverence associated with it, and a lot of the Orient had adopted similar ideas. He'd just cancelled today's meeting with a group of Bangladeshi industrial executives, as he wanted never to have met them. They'd had the gall to suggest that Asgore could, would, or should use his powers of command to force lesser monsters to work on a clothing assembly line. He'd nearly killed all of them for the vile affront and their sickening demeanor; they had no right to enslave dreams, no matter how insignificant. There would have been no spear-catching there, as those people had never appeared in any sort of match, scripted or real, and Asgore was certain he could have impaled one of them on each prong of his spear before they had known what had hit them, then used their SOULs to fuel a cascading terror rampage that would have made Chara envious before he spat them out in disgust.

Even people with no malevolence in their SOULs treated lesser monsters as animals and greater monsters as somewhat odd humans. The former were repelled and attracted, scared away and baited; the latter were paid wages in a currency valid throughout an all-consuming economy. Offerings were just bird-feeding, rituals were left to fools and madmen. In every gathering of sane, rational, approachable humans, mysticism and mystery had gone the way of the passenger pigeon, a species Asgore missed. Good and evil had been reduced to numbers and psychology, magicians were scientists and science had lost its magic. Humans had put things into categories to assuage their fears, and they had been wonderfully effective at it. It made every kind of sense, but there was something altogether sterile about the industrialized world.

Then again, the larder was full, the house was warm, his wife was by his side, his daughter was an unkillable goddess even though she didn't want to admit it, and his son was resurrected, so who was he to complain?

"Time to go," Toriel said as Frisk finished her last bite.

"Mom!" Frisk protested, and Asgore was continuously amazed by Frisk's willingness to accept their parental authority. "It's half an hour early!"

"Would you like to arrive later and introduce yourself in the hallways?" Toriel asked, smiling, and Frisk obviously got her point.

Asgore hugged his children before they left, fur brushing against fur, wishing the best for both of them. But he didn't have two children. He had three. To know what the third child was doing, he had only to watch Al-Jazeera and Russia Today, which had been giving him a strange sort of hope.

"Dress warmly," Toriel recommended, and Frisk grudgingly let her mother wrap a purple, woolen scarf around her face before putting her jacket on, her mother guiding Asriel's ears into his hood. She checked their backpacks to make sure they brought everything (they'd forgotten their gym outfits, and she rushed upstairs to pack them), then she opened the door and Frisk winced against the bitter, biting pre-dawn cold, trying to shield her eyes against the wind as she stepped outside. No, forget that- she rushed back into the house and found her snowboarding goggles. The goggles did something, and she stuffed her gloved hands into her mittens, and Toriel took her children by the hand and rushed towards the school, Frisk and Asriel's shoes smoothly rolling downhill on the neatly shoveled sidewalks and streets. Frisk spied a yellow school bus stopped behind the military
cordon and hoped that the security procedures weren't out of the TSA handbook. *Security for monsters. For the royal family. For me. I'm holding hands with Mom while they're getting searched.* Oh yeah, school was shaping up to go swimmingly well.

Toriel held the door open for them, and so began their enrollment in the Donald J. Trump K-12 School. *Here we go.* Toriel left her children to do what a principal does all day, and they found their tall, spacious lockers in short order, because they were right next to the entrance, Asriel with locker 1 and Frisk with locker 3. *(Who's locker 2 for?)* Jackets and scarf off and in, backpacks in, first-period books, pencils, binders, and laptops out. Frisk finally felt like a student, although that didn't comfort her any.

"Hey, Dreemaaaz!" Frisk turned, expecting humans, and saw Snowdrake with another Icedrake she'd never seen before, who wore sunglasses and a backpack covered in unfamiliar symbols. "Mannnn, it's warm in here. Great outside, though! Name's Chillardrake, the number-one rebel! Thanks for helpin' Snowy's mom!"

"If you're the number-one rebel, what are you doing here?" Asriel asked before Frisk could.

"Well! I was goin' online, looking for people like myself to hang out with, and I found a buncha groups that were all about stickin' it to the man, droppin' out, all of that! But they're a bunch of conformists! It's all conspiracy this, and anarchist theory that! So I'm going to go through school, get my diploma, get a business degree, and go work for Goldman Sachs! Everybody hates those guys! That'll show 'em! C'mon, Snowy, let's get to our lockers and to English class!" Oh, no. That was Frisk and Asriel's first period, too.

The Dreemurrs found the room, and Mrs. McNulty greeted them as they came in. They sat up front (there was no point in sitting in the back; that'd only make the other kids turn their heads a lot), and the teacher said what she'd been practicing to say: "Good morning, your highnesses," *Swimmingly well.* "If you have any questions or concerns that you'd like to address with me before class begins, I'd be pleased to hear them."

"Uh, Mrs. McNulty, did they ever bring up in teacher college how to deal with royalty with time-reversing and solid-altering magic powers?" Frisk asked, and the teacher broke out in genuine, relieved laughter. "If I have to use my power you won't even know it, so just act like we're normal, okay?"

She smiled. "I'll try."

The Snowdrakes came in then, books awkwardly tucked under their feathers, and sat to their right. Mrs. McNulty was trying and failing to not be distracted looking at them, at the way their impossible teeth moved. "Do you need any kind of assistance?" They just looked at her, although with Chillardrake's sunglasses it was hard to tell. "Any help holding writing instruments?"

"Naw, babe, don't worry about it," Chillardrake said, spreading out his feathers and laying out his supplies. The teacher almost objected to 'babe' but realized she had no idea why any monster talked the way it did. "If his dad can do the whole office thing, we can too."

"There's snow way we coldn't be used to it by now," Snowdrake added.

"Hey, guys! You should talk to Huey!" Kid shouted as he came in, his full-body exoskeleton and prosthetic arms churning. Frisk was surprised he'd made it to a somewhat advanced class before remembering that he was a lot older than he looked. "Hey, Frisk! Hey, Asriel!"

"Hey, Kid," the Dreemurr siblings said together. Kid slapped five with the Drakes, holding his
stuff under one arm, and they enjoyed the cold touch of the metal. He sat to Frisk's left, smiling. The three Ice Caps came in then, sitting next to each other behind the Snowdrakes, a Vulkin (wearing a funny metal hat that had to be some sort of protective device, and who actually did need a human to help him write) sat near the back left, and the human kid who'd had the guts to sit to Asriel's right during the test sat behind Frisk, smiling.

"Oh, cool, we're in the same English class," he said. "Hey, Frisk, you don't remember me, do you?" Messily combed brown hair, blue eyes, a year or two older than her- she couldn't place him. Did she see him at Disney or something?

"No, where from?" Frisk asked.

"School," he replied. "I wasn't in any of your classes." Oh, that explained it. Frisk didn't even trust herself to remember the people in her old classes. "I'm Thomas." He held out a hand, and Frisk shook it, both of them smiling. It only took one, Frisk realized; if just one person could have a somewhat normal conversation with her, everyone else could too. "Those are some kickass bracelets. How did you get from striped-shirt kid to... actually, back up. Is all that stuff about you on the news true?"

"Yes, all of it. Absolutely everything on the news about me is absolutely guaranteed to be 100% true. Unless it came from the Sholeas family. Then it's lies." She looked around at the growing crowd, other humans, most older than her, very interested in this conversation. None of them were laughing, which she found surprising. "I'm just messing, I don't even know what they're saying anymore."

"Is the time stuff true?" he asked, his face wrinkling up.

"Especially the time stuff, and I won't tell you how many times I've already told you that." It took him a moment to realize what she was talking about, and a couple of students chose that moment to find nearby desks.

He leaned back at his desk. "How'd you get that?"

"Fell down a hole."

"You fell down a hole."

"She fell down a hole," Asriel said.

"I should jump down holes."

"Don't, it's dangerous," Frisk told him.

"You know that reversing time breaks the laws of thermodynamics?" an older boy asked. He was ginger-haired and freckled, and he looked to be a year or two older than Thomas.

"Call the thermodynamics police," Frisk suggested. Chilldrake and some other students laughed.

"No, I mean, the universe, itself, is broken if you can do that."

"Yeah, that's what a wizard told us," Asriel said, shrugging.

"What, we've got wizards now?" Thomas asked, and Frisk suddenly visualized a swarm of tiny Asmodeuses (Asmodei?) swarming someone's house and started laughing. "Time manipulators, monsters, wizards, and the Devil." Thomas looked around, as if suddenly realizing that he shared a
classroom with two out of four. "This is seriously screwed up."

Frisk almost answered with no, really? sarcasm before deciding that it was unbecoming of a princess. "You get used to it," she said, and the announcements came on.

Over the intercom, Toriel welcomed the students to the first day of school, delivering a brief, prepared speech about the need for cooperation between humans and monsters. She didn't mention her children, but she did end with "Remember our motto: Treat every day like it counts!" Thanks, Mom.

The teacher began the class by introducing herself and calling roll. ("Asriel Dreemurr?" "Here!" - Frisk found that exchange far more absurd than DETERMINATION) The ginger-haired boy was named Franklin, and the dark-haired girl next to Thomas was Susan, and a quick glance showed that, even while answering her name, she couldn't stop staring at Frisk. Well, that was to be expected. Mrs. McNulty went over the syllabus, talked about how she was going to begin with a brief focus on English grammar, just to make sure that everyone had the same foundation, and go into classical poetry and literature, with a focus on alliterative and rhyming techniques, and then she immediately started in on verb tenses, which Frisk found surprising. Most teachers at her old school didn't actually start trying to teach anything until after the first week. Then again, if Mom thought any of our teachers were wasting our time, she'd probably fire them Trump style. It was only halfway through the teacher's explanation of what "perfect" meant in the verb tense sense, and why it didn't actually mean "perfect", that Frisk realized what she wasn't talking about: that almost half her class was from another dimension. Probably something Mom told her to do.

"Now, does anyone recognize this tense?" the teacher asked, gesturing to the words 'will have' on the whiteboard.

Kid raised his hand (vrrrr...) and the teacher gestured to him. "That's for time travelers!" he piped up, and Frisk could have strangled him.

She laughed. "Not always! Can anyone use it in a sentence?"

If I unhappen going to school, I won't have heard you ask that. Frisk kept her mouth shut, and so did everyone else. Asking for class participation, it seemed, was a bridge too far for the first day.

"Okay, well, if I teach this class until June, I will have taught an English course to a mixed-species class. I will have been," she continued, writing 'future perfect continuous' on the board, "one of the first people to do so." She continued in much the same vein until the bell rang- an old-fashioned chime- and the students started to file out the door. The bell rang before I knew it. Frisk couldn't remember the last time that had happened, other than when the teacher really had nothing to do and put on a movie for the class. She'd been used to whiling away her too-easy classes watching the clock, waiting to get out of there and be alone. She clearly wasn't alone in that, though; a lot of the other kids probably came from lousy schools, too, and then there were the monsters. We're all aliens here.

"Homework!" Mrs. McNulty called out, handing out simple worksheets of 'use each tense three times in a sentence'. Homework the first day, and on paper, even. Childrake accepted it in his teeth without eating it.

"Hey, Frisk," Thomas called, following her down the hall. Oh boy, here we go. The other students were coming out of their classrooms, seeing the star attraction; just like you didn't go to Disney World not to ride the rides, your parents didn't get you into the monster school so you couldn't see the monsters and their human princess with the godlike powers. "Just, real quick," he whispered at her. "Have you ever thought about making bets with this?"
"I'm not doing the casino thing," Frisk replied, annoyed. **That** was the thing he wanted to talk about? She thought he'd gotten a grip on the situation, and then he comes out and asks **that**?

"No, I mean, like the stock market."

"Like I said, I'm not doing the casino thing. **Seriously?**" she asked, loudly in front of everybody. That was probably mean, but she didn't have time for this and wanted to put it to a fast and permanent halt. "I can mess with the **universe** and you're asking me to **make money** with it?" He almost replied, but with thirty people right there and more coming, he decided to save what face remained by just breaking off, going "Whatever," and leaving the area. Frisk rolled down the hall to her locker, feeling the stares crawling on her back. Still annoyed, she turned around. "How long is everybody going to follow me? Don't you have **class** to go to?" 'Everybody' was only about a dozen people this time, but Asriel's face briefly rippled and they got the hint. There wasn't a single human in school who hadn't watched The Video.

"Well, it wasn't **that** bad, I guess?" Asriel asked as they exchanged books. The history book was fatter and heavier than the English book; Frisk hadn't considered their physical size back when her mother had asked her to judge them. "Nobody fell to his knees and started bowing down or something weird like that."

"Yeah, I shoulda known that was going to happen. Maybe in some other country they would have bowed down, but people don't do that here. Watch me get so much 'Hey Frisk, what are the answers to the test, because you took it before?'" Asriel nodded.

"I have to admit something," Asriel quietly said as they found their way to the classroom. "I'm not too upset that so many people stare at you."

"Why's that?"

"Because if they're staring at you, they're not staring at me," he replied, shrugging, and Frisk missed the simpler time when he was just trying to kill her with a laser cannon.

Other kids had taken the front-row seats in their next class, and they were surprised to see Frisk and her brother sitting behind them, and Asriel was surprised to find that he was the only monster in the room. He shouldn't have been surprised, he realized. World history was human history, and how many monsters had a good grasp on that? Frisk smirked at him- Your turn to get stared at!- but there was very little staring done. Except for Susan, who had followed them from English class, everyone else in the room was high schoolers who had clearly been told by their parents or had just decided not to mess with Frisk. She recalled what Asmodeus had told her, and extrapolated it: the more mature you are, the more you're shocked by fundamental changes to reality.

And Mr. Reed, the somewhat elderly teacher with bad eyesight, must have been mature indeed. He was clearly deeply shaken and fighting through it to deliver a decent class, and Frisk briefly wondered if he'd recently lost a loved one to unforeseen tragedy, which was extremely unlikely given the rising Count. He outlined the class, spelled out what parts of the book they would and wouldn't be using, and even gave a brief, credible aside on why he thought monsters weren't included in the history books; it was difficult to be taken seriously when your trophies turned to dust and any captive could dig a hole in the wall. Asriel perked up, realizing something, and Frisk realized it after a brief moment: he'd mentioned that monsters turn to dust. How would he know that? Who told him and why? That little tidbit wasn't on the news channels, was it? If he knew from personal experience, there was going to be some very ugly student-teacher relations in the very near future, but the Dreemurr siblings tacitly decided not to bring it up until after class.
For him, outlining the syllabus took nearly the entire time, and he did get plenty of class participation, asking various students what they already knew about Charlemagne, the Saracens, Saladin, and a lot of other people Frisk had barely heard of. There was a lot of pretense in that room; the students pretended not to recognize Frisk and pretended there was nothing wrong with the teacher, and the pretense held up for the 55-minute class period.

He didn't give any homework, and most of the other students left the room, only a couple of them glanced back. There was a brief moment of silence in which the remaining students waited for the others to go first. "Hey, um..." Frisk started. "How do you know monsters turn to dust?"

Mr. Reed took a deep breath. "My son told me. He was... he was in Kansas. He was one of them, you know who I mean." He turned to look at her, and Frisk realized this was the first time he'd done that directly, his light brown eyes piercing. "And then you and whoever saved him, removed that, and he's been a hermit ever since. Why am I in here?" he asked abruptly. "Why am I in here teaching history to someone like you?"

"Because I don't know history," Frisk answered.

One of the other kids, who was almost certainly pushing 16, spoke up. "Hey, throughout history, aren't there a lot of people who have power and still don't know important stuff? Like King George the Third, uh, Tutankhamun, wasn't he like 9?"

"That's why Frisk said we should be here," Asriel added. "We were actually talking about not coming."

The teacher smiled a bit, his mood brightening. "I suppose so. Omnipotence without omniscience is a dangerous thing." He shook his head. "I hope to live long enough to see what happens after I've taught someone who makes history. Go on, you have other classes." They went on. Having their lockers at the entrance wasn't all that great after all; a locker midway between most of their classes would have been better. And there was still no sign of the mysterious owner of Locker 2.

Geometry, next; the class was nearly full by the time the Dreemurrs got there, mostly of children Frisk's age (Susan among them) and monsters (Snowdrake and Childdrake among them), and Frisk felt a twinge of guilt and regret that she wasn't in a more advanced class. Then again, it wasn't her fault she'd never been taught these things before she went into the sixth grade. With a start, she realized that there were two desks left open for her and her brother; to the right of Asriel sat Kid, a big smile on his face, and to the left of Frisk sat a light-skinned black kid who waved to her as if he knew her, but she had no idea who he was. The bell rang almost as soon as they sat down, and Ms. Nguyen began the class in much the same way Mrs. McNulty had, although she seemed more personable, more approachable, although there was something vaguely off-kilter, as if she were asking her students for permission to teach them. Asriel figured it out first, and Frisk figured it out after fifteen minutes: She left the seats open for us. She's like that because she thought she had to be. Because we're royalty. Hoooo boy. The class, as she explained, would discuss parallelism, angles, symmetry, three-dimensional shapes, several mathematical formulae, pre-trigonometry, and an ancient Greek method of performing geometry that taught the fundamentals with no mathematics at all. Weird. But she made a point of making it all make sense to the class. She issued them rulers, protractors, and compasses, and their homework was to use them to draw a perfect square, an equilateral triangle, and a 3/4/5 triangle.

The period after that was the one Frisk dreaded the most: Lunch. Which wasn't just 'lunch', being an hour long. You couldn't really shove a half-hour lunch into an hour-long class structure, not without adding a half-hour of something stupid, so Toriel had kept the library open and encouraged students to use it for homework and projects, which Frisk found odd but useful; students were
much less likely to bother the Dreemurrs while they were studying.

Frisk looked back, and sure enough they were being followed, Susan and the black kid trailing them more directly than anyone else. "Hey..." she started.

"Hey, Frisk," he said, awkwardly tucking his stuff under one arm and holding out his hand. Frisk did the same and shook it. "I'm Jack. You want to go get this homework done? It's super easy." Susan nodded.

"My thoughts exactly," Frisk agreed, and they made their way to the library (just as in the mall, the curious followers didn't enter specific rooms), bypassing the desk marked D. Drazen, Head Librarian and its older occupant and heading for a large study carrel.

"Okay, show us, how is this easy?" Asriel asked, confused.

"It's pretty simple, Prince," Jack said, shrugging. "All you have to do is get a ruler, and measure three angles... what am I thinking, you don't need to do that. Here." He figured out the protractor and drew a single 60-degree angle, marked off two three-inch lines, then connected the two lines at their ends. "Yeah, that has to be." He measured, and of course the other angles were 60 degrees. "And for 3, 4, 5, the instructions just say it. It's a right triangle, that means 90 degrees, we can just measure. There we go." The other three nodded and followed his example; it really was easy, and squares were easier. "This isn't the easiest homework I've had, though. You would not believe some of the Ess Aitch Eye Tee I got in my old school."

"If it was that easy, why'd they give it to you?" Asriel asked.

"'Cause they had to give us somethin'! Half of those... fools" Asriel didn't know what word he almost said, but Frisk did. "didn't even do that! They wouldn't even give us-" He pulled out the compass Ms. Nguyen had given him. "They wouldn't give us something like this, and this isn't even that sharp." He lightly pressed the slightly dulled point against his finger. Asriel stared at him, confused, and he looked into Asriel's eyes and spoke slowly. "Because people would get stabbed."

"Then why are those people in school?" Asriel asked.

"'Cause it's cheaper than sending them to prison, I guess. I am so glad to be outta there, you don't even know." Frisk sort of did know, although her old school wasn't quite that bad. Jack turned to Frisk, smiling. "And it's 'cause of you I'm here."

"How's that?" Frisk asked. "Other than the whole monsters out of the Underground thing."

"Of how many lives our princess saves every day." Frisk winced unnoticeably; he just had to give away that it was daily. She'd wanted to trick people into thinking it was every week, so when they first saw the lack of news they'd think it was a final week. "And it's up there."

"He doesn't tell you when I do it, does he?" Frisk asked.

"No," Jack said, clearly frustrated at that.

"I'm not going to tell you, either," Frisk said. "If people start doing stuff thinking it's not going to
happen for real, and then it does happen, what happens? Why do you think Mom made the motto 'Treat every day like it counts'?

"That's really 'cause of you?" Jack asked. "Yeah, I guess it would be."

"Treat every day," Frisk reiterated, "like it counts. I don't want anyone worrying about what I'm doing, I don't want people acting weird. When I do my thing, for everyone else in the world, all that changes is the inside of some people's brains. Everything else just goes on like usual. And I'm not even going to tell you how many times I've told you that."

Jack put his hands on his head, looking down. "Man, this world got messed up."

"Everybody always says something like that," Frisk said, "and it's always true."

"Frisk, can you make me one?" Susan suddenly asked. "Of the people who know when it happens. I... my mom is dying of cancer. I just want..." Her eyes scrunched up and she started crying. "I just want to spend more time with her."

"Have you had monsters try to remove it?" Asriel asked, surprising her. "To take out the, what are those called, the tumors?" She didn't answer right away and Asriel scowled. "Or are you just lying about it because you want power?"

"She has a rare-"

"I can hear it in your voice."

Wordlessly, with real tears this time, Susan picked up her belongings and left. Asriel and Frisk felt twinges of pity. Even though no other humans had heard the conversation, and she really had it coming, everyone else in the library could see that she'd just been run off by the school's actual royalty and so RIP her social life.

"Can he do that?" Jack asked Frisk, pointing to her brother. He seemed more impressed by Asriel's hearing than Frisk's DETERMINATION and looked at him with awe. "Can you do that?"

"Not when they're good liars," Asriel explained, shaking his head, his ears wobbling back and forth. "Most of you have no idea what you sound like, what you say between your words." Asriel had been receiving heavy education in that subject every time he was around large groups of people. Occasionally, he overheard something, spoken or not-quite-spoken, that brought merit to Chara's point of view. "Come on, let's get some lunch."

"You wanna go down to Pizza Hut?" Jack asked. "School food always sucks."

"My mom is the principal," Asriel reminded him. "If the food sucks here, I'll be very surprised."

Asriel was very unsurprised. The fare served in the cafeteria was a free buffet of actual food, platters of bread, corn, peas, chicken, and rice, and the people whose job it was to prepare it clearly knew what they were doing. Frisk inhaled the rich scents, a smile on her face. Her old school's cafeteria had reeked of mold and ground-up rat meat left in a ditch for three days. Kid and the Vulkin were sitting at their own octogonal table (people got out of the way of Kid's attachments, thinking he was disabled instead of augmented), and as Frisk and her companions joined them, the social Dance of Tables began almost immediately- people found seats near Frisk but not at her table like they were wingless Tsunderplanes. Oh, God, not this. At her old school, nobody really wanted to sit next to Frisk, and at her new school, everyone did, and she couldn't decide which was worse. She looked around for the Icedrakes, but either they'd gone outside in the cold for lunch
(sensible, given what they were) or had lunch at a different period. There was a small clique of
teenage girls (what, already?) but they didn't have the courage to go up to Frisk, but a small,
mousy girl with glasses, a pale complexion, and straight brown hair simply sat down at the table,
looking at her food. That was me. Except for the glasses and the hair and the skin color, I'm
looking at me.

"Hey, you all right?" Asriel asked. He heard something in her breathing, stuttery and fearful, that
he didn't like.

"Yeah," she said quietly, but over the din of the lunchroom no one but him could hear her.

"Come on. You sat here for a reason. What's wrong?"

She looked up at him, smiling at his fluffy face. "Mom got me in here because of my grades, but
Dad doesn't want me here, he hates monsters, so he's suing Mom so she can't." Frisk wondered
what her grades were, as they hadn't shared any of the same classes, but she knew a messy divorce
victim when she saw one. "I know you had a big custody thing that you won, can you win mine?
Mom can't even afford a lawyer."

Frisk and Asriel looked at each other. "Here, what's your name?"

"Nicole."

"Okay, Nicole, give me your mom's phone number," Frisk said, and the girl walked around to
Frisk's side of the table to whisper it. "We can afford a lawyer."

"Oh, that's right, you've got the skeleton man!" Jack exclaimed, smiling at Nicole. "Skeleton man
wins." Frisk chuckled as she dialed; skeleton man was clumsy and had lost badly the first time
they'd met. Jack was probably talking about Frisk's custody battle, but she didn't want to
demoralize Nicole by saying how many tries that one took.

Of course the call went to voicemail; as a successful or at least well-known lawyer, Papyrus
couldn't guarantee that he'd pick up on the second ring anymore. "YOU'VE REACHED THE LAW
OFFICES OF PAPYRUS, PAPYRUS, AND PAPYRUS! PLEASE LEAVE YOUR NAME,
PHONE NUMBER, AND HOW GUILTY YOU ARE AND I'LL GET BACK TO YOU WHEN I
CAN PROTECT YOU FROM JUSTICE!" Frisk blinked, wondering if she'd heard that right, but
left a message anyway, cupping her hand over her phone; although she didn't tell Papyrus how
guilty Nicole's family might or might not have been, she did tell him to work pro bone-o for this
one.

"He'll call your mom when he can," Frisk said. She couldn't promise this girl that she'd win, not the
way the Dreemurrs won, and Frisk's mind turned to more sure-fire solutions because she had a
sneaking suspicion Nicole's dad was quite a bit worse than a monster hater. Given proper
motivation (a casual suggestion would probably do it), Asriel could simply reduce Nicole's father
to unidentifiable ashes and that would be that. With her clout and connections (Oh God, help me, I
have clout and connections), Frisk could probably have made a phone call to someone else and he
would never have been heard from again, while her old school's cafeteria would have been
supplied with however many more pounds of mystery meat. (The lunch ladies there never really
cared who they were serving.) But Frisk still didn't want to do things like that and she could call in
a panoply of less violent favors.

"Thank you," Nicole said, and suddenly hugged Frisk fiercely, the small crowd staring, before she
returned to her food. Frisk looked around. C'mon, say something. Any of you. I dare you. There
were only a couple of "Awwww"s from the peanut gallery. The Dreemurrs played with their
Nicole did share a class with them after all; she sat next to Frisk in chemistry, and Mr. Lowe was up-front about the syllabus. It was straightforward chemistry fare for kids new to the subject: the periodic table, acids, bases, valences, electron shells. The usual. "There's one more caveat," he said. "This class is for ordinary chemical reactions. There will be a lab component. Any use of magic to change your results is cheating." He'd said that multiple times that day and still couldn't believe what he was saying. (You are not allowed to break the laws of physics in this class. Hey! No! Stop it!) Asriel and the other monsters had no idea how to change such results and hoped that Gaster would teach them later that day. "Going back in time because you didn't like how your reaction turned out is also cheating." Frisk just sniggered at him, and he had to look at her to realize that the snigger meant Like I'd really do that and not You can't stop me. Like all chemistry courses, the first one focused on safety, and he made it clear that he really had no idea what certain strong chemicals would do to monster physiology. Neither did the monsters.

The next class, the one Frisk anticipated the most, was Magical Theory. It was the flipside of history class; this time, Frisk was the only human in the room, and she knew that Victoria would be similarly alone when she was old enough to take it. It was comforting, relaxing; human drama could not follow her here. And then Gaster started talking and her relaxation went away.

It wasn't that he was a bad teacher, per se. He spoke very clearly and he gave examples (DETERMINATION among them), he even explained Asmodeus' books and cleared up ambiguities as he broadly introduced his subject, but the ways in which he connected his concepts made little sense to Frisk and she felt like she was missing something, so she opened up her laptop and started furiously taking notes, particularly when he started making up words for emotions that he explained with detailed examples. She resolved to start recording him for next time. Asriel had been quite right; monsters treated feelings and concepts like quantities of physical objects, as completely impossible as that was. By the time he was done, her fingers hurt, and she remembered to save her notes before closing her laptop.

"I guess this is where we part ways," Asriel said, as they rolled down the hall together, Frisk putting away her books and getting out her gym uniform. The two of them couldn't help but look at their bracelets, even though their failure would just be an insta-LOAD despite everything else. They rolled in the same direction, looking at each other curiously.

"Where are you going?" Asriel asked Frisk.

"Where are you going?" Frisk asked Asriel.

"I'm going to the gym, the entrance on the far side of the hall."

"I'm going to the gym, the entrance on the near side of the hall. 'Near' just means 'closer', right?"

"Yeah. Are we just in the same room, or, oh, I see," he said, looking in. Frisk rolled- alone- into the extremely spacious gym, which would have been twice as spacious if not for the gigantic, flexible divider separating it into two halves. She could hear energetic spells being cast on the other side of it, and if Frisk could hear them spellcasting then of course Asriel could hear Frisk. As one of the first girls there (someone else was using the shower), she rolled into the locker room, pulled the wheels out of her shoes (she had to shove her gym shirt in to get a good grip), and used a small, private stall to change into her purple, lightweight shirt and shorts, the Delta Rune with its own red heart still on her chest. There are private changing stalls thank you so much Mom. A crisis she'd been trying not to think about had been averted. She'd forgotten to get a lock for the gym lockers, so she found an out-of-the-way locker and carefully arranged her stuff in it, memorizing its
position; if someone did get in (would someone really do that here?), she'd at least know.

"Hey, Frisk," Undyne said, getting out of the shower.

"Hey, Undyne WHAT?!!" Frisk blurted out. Undyne put back on her uniform, which prominently featured the words 'Snail Pride' (Mom, you didn't!) on the shirt and a coach's whistle over that (Mom, you didn't!), and before Frisk could find just the right amount of boulder-crushing expletives to describe what she thought of Undyne being her gym teacher, other girls started walking in and Frisk went back onto the gym floor to wait and hang out. Thomas and Susan were there, and they avoided Frisk's glances; Jack and Nicole were there, talking, and Frisk greeted them.

"Still got the bracelets," Jack pointed out.

"They're for an extremely rare medical condition," Frisk replied. "Spontaneous Floral Reversion Syndrome. Don't even look at me like that. It's magic, and I'm not explaining it."

"Is the gym teacher really a monster?" Nicole asked, changing the subject.

"Yes." In more ways than one. "I can't even explain what's going to happen here. Just hold onto your butts."

Either Jack or Nicole might have said something, but Undyne came bursting out of the locker room, yelling.

"GOOD AFTERNOON, CLASS! IT IS TIME! FOR YOUR! PHYSICAL! EDUCATION! NNNNGGGAAAAHHHHH! EVERY ONE OF YOU GIVE ME TWENTY! PUSHUPS! NOW!"

Startled, the class did as she said, boys and girls rushing out of the locker rooms, Undyne examining everyone's technique, lavishing praise on the kids doing it right and brutal criticism ("NOT LIKE THAT, ARE YOU TRYING TO HUG THE GROUND??!") on the kids doing it wrong. Frisk had done it before (there were kids who hadn't done pushups? Apparently there were) and so got praise, although Undyne told her to keep her hands closer to her shoulders, which of course made things harder. And then when they all were done, Undyne sent them into jumping jacks, once again correcting poor form.

At least the physical education was actual education. Frisk hadn't known that there were different kinds of pushups before Undyne showed the class. Sit-ups, crunches, and different kinds of handstands were touched upon, and while Undyne was exactly as merciless as Frisk had expected her to be, Frisk and all the other students felt up to the challenge. Even the fat kids didn't complain even though the fat kids always complained, and Frisk wondered how the flying heck Undyne pulled that off (because raw intimidation only went so far) before she looked down at her own chest and realized that the red heart had turned green as her SOUL had gained a similar aspect. How did she do that?! Mom bought packs of these things at a craft store!

But of course Undyne didn't have the power to make their bodies do more than they physically could and after an hour of exercise with minimal rest periods, including being chased around by Undyne after her heart turned red again (not for the first time), Frisk nearly collapsed. She didn't even know, couldn't even guess how much power Asriel had drained. All she knew was that some of the other kids were complaining, not because of the workout but because Undyne hadn't left them time to shower, and that she wanted greatly to go home and rest. She changed clothes—no one had disturbed her stuff— and rolled out, muscles burning. Asriel was waiting for her at their lockers, and they put their jackets on and started walking home (no rolling uphill, not really) to the envy of
the other human students, who were waiting for their buses to get a move on. At least it wasn't murderously cold anymore.

"I wish I'd known Undyne was going to do that," Asriel said as they walked up.

"What, become my gym teacher? Wear me out? Imitate, what's his name, that drill sergeant guy?"

"No, change your SOUL. Kinda threw me for a bit."

"Yeah, how does that even... never mind, question for Gaster. And I'm still trying to figure out how this all works."

"It all made perfect sense to me." Asriel smiled. "Don't worry. Your chemistry is going to confuse me."

Sans was waiting for them at home, babysitting Victoria as usual. She looked relaxed and attentive and showed no signs of crying, so Frisk guessed she hadn't engaged in anything particularly destructive. (She'd actually fused some Legos together, which had taken a monster's touch to un-fuse.)

"heyo, you two," Sans greeted them.

"Hey, Sans," the Dreemurr kids greeted him back. "Oh, ah, your brother should be doing another custody case," Frisk told him. "Make sure he wins. Capiche?"

"i gotcha. sounds like you made a new friend."

"I don't know, Sans, you think maybe I might have made new human friends in the school full of humans?"

"well, you didn't make 'em smelling like that."

"How would you know, you don't have a nose!"

"that's how bad you reek." The problem was, he was telling the truth, and Asriel had been smelling her the whole time, and Frisk pulled off her sweat-covered sweater on her way up to the tub. *They'll all be on buses while I'm in a Jacuzzi. Nyah, nyah, nyah-nyah nyah.*

Frisk felt like hell, but the first touch of just-hot-enough water was bliss. "What did we sign up for?" she asked, relaxing in pure decadence, shampooing her brother's fur. "This felt like the longest day of my life. Well, okay, the longest day when people weren't trying to kill me."

"Think about everyone else, though," Asriel said. "We get to skip days, they don't."

"Yeah, I know. And all of them have to go to school with a girl with reality-changing DETERMINATION, who they still don't know how to deal with. Still, Az. Still." She leaned forward to let her brother clean up her hair.

"Hey, just think!" Asriel exclaimed, a wide, princely smile on his face. "We get to do this again four more times before Christmas! And then we get to do it again for months!" Frisk's eyes rolled, and she splashed him, and they got into a vigorous splashing match before Frisk realized she didn't have the energy for it. She barely had enough energy to put on a comfortable dress and start on her English homework, simple as it was. Toriel came home shortly after her children were done putting sentences together.
"Mom!" Frisk shouted, walking down the stairs. "Why did you make lunch an hour? Why did you make P.E. an hour?"

"Because I do not know what your classmates' home environments are like," Toriel explained. "I need to make sure that everyone has at least minimal time to eat, study, and exercise."

"That wasn't minimal at all! Undyne used her green-whatever to make us all keep up with her! For an hour!"

"And that is why I placed her in that position. There are a lot of children in your age group who are on the path to early demise by ill health. It is as long as it is to match the needs of the schedule, and it is only 55 minutes." Frisk just stared at her: only? "I suppose I can instruct her to be less... intense." Frisk chuckled. Asking Undyne to be less intense was like asking a lead brick to stop being heavy.

"Please, just, more rests at least?" Frisk asked. "Before some fat kid ruptures something and gets a very early demise?"

"I will tell her. Other than that, how was school?"

"Oh, y'know, the usual. One kid who asked to use my power to make money, another kid who lied about her mom having cancer to try to get power, another kid who's probably really going to figure everything out because his dad's a rememberer, and finally, a kid who's engaged in some kind of divorce court custody mess just because she's going to our school. I called up Papyrus for that one. Oh, and there's Childrake, who's going to grow up to cause another, what's that called, too-big-to-fail financial crisis just because he's a rebel. And don't forget all the people who want to follow me around because I'm the princess of time but are too chicken because Azzy can gobble them up like Twinkies and I'm the princess of time." Frisk inhaled and then exhaled sharply. "I think I'm going to SAVE before bed tonight."

"As always, it is your decision," Toriel said, smiling, "my princess of time."
Frisk was lying next to her brother on the comfortable couch, watching the news at a 90-degree angle with her head resting on the end cushion. That was the nice thing about having parents so much larger than humans: you always had plenty of room. Most of Asriel's body was lying on the side of Frisk's ankle-length housedress, a comfortable, lilac thing made of cotton, Dreemurr fur and the telltale red heart, which his head rested on. They watched the news for lack of better things to do, although today was a to-be-unhappened Thursday so who really cared? The last couple of school days had been, for lack of a better word, tolerable; Frisk's teachers had started treating her like just another student, Susan had stopped coming to that school, Thomas kept a respectful distance and never talked to Frisk, Jack still hung out with the Dreemurrs at school (I really should invite him over sometime, but that might make his life harder), Nicole had given an embarrassing and clearly rehearsed thank-you to Frisk for the legal services, right in the middle of lunch (Frisk had given an equally formal you're-welcome, and it was mortifying for everyone involved), and Gaster hadn't gotten happened and unhappened timelines confused. He had, however, come along each morning, specialized flask in hand, to give the Dreemurr kids homework on unhappened days: Asriel had to extract an emotion from Frisk. The first day had been happiness, and that was the easiest thing in the world to come by; Asriel had gently touched the not-a-needle to the side of Frisk's head and carefully intoned a couple of syllables, and Frisk's sensation of happiness suddenly evaporated, replaced moments later as her brain continued being happy. The second had been fear, and that meant 'go download a horror game'; Gaster had said that the vial was full of anxiety and dread rather than true fear, but it was close enough and what could Frisk possibly be truly afraid of anyway? The third was calm, which Gaster explained was a proper emotion and not just the lack of them.

"Hey, Az, you can do Gaster's homework now," she said, and her brother magicked the vial off the table as the weatherman informed residents near the Mt. Ebbot area that, yes, it would in fact be quite cold for the poor unfortunates who had to go outside today. As her calm went away, poured into a vial, she wondered if any weathermen were rememberers. ('Your high today is 33 degrees. I know, because I was there."

The weather went away, replaced by the news, and it was apparently a slow news day - but it could never be a slow news day, not on an original day, and it took Frisk a couple of seconds after the anchorman said "Next up, we hear from a man who just got a call telling him to return his medicine to the hospital" to react. Just got? That was impossible.

"Does he know he's reporting lies?" Frisk asked.

"Yes," Asriel replied immediately. "It sounds like he's afraid, too, like he thinks that he dies when you LOAD." There had been a lot of debates about that on the Internet, the chans first among them. On the unhappened yesterday, Frisk had anonymously informed some particularly paranoid man that, no, he would be very much the same person as he was because that's what not remembering anything meant; in reply, she had been called a shill and a great many other things, alongside pictures of a smiling man with cold hands and an excellent sense of smell. Frisk had almost decided to take a selfie with Az and post it with her identity but decided that it was really better not to talk to these people or even read what they had to say. I'm trying to SAVE the world, and these people are trying to fit that into their conspiracy theories. Some people would never be happy.
She sighed. "I bet they'll just run the same fake story over and over again, too." Over and over again to rememberers, not to the masses. She didn't know what kind of backroom deals Trump and FEMA did to censor the news, but of course the censorship was unhappened right along with everything else and so it would never go to court. (It happened in a timeline that didn't happen' was not valid evidence in any court; the police either prevented crimes or caught people in the act.) Frisk turned off the TV; what was the point of watching news that wasn't even real? She played with her brother's ears instead, eliciting a few soft bleats, her extracted calm returning. "It's a shame that stuff doesn't keep very long," she said. "Can you imagine selling it?"

Asriel chuckled. "Happiness and calm in a bottle! Actual happiness for sale, guaranteed to make you briefly happy. These statements are not approved by the whatever that is."

"That would be pretty bad. You want to do Mom's homework now?" In lieu of anything extra to actually study, Toriel gave them a book a day to broaden their horizons.

"Okay, you read Japanese comic books right to left, right?" Toriel had heard that there was a manga series with snails in it but didn't have time to read it herself, so she'd given her children all three volumes of Uzumaki to read.

"I think so, I've only seen a few."

"That reminds me, what are we going to give Papyrus for Christmas?" Asriel abruptly looked up at Frisk, as her heart started beating more quickly.

"I completely forgot I can give people things now!" Frisk Sholeas had lacked the money and the friends to even consider giving anyone anything for Christmas, and her gifts had ranged from school supplies to low-quality knockoff game devices from the dollar store. Frisk Dreemurr, with an eight-digit personal spending allowance, had only anticipated it as an excuse to spend time with family and friends. The idea that she'd be expected to give presents took her entirely off-guard. What would she give Papyrus? Or Sans? Or their parents? Or Kid, or Undyne, or Alphys, or everyone else she knew? She could have her brother and possibly her parents help with those things, make the gifts from 'The Dreemurrs' instead of just herself, but what on earth would she give her father, her mother, her brother?! She couldn't even really conspire with anyone else, not over voice anyway; Asriel would surely hear her. (She briefly lamented the loss of privacy, but she couldn't blame him for knowing what was going on with his life support system.) What could she possibly even buy him? What could he possibly even buy her? What, exactly, do you give to the royalty who has everything? She had to give something that she knew he'd like, that was how Christmas worked, but outright asking him was crass. She considered making him something, and that was what he'd surely do for her, but even if she could sew or build, how could her clumsy human efforts match his magic? She could give him a... but they already had... but they already didn't have, and she could get it. It'd be tricky, but she could call people to get around 'tricky'.

Smiling, she petted her brother's ears some more as he picked up the first volume of one of Junji Ito's most famous works.

Five minutes later, they realized that their mother hadn't read it herself and had made a poor choice.

Fifteen minutes later, they agreed that Gaster should have given them yesterday's homework today.

"None of this is possible, is it?" Frisk asked when they were done, wishing for another vial or several to extract her fear. "Any of it?" Last month, she could have easily dismissed it all as just a scary book, but that was before she fell down a hole.

"I don't know of any kind of magic, any kind of spells, that can do any of this stuff," Asriel said, trembling a bit. "Our universe might be broken, but it's not this broken."
"Okay, yeah, change of subject. Let's start with the easy one, what do you want to get Victoria?"

They talked Christmas for a long while. The monsters' tradition had been focused on things that the monsters could make for each other; in the modern human world, where you could just buy more or less anything, the personal aspects were depleted- but, hey, there was plenty of cool stuff! Asriel pointed out that the only kids who could ever get lavish Christmas gifts in human society were the kids who didn't really need them, and Frisk briefly felt guilty about being so exceedingly, gobsmackingly rich before dismissing it with a smile. She and Asriel deserved it, and all her friends did too, and that was before the Count came into play. *I save a thousand people's lives every day- who's going to tell me I don't deserve opulence?* Besides, the Dreemurrs had a Christmas charity event coming up, and her parents planned on giving money to assorted worthy causes. There would be various charities vying for their funding, and their representatives would be disappointed the first time around; the first Christmas, Frisk intended to spend with her closest rememberer friends.

Which now included someone she didn't expect. Sans had faithfully obeyed her instruction to make sure that Papyrus won his court case, in one of the laziest ways possible: by getting the memory spell from his dad and casting it on his brother. There were only a few monsters who had the patience, power, and know-how to do that, or so Frisk hoped, because if too many people became rememberers then the whole exercise would become pointless and she'd lose one of her critical advantages in life. At least Papyrus was able to deal with it (despite not fully understanding why Frisk staggered it the way she did) and knew how not to give things away- or at least if he did, he'd give them away in such a Papyrus way that nobody would realize what he was actually saying. Or, again, so she hoped.

But she didn't want to worry, Christmas was coming, the first actually good Christmas in her life. She felt hopeful for it again, a hope she hadn't felt since she was five, when she first understood what Christmas was supposed to be and had crushing disappointment take it away. ("There is no Santa, and if there were, he wouldn't visit chimeras.") *It'd just take one phone call...*

On the happened Thursday, she did make a brief, rehearsed, and instructive phone call to Jenkins in the privacy of the girls' locker room, but it wasn't about getting her not-parents sent to a CIA black site where they belonged. He couldn't get it done by the happened Friday, he texted her later, but Christmas Day would work.

After the happened Friday began Christmas vacation. It didn't feel like they needed such a long one; non-remembers would experience nine straight days of vacation after five days of school. But it was what everyone expected and planned for, and some of the students had existing vacation plans involving family in other states. Frisk could only imagine the conversations: "So, did you meet that Frisk girl at school? Was she nice? Can she really reverse time? Did her brother ever turn into a ferocious monstrosity from the pits of Hell?" The Dreemurr kids themselves planned to return to Disney World to finish their interrupted vacation, but since Christmas was on a Tuesday they spent the next three repeated days snowboarding, at rapidly increasing skill levels. Only people who understood how magic worked, who were few, knew why Frisk was willing to do flips holding onto her brother that she would have never attempted alone.

They had people to do things for them (*Oh God, help me, help me please, I have 'people who do things for me'.*) but Frisk and Asriel made a point of buying at least some Christmas gifts themselves, because whose gifts were these anyway? Crowds, even the worst crowds that Jenkins and his team warned them about, parted before them like the Old Testament's Red Sea. (*What'd I expect, I am a religious figure...*) Three people- count 'em, three- performed acts of obeisance upon seeing them. Two Catholics crossed themselves in shock. One woman had brought her seven-year-old girl forward: "This is the girl who saved you, Jessica. She's why you're not in the cold, cold ground."
The mortification continued until a boy about three years older than her gave a hearty "Hey, Frisk! What the heck are you doing here?!!" Who was...? Oh, right, a kid from history class.

"Buying Christmas gifts, getting followed around by idiots" was Frisk's response, and the idiots dissipated like sea foam. People still kept a healthy distance away, especially when Asriel gave some of the more forward ones the stink-eye.

And they had twice as long to wait as the other kids, with Frisk in the very undesirable position of temporarily canceling Christmas so that Christmas Eve could be redone. She had, however, consulted Alice, who had already been expecting her to put SAVEs and LOADs in good places to triple the best parts of Christmas.

And then Christmas came, and it came with ribbons, tags, packages, boxes, and bags without a Grinch to steal them. (There was a Grinch-like monster that showed up on Christmas Eve in Boston, but the first time, a family dog had savaged it to dust, and the second time, a team of specially trained federal agents had pacified it.) Frisk SAVED right when she woke up and the Dreemurr kids went through their morning ritual long before the sun came up, and their mother arrived with clothes just as they finished. They were heavily decorated in red and green, with patterns of snowmen and candy canes that somehow avoided being completely hideous, and Asriel received a lightweight, long-sleeved shirt and pants while his sister wore a warm, long-sleeved, nearly floor-length dress of cotton and Dreemurr fur, her socks matching the pattern. Their mother and father were wearing similar clothes, adjusted to their usual styles, although how could a kingly robe be kingly when its most prominent decorative element was reindeer? Frisk popped her hairband on and laughed at her reflection before walking downstairs with her family.

Breakfast was very light, just eggs on toast with some chocolate milk, but Frisk could have expected that; Toriel was making sure they had room for the Christmas feast. Their rememberer friends came in with the sun, the skelebros and their father first, Asmodeus second, bringing along his daughter. Victoria was overjoyed at being with her father again- he had promised her that he would be home for that one day, and he really did skip a day of his vital job to be with his daughter. ("I shouldn't," he'd told Frisk, "the same way you shouldn't if anything happens to just her. And yet, we can't do anything else.") It was a shame she was way too young for the memory spell, but other people could remember her experiences to give her an even better Christmas than last time.

Of course she wanted to open her gifts right away, and everyone else did too. Frisk had never seen such a large tree in a house (there was room for it!) nor so many presents underneath it. Some of them were from people who didn't attend; Alphys had gotten Victoria a large, expansive pink dress, probably out of some anime, to which she had festooned bells and which the little girl wanted to wear right away. You gave a four-year-old something with bells in a house of goats with superhuman hearing. Thanks much, Alphys, you eternal dweeb! Papyrus got Frisk and Asriel matching purple and green watches. A watch. He gave the princess of time a watch. Frisk had given Victoria a huge pink box full of Lego, knowing exactly how she'd use it, and Asriel had given her an enormous variety of Play-Doh, and her bells jingled madly as she unpacked it all. Sans and Papyrus gave each other bones, the same bones that they'd swapped back and forth for several decades. "THANK YOU SO MUCH, SANS! I REALLY WASN'T EXPECTING THIS!" Asriel gave Papyrus an extra-large briefcase full of pockets that he'd modified himself, and Frisk gave him a glowing recommendation to use in his advertising material; her parents looked somewhat disappointed, but Papyrus' face lit up as he realized he was being given something incredibly valuable. (To win such a famous custody battle was one thing; to have 'History's Most Important Person’ tell everyone that he's the best lawyer ever was something else.) Frisk almost expected Sans to give them each a gift certificate or something else lazy just because he was Sans, but instead he splurged for a foldable hang glider specially designed and modified for the two of them.
Frisk's eyes went wide. With Asriel providing lift every so often, they could glide for a very, very long time even without updrafts. Frisk almost asked where Sans got the money for it- where he got any money at all, actually- but decided not to.

Asmodeus gave the Dreemurr kids 4,320 small, spherical magnets, the kind that the consumer safety nannies had banned until the Trump administration put a quick end to that. He gave Toriel a thick bolt of extremely fine silk cloth, knowing very well that she'd eventually use it to make clothing and blankets for her children and his own daughter, and gave Asgore a specially forged, fully functional, three-pronged spear made of modern materials. (The human had made the 'Asgore Trident' as a project, never knowing that the actual Asgore would one day wield it. His Twitch and Youtube subscribers, already somewhat impressive, shot up thirtyfold when he revealed who he'd sold it to and who was destined to receive it.) Asriel gave his parents and sister somewhat small packages, and even Victoria stopped playing to see what they were. Frisk's was very light, and she slowly broke through the paper before spying the glint of precious metals. Letting the paper fall to the floor in astonishment, she held up the tiara, looking around it. She wasn't even sure what she was looking at, having never seen platinum or palladium in person before, and she didn't know that pink diamonds existed, although she was certain the purple gems were amethysts. It was clearly done entirely with his magic; no human hands could have produced such craft, which had details smaller than Frisk could see. She couldn't guess how much it was worth just in raw materials, but she knew its value: absolutely priceless. She slowly put her hairband on the table and put the tiara on, having nothing to say that wasn't some sort of awed expletive, while her mother and father put on their similar, larger crowns. Asriel and the rest of her family looked at her expectantly. "It's... amazing. Az, Mom, Dad, I do have a gift for all of you, and you will get it for Christmas this year," she said, smiling. Asriel looked curious but resisted the urge to ask. As his sister was the final arbiter of when Christmas began, ended, and restarted, he was sure she'd follow through.

Compared to that, the rest of the gifts were barely noteworthy. The Dreemurr kids had gotten Sans a bicycle to fit his frame ("He's got a really bony butt. No, you don't understand...") and gave Gaster a nightmarishly difficult pentagonal Rubik's cube variant with multiple layers, and they were quick to remind him that he ought to solve it only through turning the pieces, the way a human would. (It would take him less time to develop a functional, all-inclusive solving algorithm than most humans would take to solve it just once.) For his part, Gaster pulled out a large vial and touched an applicator to each of them; it wasn't clear where he got it all or how he extracted it, but he infused everyone there with a combination of emotions that could only be defined as the Christmas spirit. For the humans, it wore off in moments; the monsters felt it for the better part of an hour, and they spent it caroling. With all the different voice ranges, from Asgore's earthshaking bass to Victoria's mouselike pitch, the carols sounded like exactly what they were: very, very different people singing as one.

As Gaster's effects wore off, the group sat around the wood-stoked fireplace, talking and relaxing for hours. Frisk asked how Nicole's trial went; in the court of Judge Saibancho yet again, Papyrus had mercilessly dunked on the opposing lawyer, and the padded head cushion had gotten even more vigorous use. Asmodeus described his woes with making rememberers out of people who couldn't speak English; he'd had to interview translators and make them rememberers first. Frisk found herself dragged into playing Legos with Victoria (Frisk couldn't just tell her to go away; even if she wouldn't remember it, everyone else would), trying to follow the little girl's weird connections between concepts. Of course she put Play-Doh on Lego and vice versa, and Toriel had laid out a thin blanket to prevent a mess. Asriel was busy helping Sans ride a bike. He had magic to keep him upright, but using it took effort. Frisk was starting to think that Victoria's magic kingdom was a Stalinist nightmare of tyranny and bureaucracy, with the way she made up titles for each and every one of her kingdom's subjects (including the Play-Doh dragon, which she'd carefully magicked into sculptured realism), when the good smells began and Toriel called her family to a
midday dinner.

The feast was comparable to Thanksgiving’s. Toriel had prepared Christmas cookies as appetizers (instantly, voraciously disappeared; even powerful magic couldn’t make them vanish that fast), thinly sliced ham, a large bowl full of steamed peas, plates of cornbread, oysters (Frisk didn't like the smell, but the monsters did), mince pie (that Frisk thought was a dessert but wasn't), a bowl full of pistachios shelled through monster magic, and- Frisk didn't even recognize it- an actual goose in gravy. She’d always thought 'the goose is getting fat' was just some old song. Toriel said that she had a dessert ready, but, even for an unhappened day, she wanted her family and guests to eat dinner first. There was plenty of sugar in the egg nog, anyway.

They feasted, and it was good. Frisk felt like she was in a Dr. Seuss cartoon. Watching Gaster eat goose was fascinating; he did much of his chewing outside his mask, politely, delicately tearing apart and crushing the oily bird meat. Frisk didn't like the taste of goose too much, and at Asriel's urging she managed to eat one oyster, but the pistachios were delicious especially since she didn't have to pull the shells off, and the ham, peas, cornbread, and mince pie were filling. She just had to remind herself that mutton came from sheep, not goats. While the happened day's dinner wouldn't go the same way, she knew exactly when to place her next SAVE point.

Asriel’s ears perked up, as he seemed to be hearing something he didn't recognize. Toriel looked worried, and Asgore's brow furrowed. "Someone at the door," Asriel said just before the steady, firm knocking. A knock at the Dreemurrs' door? Perhaps it was Jenkins, who had been invited by Toriel but had formally declined. No, couldn’t be, as he was out flagrantly abusing his rememberer abilities instead; he was going to propose to his girlfriend for Christmas, and if she turned him down he would have never done it. 'I'll get it," Frisk said, thinking it might be some Christmas monster. There were Gyftrots and Santas out there, and she’d heard reports of a Krampus or two... but why would any of them show up here? Her human friends weren't allowed into the town for anything but school, Undyne was off managing the charity event that wasn't going to happen (she'd even invited at least one of the charities) and Kid was with her... who else was there? She walked through the foyer and carefully opened one of the large doors. "Hello?"

At first, Frisk thought that the visitor was a digging monster of some kind despite his human shape. His young face, similar in color and complexion to hers, was overlaid with a strange aspect Frisk couldn't put her finger on. He was roughly Frisk's size, wearing a green and yellow parka too big for him, the sleeves ripped at the wrists, his hands caked in dirt. His jeans were similarly oversized and ragged at the ankles, his boots bent out of shape- even the steel toes were severely warped and dented, the steel shining through beneath the filth. And then Frisk saw the scabbarded knife at his hip and the heart-shaped locket at his neck. Startled, she gasped and took a large step back just as he quietly said, "Hi, Frisk."

"That voice-" Asriel started, launching himself out of his chair and flying towards the door. One glimpse was all it took: "Chara?!"

The reaction was instant. Nearly everyone else rushed to the foyer, jostling for space, dropping forks and toppling chairs. Sans’ left eye was glowing a brilliant shade of cyan. Asmodeus was fumbling in his pocket for his phone. Gaster was on the ceiling and his hands were out, all of them, floating around him in a random, threatening pattern next to four ready gasterblasters. Even Papyrus' grin had turned nasty. Victoria, seeing everyone else's reaction, sat frozen in place, her hands alight. Only Toriel and Asgore remained calm.

"Don't do it!" Asriel commanded before the group got there, holding out a hand, deepening his voice.
"Don't," Frisk emphasized. "Just don't. Anyone. None of this is going to have happened anyway, and we all know it. Especially them. They need a thousand or so people to steal my SOUL, remember?"

"I wouldn't have," Asmodeus grumbled, his hand still firmly in his pocket.

"I'll just LOAD, okay? If this goes bad. If they could just kill me they would have done it already, so chill out." Asmodeus considered flatly disobeying a direct command from the princess of time and realized that he was in no position to do that. His posture relaxed, he took a breath, and his hand stayed in his pocket with his phone.

"You can't cast it on this body anyway," the boy said. "It's just me in here this time. And I'm not Chara anymore. I'm Charles. Seven letters." There was silence for a moment, and nobody really liked that silence, and Papyrus cleared his throat even though he didn't have one.

"It's okay, we're not going to get mad," Frisk said, even though it was very much not okay and many of them were already quite mad. "Just tell us what happened, why you came here, how you came here."

Charles faintly smiled, still looking down. "I dug. The fence doesn't go underground." Frisk realized the simplicity of it: a single boy who could use his own strength to burrow through however many hundreds of meters of earth in however little time was outside the military's experience, the possibility unaccounted for. Humans just couldn't do things like that. "Frisk, when you won, when you beat me, I thought, how could I possibly lose, I'm Satan!" He suddenly started sobbing and fell to his knees, his body wracked with grief. "So I got mad, and I made the rest of them get mad, and I killed and I hurt and a lot of them died and I just wanted to hurt more... and then I decided that maybe if I had a body of my own, with its own brain, maybe I'd be able to see things the way everyone else did, that maybe I could figure out how that spell was cast on me," His talking grew faster and faster. "and then I had some researcher gain more LOVE and break into a lab, this lab in China full of genetically engineered embryos, and I thought I was being so smart..." His body shuddered with sobs again, for a full thirty seconds, no one else doing anything. Victoria almost ran to him, bells tinkling, but her father quickly grabbed her arm. "So I had the researcher put the embryo into a woman who killed monsters, and I had her kill more monsters, and I poured myself into it. I made the woman steal and murder and I took her to Afghanistan, and I used so much of my guys' power to make the baby grow faster, and faster, and when they gave me all their LOVE I just killed them, every day..." He was crying louder, his face buried in the soft carpet with his hands. "...and then I felt things, I felt sadness and despair and this, whatever this is, and I felt compassion and I know it's real... I'm so, so sorry, I'm so sorry, maybe if I can help you go back and make it not happen..." This is it, Frisk realized. This is who Chara always was. No epic showdown between the savior and the destroyer, no world-spanning boss fight. Just a lonely, angry kid who'd had some important stuff missing, who'd become a mass murderer because he didn't, couldn't know how not to be one. I never could save him. He had to save himself.

"You already did make some of it not happen," Asriel said, and Charles abruptly looked up at him, sitting up on his knees and wiping his tears with one strong, dirt-covered hand. Frisk noticed the rock flecks on his knuckles and wondered if he'd even bothered using a shovel or if he'd simply punched, clawed, and kicked his way through the ground. If she went out and looked, she'd probably see uppercuts for air holes. "Or you will have. I guess you've never heard your own new voice?" Charles touched his own throat, realizing. "Mom, Dad, you know whose voice this is, don't you?"

"Yes," Asgore rumbled, kneeling down. "Would that we could reverse all the pain you've caused."
"I already know we can't," Frisk said. "If we could, we would have done it." Chara looked down again. "But don't blame him, Dad! The one who did all those bad things wasn't him!"

"What?" the crying boy asked, confused.

"Az," Frisk started, although she was addressing everyone else in the room, "was Flowey really you? if I didn't have my compassion, would I be me? Charles, you just said, now you have a brain that works. You can feel compassion, and love, and regret. Chara couldn't do any of those things. So there's nothing to forgive."

Charles started to smile, wiping his tears away. "I guess Charles really isn't Chara. Az, thanks for never telling my secret."

"I promised I wouldn't," Asriel said.

"Oh, I guess you all want to know now, too?" Everyone stared at him, and he stood up. "I took a cat apart, when I was little. It was old, and hadn't caught any mice recently, so I wanted to see what it was made out of. And then everyone got mad, and my mom, she said that... she said that I was wrong and bad, and so did my dad, and they took away my... and then they started calling me 'char-a', because I didn't have... and I was so mad, I became Care-a, because if I was a character out of a story, nobody could do anything to me, nobody could hurt me. I cut their throats at night, and I walked away, up the mountain, to have adventures. Then I fell down, and I met Asriel, and I wanted to play but I didn't know what was right and wrong, and I just wanted revenge, on everything... Mom, I'm so, so sorry..."

"Frisk is right. You have gained something you did not have before, so you are not the person you used to be," Toriel said, putting a large arm around him, and he trembled in sorrow.

Asgore frowned. "I am not sure if the population can be made to believe that," he slowly said. "The humans may want you to be punished." Asmodeus gave a dark chuckle.

"Then we lie," Frisk said, her mind working furiously. "We say that some other devil came out of the underground and possessed Charles, but Charles overpowered it in the end. Or make something else up. Or we won't even have to because if we talk at the same time, I'm pretty sure people will not mess with us no matter what. They can't do anything anyway, they can't put him in jail because he's everywhere and they can't kill him because he won't really be dead." Asmodeus was nodding.

"You don't mind that I'm Satan?" Charles asked.

Frisk looked him in the face, smiling. "I do mind, but it only means you can do more good now. Just because you have crazy devil powers doesn't mean you have to be a crazy devil with them. Like, instead of making people kill more monsters, you can tell them to stop. I just wish you could do the same thing for people who kill humans."

"You don't understand..." Charles trailed off. He looked distracted by something.

"We can discuss what we do or do not understand at the table," Toriel said primly. "Take off your shoes right here, and take a bath. I will fetch clean clothes for you." Looks were exchanged between the guests and their Queen, but all of the Dreemurrs were determined to bring in their wayward child, and Asmodeus and Gaster had already relented, looking at each other in silent understanding. If the other half of That Voice was Charles, there was something that absolutely needed to be done. He tore off his boots, ripping them in half and bending the steel away from his toes, and his mother took him by the hand and led him away.
Gaster's voice oozed from him in a comfortable, melodic tone, and his blobby form detached from the ceiling and he flipped on his spindly legs back onto the ground. "I had wondered how such a thing could be possible without his cooperation. It appears I was correct to assume it was impossible."

"No choice now on what to do next," Asmodeus said. "Until we do it, free will is officially canceled."

"Just curious, but what happens if we don't?" Asriel asked.

"I LOVE PARADOXES! THEY'RE ALMOST AS FUN AS PUNS. WELL, SOMETIMES. AND WE SHOULD ONLY TALK ABOUT THEM. NOT DO THEM FOR REAL," Papyrus advised, before looking shocked. "I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD DO A PARADOX FOR REAL!"

Asmodeus nodded at the skeleton. "Unless someone here has a backup universe stashed somewhere I don't know about, we're not going to find out what happens." He turned to Frisk, an ineffable look on his face. "Before, he could end the universe by taking your SOUL; now, he might be able to end the universe without your help. In fact, if it's not done exactly right, I don't know what happens then, either." His hands started twitching as he fully realized what he was talking about.

"So, do you have a plan?" Frisk asked. "Like, what spell to cast, what syllables and all that?"

"Believe it or not, 'go back in time and remove EXP from people' isn't that hard of a spell to make up," Asmodeus replied. "It's just uncastable without deific abilities." He gave Frisk a pointed look. Gee, Asmodeus, you know how I feel about being called a goddess, thanks a whole lot for classifying me as one.

"Wait a minute," Asriel said, his ears springing back in fear. "This isn't going to do anything to either of them, is it? We're not going to make some kind of sacrifice here, are we?"

"No," Gaster replied, and Asriel sagged in relief. "The sacrifice was already made. It requires prodigious amounts of power. Which is why we can only do it to the concentrated nexi that Chara had created. We shall... we have used their power to remove their power."

"and then that's it, huh. devil kid goes back to beat devil kid and we all live happily ever after. he just gets away with it. the end."

"Sans, Flowey got away with it too!" Frisk snapped at him. "If you want to fight evil, you have to stop the evil, remove the evil. And maybe, sometimes, you need to fight, even kill people, but if we can fight the bad things directly, then we don't need to worry about things like punishment or retribution. Chara's gone, Sans, Charles beat him. But if Charles' body dies then they might come back, I don't know. I know he's covered in dead monsters, he's got to be maximum LV if there is one. But trying to fight him if he's got to help us, before or after, isn't going to help anything."

Asgore stared at Sans. "I forbid any of you from harming my son." Sans' blue eye finally stopped glowing.

"WELL THERE IS ONE THING WE AREN'T DOING FOR HIM," Papyrus pointed out. "HE'S NOT GETTING ANYTHING FOR CHRISTMAS!"

"Actually, wait," Frisk said, looking through the living room towards the roaring fireplace. "Az, can you..."
A few minutes later, Toriel led her adopted son downstairs. He was wearing one of Asriel's green and yellow striped shirts and dark pants, Dreemurr-fur socks on his feet. His hair had been thoroughly disentangled and combed, making him presentable for Christmas dinner. He was still silent and downcast, twitching every once in a while, and he took a seat on the other side of his siblings.

"Charles," Frisk said, smiling, "you came on such short notice, we couldn't get you the real thing. So, here. It's something you deserve." Charles took the gift in hand, and laughed, and Frisk and Asriel laughed with him, and soon everyone else was laughing too, even Toriel. It was, of course, a piece of wood that had burned to charcoal. Still laughing, Charles crushed it in his hand, and Frisk was wondering if he could make a diamond from it; instead, it was crushed to powder, and he sprinkled the powder back into the fireplace.

"Asriel, I've missed you so much," Charles said as they walked back to the table together. He wiped off his charcoal-covered hand on a napkin before digging into the goose that Toriel had set out for him. "Thiff if what-" He swallowed, not taking a small bite chewed thoroughly, although Frisk somewhat doubted if he even could choke. "This is what I..." He stopped suddenly, as if hit by something.

"What is it?" Asriel asked.

"What do you think?!" Charles shouted at him, angrily, and everyone else reacted before calming down. At least nobody spilled anything. "Don't you know what I still am? Don't you know what I can still see, what's going on in the world? You don't understand," he continued, more quietly, and Asriel heard a mote of the old Chara in his voice. "How could you? I'm in those people's heads, all of them. So much pain, so much rage, so much hatred and evil. Some of them... they're not people, not really, they're worse than I was. So many being born, so many children, so many..." He shuddered, and looked around the room. "It's the opposite of this. The opposite of this house, the opposite of friends, the opposite of Christmas. I tried to stop it. I tried to use my armies, the worst people in the world, to kill everyone who was causing the most misery. But it's still out there, it's just there... and it's not going to go away, not until we fix them, not until they stop making more children who are just going to make more starvation and pain..." He winced, concentrating. "There. She's only, like, LV 3 or 4, and they were so much bigger, but she killed them. Both of them. With a rock." Nobody, not even Papyrus, asked who 'she' and 'them' were. Victoria looked traumatized, but it didn't matter; she wouldn't remember this. "Next time, I'll know they're coming, so the rock will come sooner. Some of these people are trying to get possessed, because it's better than their lives." He narrowed his eyes. "There's a starving man in a North Korean prison camp, he killed only one monster so I can barely even hear him, who's been begging me to save him for three days straight. Three real days. I can't. I don't have many people there after they blew up Kim. Those guys use bombs on monsters." He stopped for a moment, making himself relax. "Asriel, Frisk, all of you. One day I want to be just here, with you. I'll be the last person on Earth with any EXP at all. Then all my crazy devil powers," he said, smiling at Frisk, "will be just me and not... innocent people. Or less guilty people."

"I WOULD NOT WANT TO REPRESENT YOU IN COURT," Papyrus said, and Charles broke out laughing. "THERE WOULD BE TOO MANY MULTIPLE COUNTS AND I DON'T KNOW IF COURTS CAN COUNT THAT HIGH! ALSO WE WOULD NEED TO BE IN A THOUSAND DIFFERENT COURTS AND I DON'T FEEL LIKE TAKING THE BAR EXAM ANOTHER HUNDRED TIMES."

"It'd be like the OJ trial," Asmodeus said. "If the name doesn't fit, you must acquit." Charles chuckled again.
Frisk looked at her new brother. The table was too wide to extend her hand across it, so she just smiled a sympathetic smile instead. "Charles, one day we'll solve it. Okay? Hopefully one day soon. If there's anyone who has the power to save people from themselves, it's us."

"You will," Asgore said. "Charles, Frisk, do you understand now? You are truly our future."

Charles laughed. "Dad, you used to tell me that. Over and over again, when I was little. I had no idea what you meant."

"Wait, he used to tell you that, too?" Frisk asked. "But it really is both of us, isn't it? Dad, how'd you know?"

Asgore smiled a broad smile and chuckled heartily. "'King' is not just a title, and not just a bit of authority either. I don't have W.D. Gaster's abilities, but there are things that I know. Although I did not understand them either, before now." He smiled again. "Go on, my children. Enjoy this day of merriment. Charles, if you see some miscreancy occur in the civilized world, you, too, are a rememberer with some power to prevent it."

"That's the problem, Dad," Charles muttered. "Most of this stuff isn't in the civilized world, not by your definition." He took another big bite of food.

Toriel smiled at him, holding a big, wrapped box. "Charles?" He looked up at her. "This is for everybody, but I believe you should have a share, too." She delicately unwrapped it, and his EXP-infused, genetically modified eyes grew to saucers as she revealed the extra-large, heavy box of assorted chocolates with sugary, fruity fillings of all kinds.

"You can just buy this stuff at the store now," Asriel reminded him, as he gently took the box from his mother's hand, shoving bite-sized candies into his mouth one after the other, chewing thoroughly to get the most out of the taste.

"y'know what we ought to bake him?" Sans asked, and everyone else at the table looked at him. "c'mon. you know this one."
Sympathy

Toriel chuckled. "We can bake a devil's food cake," she said with a smile, "as long as he keeps the devilry to a minimum." Charles just nodded, the monsters didn't react, and Victoria didn't see what was wrong with it, but Asmodeus raised both eyebrows and Frisk almost broke out laughing; if chocolate was the price of Charles not turning back into an omnicultural maniac, then the candy store at the mall would deserve a lot more business. ('Come and try our Satan Appeasement Delight! It tastes like fudge, icing, and innocent people not being brutally killed!') Charles continued savoring candy before he realized that everyone was watching him eat and casually put the package on the table. Asriel reached out first, magicking a piece into his hand, and Frisk got one with a cream filling. (*Oh, that is good.*) Victoria stood up on her chair to reach out (jingle, jingle, jingle) and her father handed her two of them.

Asgore reached out his great hand and plucked a couple of candies, one at a time. Between his fingers they looked almost like pebbles, and Charles laughed at the sight. "Dad, I'm glad you're not doing what you did the first time we had chocolate."

"I took one bite," Asgore answered his son, although there was a subtle smile on his face.

"One bite for you! That was most of it! Even Mom got mad at you!" Toriel grew the same subtle smile as her husband, remembering. "It wasn't even sweetened chocolate," Charles explained. "It wasn't even good." He reached out to snag another one.

"That wasn't the bite I remember the most," Asriel said, slowly, not sure if he should even bring it up. "That was the buttercups. And there was that time..."

"There were a lot of that times. Frisk, I really want to believe that I really am someone else with a bad person's memories. Because I... because Chara did so many malicious things to Asriel, if I were to apologize for each one of those things..." He looked up at his siblings, then at his parents. "I'd be apologizing all night, just for the things I did behind the barrier. For everything I did here..." He took a deep breath, everyone's watching him. Victoria had tears in her eyes and could not have explained why. "Tens of thousands, and maybe more. That's not counting the brush wars and all the terrorism that started when I blew up that one thing." It was only long after his largest armies had been de-possessed that Charles understood exactly why the Middle East had become an even less friendly place than usual. "I can't ever make restitution for this. What am I going to say, when people ask? Some of them were children. Some were no older than her..." He pointed to Victoria, and the little girl started bawling uncontrollably, her father hugging her close to the sound of bells and sobbing. He looked like he wanted to tell Charles to stop scaring his daughter but was not about to make an ultimately pointless demand of an apologetic Devil. "And there's two more I'm watching, right now. I think their mother is LV 2. She's got AIDS. So do they. They're all going to die soon. Why were they born?"

"Because humans do not always foresee the consequences of their actions unless the result is clear," Asgore said. "And often, they do not care unless it impacts them directly, whether they have the capacity for a conscience or not. Which is why you must curtail your apologies to the public and why you must never be seen as a savior."

"Dad, nobody's going to see me as a savior! Even if they did, I don't understand why they shouldn't." Frisk didn't understand, either. Was Dad trying to say that the humans needed a devil to scare them?
"Oh, I get it!" Asriel exclaimed. "Charles, if people want to get in contact with you, what's the one way they know will work?"

"Yeah. You don't want anyone else calling through the dead-monster hotline," Sans added.

"So I have to be the bogeyman. Yeah, I can do that."

"Hey, I'm sure you'll do a great job at being evil! You're even better at it than I am! I bet I can still give you some pointers though!"

"Papyrus..." Charles started, shaking his head, and Frisk found herself agreeing with him. The skeleton didn't, couldn't, grasp the enormity of what Chara had done. Frisk found that she couldn't, either. "I never thought you'd grow up into... you." Not for the first time, Frisk wondered exactly how old all of them were or if that was even a valid metric after Flowey's constant resets. "Lay it on me, what are your pointers for being evil?"

"Well, first off, when someone asks you for help, you can't just say 'I'll help you!' you have to say " He switched to his lawyer voice, which was overlaid with a hint of deep-bass supervillain. "What is my help worth to you? Are you capable of paying what I demand?" This, coming from a skeleton wearing a Christmas-themed scarf and mittens, stopped Victoria's crying and made her giggle. "And then you should pet a cat but Sans says I shouldn't have any pets and some of my clients are allergic."

"Actually," Asmodeus pointed out, "most lawyers just say 'I'll help you' and then draft up a contract that bills the client for large amounts of money."

"Oh wow! You're good at being evil too! We should start a club!"

Charles forced a smile, trying to pay attention to the people in front of this body instead of the ones thousands of miles away. "Pretty small club, Papyrus. How can I even engage in camaraderie..." Frisk blinked at Charles' word choice, but then again, who knew who he was getting his words from? "How can I even socialize with you guys? I even tried to kill the person who saved you," he said, looking at Frisk.

"Okay, show of hands, who here has never attacked me?" Frisk asked, and Charles laughed, remembering Frisk's original adventure. He was surprised to see only Sans' bony hand and Victoria's tentative, small hand go up. All of Gaster's hands were flat on the table in tacit admission; Asmodeus' hands were holding his daughter. "See? You're in good company."

"Except for you," Charles said. "You're a saint."

"What- no I'm not! You should have seen what happened when I met my not-parents." Frisk was leaning towards the center of the table to talk to him, although the size of the furniture made it difficult.

"Your not-parents, hah. Great name for them." He was leaning forwards as well, and Gaster reached a hand (no arm, just a hand) past him to take some chocolate (chocolate-filled chocolate, that one), and it fit into one of his mask holes perfectly. "Don't pretend, Frisk. You didn't murder yours."

"I did worse, I made Az murder them. Twice." Frisk reached for another piece of chocolate. Strawberry filling!
"It's like what you tried to do," Asriel explained, and his chair levitated over towards Frisk's. He put his right arm around her protectively. "Only, Frisk actually did it."

"That explains the repetition that one time," Charles said. "What was the other time? The three, four in a row time?"

Asmodeus looked embarrassed. "That was when I did the dumbest thing in my life," Frisk answered. "I went to a magic show with only Az and Monster Kid. And I knew it would be actual magic. I was thinking, oh, well, I can always just go back! I SAVEd in front of the door, too. God, that was so stupid."

"I was dumber," Asmodeus added. "If I'd known what I was doing, I would have just flown up to His Majesty and told him everything the moment monsters emerged." Asgore nodded in reply, and took the chance to grab a piece of chocolate (he had never tasted coconut before and decided he liked it). Toriel reminded herself to have a great deal more available and began looking up recipes for devil's food cake on her phone. She kept a well-stocked pantry and was experienced at making substitutions.

"If we are making confessions," Gaster said, "I must admit that being outside the universe had warped me considerably. I am glad that Prince Asriel refocused my perceptions."

"Yeah, Az, that was you," Frisk added, nodding and putting her left arm around him. "I think Gaster would have won that if it was just me." She looked around. "But everybody I meet thinks everything is just me! I get why monsters treat me like that, and okay, the Count's pretty high, but I'm not saving a thousand people a day by myself!"

"When discussing fast cars," Asmodeus pointed out, "most people focus first on the engine, rather on the steering, suspension, or tires. We might be doing the actual work, as you put it, but only you make it possible."

"Frisk, the reason everyone expects you to save them is because you're good at it," Asriel reminded her. "And humans want somebody to save them, there's whole religions based on it. Then you come out of the Underground with deific powers." Asriel emphasized 'deific powers' by comically deepening his voice and wiggling his left hand's fingers in the air, his right still hugging his sister. "What did you think they were going to do? And now you've got the Devil... actually, that's the lie you should tell. Tell everyone you saved Charles and you're the reason he's not Chara anymore. They'd believe it!" He looked up at his brother. "And then you wouldn't have to worry about anyone coming after you because of what Chara did. We could go to school together."

Toriel abruptly looked up from her phone. "You will be going to school together regardless of what people believe," she informed them.

"Why?!" Charles asked. "Mom, you still don't understand. If I need answers about almost anything, I can just get them."

"And if my other children need answers about almost anything, they can use the Internet," she replied. "But neither they nor you always know the right questions." Charles nodded, acknowledging the point. Had he known the right questions, things would never have gone the way they had.

"Hey, wait," Frisk said. "Mom, is he who locker 2 is for?"

"He is indeed," Toriel replied, her gentle smile wide. She reached in and politely, delicately grabbed a piece of chocolate now that she knew that she was going to make more. Creamy lemon!
She would have to use this in her own recipes.

Charles looked back and forth between his mother and his siblings. "What's locker 2?"

"Mom gave Az locker 1 and me locker 3," Frisk explained. "You're right between us."

Charles, who was about to reach for another piece, abruptly stopped and looked at his mother.
"Mom, you... you saved something for me? Even while... while Chara was out doing evil, you left me a spot?" His voice wavered.

"Your father had said that you would be the future. I had hoped that your future would be with your siblings," Toriel said. "I was right to hope." Out of words, Charles got out of his chair and buried his face in his mother's side, awkwardly hugging her as gently as he could. She picked him up and cradled him in her arms in much the same way that Asmodeus had cradled his daughter. "Although I am not sure if it is right to lie about how you returned."

"ALLOW ME, YOUR MAJESTY." Papyrus made a show of clearing his nonexistent throat. "WE DO NOT NEED TO TELL THE HUMANS THAT FRISK PLAYED ANY PART IN CHARLES' RETURN. WE SIMPLY HAVE FRISK INTRODUCE HIM AS HER SIBLING. THEY WILL BELIEVE WHAT THEY WANT. LIKE THAT? IT'S CALLED LYING BY OMISSION! WITNESSES DO IT A LOT." Frisk's parents agreed that it was the most prudent plan.

"Introduce me where?" Charles asked from his mother's arms.

"There is a charity event which we are expected to attend today," Asgore explained. "The humans there are upset by our absence, I imagine. Frisk has mentioned this, and I wonder it as well: How many of them have realized that we will in fact be present and on time?"

"And we will all be present, and I don't know if Asriel's robes will fit you," Toriel said to her son. While they were similar in height, Charles' bioengineered body was burly and had slightly different proportions than his brother. "I will have to make adjustments. Frisk, when did you SAVE?"

"Last night, before bed," Frisk answered. She'd chosen that time to let rememberers re-experience Christmas from start to finish.

"Good, although I fear I will not get much sleep. Charles, where were you?" Charles answered her, in detail, and while they agreed where to pick him up Frisk was struck by the absurdity of everything: "When did you set a SAVE point for time itself,' the eight-foot-tall goat monster had asked. 'Now I need to know where your brother, the Devil, was so a skeleton can drive him home.' Asgore had been adamant in forbidding monsters' vehicles, including his own, from being searched on entry. "Now that that is settled, have you heard the story of the Little Red Hen?"

"Is that the one that goes 'If you don't work, you don't eat'?" Charles asked, eyebrows raised.

Toriel laughed. "For this, precisely. For this to be truly devil's food, I would like his assistance. And that of his siblings as well." The Dreemurr kids followed their mother to the kitchen, and Asmodeus and Gaster started talking about how the time travel spell must work (His Majesty feeling obligated to listen even if he did not fully understand) while the skeletons, lacking better things to do, promptly found spots in front of the television and Papyrus insisted on watching the last fifteen minutes of the Star Wars Holiday Special.

Frisk was half-expecting Toriel to hand her children aprons, but monster magic was an excellent cleanser and Dreemurr fur could tolerate detergent. It was only when Charles, at his mother's direction, opened the fridge that Frisk noticed it: he was still carrying his knife! Then again,
Charles carrying a knife was like a heavyweight boxer carrying a plastic straw. And he was still wearing his locket...

"I'm not sure if this'll bring back painful memories, but what's in the locket?" Frisk asked, looking for the items the recipe demanded. She'd had to cook things before, but never in a kitchen as well-equipped as this one.

"Nothing," Charles said quietly. "Asriel gave it to me." He looked at his brother. "You said that we could put something in it when we did something good together. But we never did." Frisk winced. *Yup, painful memories, saw it coming.*

"And now we can. Frisk, we'll have to change those shirts, too," Asriel said, smiling and magicking the exact right amount of flour that his mother had specified into a measuring cup- Toriel tended to use precise fractions in cooking, right down to an eighth of a teaspoon.

Charles looked at him quizzically while pulling out an egg very, very carefully from the container. "Oh, you mean our don't-blame ones, yeah," Frisk said, pulling out a wire whisk and a spatula from the drawers. Toriel didn't use electrical tools, either. "Don't you ever blame my brothers. Either of them."

"Wear it to school," Charles recommended, holding the egg and focusing on it. Two tiny sections of reality decided they didn't like each other very much and he held the two neatly cloven halves of eggshell apart as the slashed yolk and white fell into the bowl.

"Deviled eggs," Toriel joked, heating up a saucepan full of cream, and her children laughed. Smiling, Charles went for another one, in defiance of the horrific Creator he'd envisioned. *See, God? You made me a compassionless demonic hell-entity and here I am, using your gifted infernal power to bake a cake with the family I should have had from day one. Take your divine providence and cram it. Humanity was never my enemy. Neither was Frisk. You are.*

"We all wear them to school, it's a set," Asriel said. "I think I have an idea for yours." He poured the flour onto the eggs and went to work on the butter while his sister weighed, with a kitchen scale, the exact right amounts of cocoa powder, cocoa butter, and sugar for the icing. Charles looked at the containers, smelled the deep, rich smells, and facts that he already knew came together for him; a few cacao farmers had gained some EXP, and he realized that his principal body was eating what they produced, so far away. (One had been a child slave, but the child, expressly tasked with monster removal, had managed to reach LV 6 and slavery was no longer an issue at that plantation or any others nearby. They'd even given the kid a machete...) He reality-sliced open another egg while his mother explained to his sister the difference between baking soda and baking powder and why she didn't want to get them confused in measurements, his brother using the whisk and some magic to blend the icing together.

Once they'd finished adding the myriad ingredients, Asriel offered his brother the whisk. "If you stir it too hard, you're going to splatter it," Frisk warned him.

Charles just looked at her. "You have no idea how much practice I've had this week in not splattering things." He took the whisk between both hands and spun it just fast enough to blend it well, scraping the sides, being careful not to scrape the ceramic bowl itself with the batter. Toriel poured the batter into different pans, one after the other, leaving her human children with the opportunity to scrape out the last of the batter with spoons.

"My turn," Asriel said, scraping out the batter with magic in much the same way he did Frisk's teeth every day. *Four out of five dentists recommend magic for daily tooth cleaning,* Frisk whimsically thought. *The other one's afraid monsters will take his job.*
"I want some!" Victoria chirped, running towards the kitchen, bells constantly jingling.

"There's raw eggs in that," Asmodeus said, and it was only after he said it that he realized the absurdity: his daughter was running towards the World Ending Mind (as one of his books had called Chara) while he complained about raw eggs.

"It's all right, I've got it," Asriel said, and concentrated: first to heat up, then to cool down. Victoria got a tiny ball of nicely cooked cake.

"We will not be cooking all the cake that way," Toriel said, smiling. "Run along and play for half an hour," the huge goat woman told her deific, reality-altering children and their sorcerous brother. "It will be finished when you return."

"Snowboarding!" Victoria cheered.

Anything to make the noise of that dress stop, Asriel didn't say. "I want to, but Charles doesn't have any gear," he said instead. "He doesn't even have any shoes now. Hey, where did you get those?"

"Come on. I didn't have anything to buy steel-toed boots with, so I just kicked through a wall to get them," he explained. "I didn't hurt anybody getting stuff I needed to get here." Which was true, if somewhat misleading; he had made heavy use of possessed people in the right places to get him across the Pacific Ocean, and while Charles had been helping his family bake the cake, that LV 6 boy with the machete had been hunted down with three men with guns, but he had heard them coming so now he had a bent machete and three guns.

"Now that you are here, you're going to need a whole new wardrobe, actually," Frisk said. She would have continued with about how he needed his own room, but she didn't want to bring up household renovations quite yet.

"Yeah, red and black," Charles said. "With a snowboard with fire and skulls and pentagrams and Latin all over it and a metallic demon head with spikes that has snakes coming out of its mouth. And the snakes also have spikes on them, and they've got fangs as long as their bodies and they're spitting acid, and the acid's got spikes on it too." He looked around at the stares and started laughing. "That was the first real joke I've ever told in my life, I'm sorry if it was bad."

Papyrus sheepishly put away his phone. "OH, I GUESS I SHOULDN'T COMMISSION THAT ARTWORK THEN."

"That's nothing, you should see what Azzy's final form actually looks like," Frisk said conspiratorially. Asriel wrapped his ears around his face in embarrassment.

"I know, I did see it! I was kinda with you, remember? Things were different before the barrier broke." Asmodeus and Gaster nodded at each other, knowing what Charles meant. "I want to see it again! Azzy, show everyone what it looks like!" Now he's calling me Azzy too?!

"Fine," he said, annoyed. "But not for very long or Frisk will pass out." He walked into the living room and became ASRIEL DREEMURR, GOD OF HYPERDEATH for a few seconds. "I never thought I'd turn that into a parlor trick."

"I never thought compassion existed," Charles said, and he forced a smile wide enough for Frisk to see his teeth in detail. That's messed up- they're all baby teeth! Well, yeah, he force-grew himself, however that works... She was not about to tell her brother not to smile.

"I never thought I'd be here, with you guys, doing this," Frisk said, and they all shared a laugh,
and then she and Asriel saw their brother's laughter turn to tears as he stared at the floor in grief. Of course he wouldn't be able to get over it, nor not for a very long time. Frisk knew that she'd have a hard time understanding what he felt, and him being in many thousands of places at once couldn't possibly help. So, having absolutely no idea why she did it, she gently leaned forward and kissed him on the top of the head.

Victoria clapped and giggled. "man. i wouldn't have known what to do if i'd foreseen that," Sans said. Papyrus had one large tear coming out of an eyesocket. The skeletons' father had no idea what he was looking at. Asmodeus pondered the idea that he didn't really belong in this completely bonkers universe anymore and considered self-immolation as a suitable way to leave it. Asgore and Toriel just smiled, a deep and abiding warmth growing in their hearts.

Asriel just chortled, a bit of bleating mixed in. "Come on, you can borrow some of my clothes, I'll put your boots at least sort of back together, and then we can go make some snowmen," he suggested. "Victoria, you can go down whatever hill you want today, just don't get yourself killed or your dad will get mad."

"We'll just make the regular kind," Frisk said. "There's a snowman... a real snowman... okay, a talking snowman who gets freaked out if we make the Calvin kind."

"And when you return, I have a gift for you all," Toriel said, addressing everyone in the room. "I was originally going to give this game to you after the meeting, but I believe circumstances call for it." She opened a closet door and dug through a box marked 'Extremely Boring Knick-Knacks' to the place where she'd hidden it. "This video game contains no true violence, no profanity, and none of what are childishly called 'adult themes'. I believe that it'll bring all of us together, and all of us will enjoy the experience, feel an increased sense of love for each other, and heal the last of our hurt feelings."

"Really?" Charles asked skeptically. "What game's that?"

She held up the box with a smile. "Mario Kart!"
It's a Me, Beelzebub!

Some magical alterations and fixing later, all three of the Dreemurr siblings and the little witch walked outside together. Charles felt the silky warmth of the Dreemurr-fur gloves on his hands. It felt like his family was holding his hands, all the time. *No wonder Frisk likes wearing this stuff.* Victoria started running up the hill, finding a nice spot to slide down, and Charles decided that he and his siblings were alone enough, even if their parents could probably still hear this.

He paused for a moment, unsure how to even say it. "Azzy..." Asriel turned, and abruptly, with superhuman speed, Charles wrapped his arms around his brother, hugging him just gently enough not to hurt him. "I want us to have the friendship we didn't have, now that I'm the me I should have been. I want you to be happy. I want to be with you forever. I want to see your smile." Asriel smiled, widely, and Charles smiled in reply, slowly letting him go. "Is this called something? Is this just friendship or trust or family..." His sources were giving him many words in many languages.

Frisk joined in on the smiling. "That one's love."

Charles turned to her, and on his face was the same worshipful look she'd seen so many times before. "Frisk, I... Chara thanked you, but this is me. Thank you so much for keeping him safe. We can finally be together again, after all this time." He held up the locket at his neck, smiling. "I guess this thing is too small to fit all the memories now, huh?"

"Nah, you're still in the past," Frisk said, grinning, reaching out to touch it with her mitten. "There's tiny little cards now that can fit huge amounts of video. Let's make a whole bunch of memories together and pack your locket solid with them. On days that count."

"I think I love you, too," Charles said quietly, and he gave Frisk the same kind of hug he had his brother, lifting her into the air and spinning her around. To him, she weighed little more than Asriel. He was about to set her down gently on the ground-

"LOOK OUT!" Victoria screeched, turning her snowboard and using her magic to keep her back from hitting the ground. Pushed by her momentum, a solid wave of snow splattered Charles and Frisk, and Asriel pointed and laughed while they cleaned the snow off their faces and out of their hair, briefly staring at each other and then laughing.

Of course it was Asriel who did most of the work on the snowman. Charles' devil magic was of the break-things-apart rather than put-them-together variety, and despite how tightly he could compress snow he could only do it two handfuls at a time. Victoria had the power to help but not the know-how, and Frisk helped in the most conventional way possible: with a snow shovel. Three spheres of snow could not possibly be enough for this group, and because they weren't making a macabre snow massacre this time around, they did plenty of work to give it a humanoid shape.

"CAN I HELP?" Papyrus asked, his grin wider than usual. He was dressed for the snow, but then again that was how he usually looked.

"Just don't mess it up," Asriel said.

"Nah, he won't, his sculpture in Snowdin was good," Frisk said, staring as he worked. Papyrus took off his mittens to handle the snow. He started with the head, and around his magical phalanges a pair of ice horns grew out of the head. A snout grew from the mouth area. The body gained a texture like fur, the spheres forming into a robe that reached to the ground. A few more passes and
the snow goat took shape. "NYEH. IT'S ALL RIGHT, I'LL DO BETTER NEXT TIME!" There were ears, but they weren't big enough.

Charles shrugged. "It's pretty good for a magical skeleton, I lich it." He reached out and touched two fingers to the snout. "Boop!"

"Chara- I mean Charles! That's...!" Asriel exclaimed.

"Not everything Chara did to him was really mean," Charles told Frisk. "Go on, boop the snootle." Frisk wasn't sure which snootle to boop or whether she should do it or not.

"Can I boop the snootle?" Victoria asked, giggling.

"I am so glad you're going to forget about this," Asriel said, kneeling down, and the little girl reached out and booped him.

"Children, the cake's done! We are going to play while we give it time to cool." The kids eagerly ran inside and changed back their clothes, and the jingling began anew. Asmodeus looked at Asriel with an understanding expression: this is just what small children are like. Asriel couldn't remember being so annoying to his own parents, but loud and repetitive noises always annoyed him, even when he was small. Sighing and pretending to be patient, he picked up a controller.

With its latest console release, Nintendo had finally caved in to a market it wasn't sure existed and put in a 16-player system for its flagship titles. The only people who could possibly make use of it had a lot of money to afford the controllers, and, depending on the game, a huge television. But the Dreemurrs had both of those things and so they crowded around the couch, the Dreemurr kids squashed between their parents like sandwich fixings between whole loaves of bread. Frisk, Asriel noted, was a lot squishier than Charles, whose every cell felt like it was made of solid iron. Charles got Mario immediately, Asriel got Luigi, and Frisk found herself gravitating towards Princess Peach. Her dad, naturally, was Bowser, and Frisk laughed.

"It's a shame I got out of the Underground in November," Frisk said, smiling. "You could have dressed up like him for Halloween."

"That'd almost be like hacking Halloween," Charles replied between laughs.

"Okay, this button's to brake, this button's the gas, this one's boost, this one uses items," Frisk explained. "Ready?" They took off at once, and to her delight none of them were too terribly far behind. "Okay, you guys get it- how'd you get up there so quickly?!"

"took a shortcut."

"I thought you could only do that in real life, not in video games!"

"heh, hey, devil kid took it too. charles, you, uh, you really like tossing those shells around, don't ya?"

"Eat my dust before I eat yours, Captain Calcium."

"Watch out, I got the fire flower!" Asriel said gleefully, after he tossed a fireball at Frisk.

"Oh, so you like flowers, do you?!"

"C'mon, don't take it so- You used that power to run into people?!" Asmodeus didn't even have to reply for Asriel to hear his smugness.
"It is just a game, children. There is no need to- **Whichever one of you threw that is going over my knee!**"

"That was me, dear..."

"When the children aren't home, you and I are going to find out how fluffy your buns really are, Asgore Dreemurr!"

Victoria tugged on her father's shirt. "Daddy, I have to..."

"Not now, honey! Daddy's got to show little Lucifer here why you don't just drift without looking!"

"Yeah, eat another banana, Snape. Please. I've got the skills of dozens of players, none of you stand a chance."

"HERE COMES MY BLUE ATTACK!"

"Blue attack? What's- **You puzzle of dog chews!** I will end you! I will crush you like a bug! Mom will have to pick up what's left of you with a vacuum cleaner! They will be singing minstrel songs in taverns about the brutality I will inflict on you! And I know those things don't exist anymore but they will rebuild them just for that!"

"Don't break the controller, Charles," Frisk warned.

"I don't break controllers, I break skulls!"

"Fascinating," Gaster said. "This game was released prior to the barrier's removal, correct?"

"No," Frisk said, "it came out just before Christmas, I- Azzy, are you **screen-watching**?!"

"You mean your character? No, I can just hear your controller!"

"Gaster, it's not magically influenced, if that's what you're implying," Asmodeus said, getting into an aggressive bumping fight with Asriel, right before Papyrus' Bullet Bill refocused their priorities.

"Even without magical influence, it seems to be connected to the basic emotion of anger," Gaster explained. "Strange. Pardon me, Your Majesty."

"For wh- And now this thing has to fish me out again," Asgore groaned. "This is becoming **tiresome**. This is something humans play for fun?"

"It's fun when you're **good**," Charles said, smugly. "Just as soon as I blow past bone midget up here- Oh, **come on**! That is **such**- **How**?! Did you cheat?! **Can** you use magic to cheat in a video game?!"

"geeettttttt dunked on!"

"I shall begin serving the cake now," Toriel said, after Daisy crossed the finish line.

"Let me get her taken care of first," Asmodeus said, leading his daughter to the guest bathroom.

"Yeah, I gotta go too," Charles said, and Frisk showed him upstairs.

"Frisk, I really thought you'd do better than that," Asriel told her.
"Yeah, because I have **so much** experience with video games, right?"

"Isn't that a weird thing to be upset about?" Charles asked after a moment. "I mean, Azzy and I didn't have them, and kids in other places don't."

"Yeah, but... here and now, we do. When everybody else you know has something that you don't have, that makes people mad." Charles smiled in reply, and went to do his business, taking care to flush and wash his hands. He opened the door and the **stench** was like the Devil himself had dropped a- oh, right. Frisk also finished quickly, looking around for nuclear-strength air freshener and not finding any.

"This stuff is going **fast,**" Charles said as Frisk hopped down the stairs, her dress fluttering around her ankles. "Saved ya a slice, Frisk."

"Ohhhhh that is good," Frisk said on the first bite. The cake was heavenly, despite who it was made for.

"I would like to play again," Gaster said. "I believe I understand the physics simulation more completely now."

"Perhaps in a less aggressive form," Asgore suggested. "A change of course looks like it might work. Ah, this one. Something by the name of Rainbow Road cannot possibly be as aggravating."

They chose the same characters as before, although Asmodeus let his daughter play this time, his hands over hers, even though she'd have to re-learn everything again later.

"You're not beating me this time, you piranha-eaten dwarf!" Charles challenged as the game began.

"you look frustrated about something."

"Yeah, I can make this big jump too! What now? What now? What the- **Gaster?!**"

"You do not deserve a quick death," Gaster said, calmly. "You... oh. That was the item I was hoping you would not get."

"RNJesus strikes again!" Charles crowed, laughing. "Oh, no, Sans, you're passing me..."

"heh, at least you know when to give up."

"Oh, this must be the 'Blue Attack' you used before, Papyrus." Asgore said, firing it off.

"welp."

Frisk sighed. "One of my brothers might as well be a screen watcher, and the other one is."

"C'mon, you know I'd have to win eventually," Charles said, smugly, as Mario did his victory animation. "Wanna go again?"

"the expression that you're wearing... well, i won't grace it with a description."

"I believe we should play something else," Toriel said. "Something more accessible for a small child, something less competitive than a race, something that doesn't encourage family members to inflict **well-deserved pain** upon each other. Here, we have had this game for some time," she said, pulling out a copy of Mario Party.
"I WILL BRING FIRE AND PESTILENCE TO YOUR HOME. I WILL DEFILE YOUR TEMPLES, CAST DOWN YOUR IDOLS, AND MERCILESSLY SLAUGHTER EVERYONE YOU LOVE. WOMEN AND CHILDREN WILL BE PUT TO THE SWORD IN A THOUSAND-YEAR RAMPAGE OF DESTRUCTION, AFTER WHICH I WILL BUILD A MOUNTAIN OF SKULLS OF EVERYONE WHO EVER SUPPORTED YOU AND WHO EVER CALLED YOU FRIEND. THIS INCLUDES MY OWN, WHICH I WILL PLACE ATOP THE PILE AS AN ETERNAL MONUMENT TO RAGE AND FRUSTRATION." Papyrus looked around for approval, making sure he'd done it right, and decided that he had from the shocked looks.

"gee, papyrus, it was just one star."

"BUT IT WAS MY STAR, SANS!"

"Okay, Frisk, at least I've got you as a partner this time," Charles said. "This is good! We've got the rhythm- what-"

"We're stuck, on your side. Can we turn? No, I mean, you should paddle so that it..."

"It's still hitting it! From way over there? Can't I pull the oar in or something?! We can't go back..."

"Didn't you say you had dozens of players?!" Frisk protested.

"Yeah, but they're all telling me different things! I... there goes Mom and Azzy. And then everybody else. And then it lets us go. Great." Charles picked a mind from Southeast Asia and said some choice words in that person's language.

"Do mom my, what?" Frisk asked.

"Never mind."

"You're not too mad, Charlie?" Asriel asked, smiling.

"Naw. I'm just in the mood to take a walk, get some sunshine, drown a bus full of orphans, make Yellowstone erupt..."

"Come on, we're still almost tied for first," Frisk said, smiling. "Just a couple more turns... what's a 'Bowser Revolution'?" She and her siblings put their controllers on their laps for a bit, all of them exhaling at once in pure disbelief. Someone in the design department had a lot to answer for. "Hey, Charlie, are you sure you don't wanna end the world?"

"Thinking about it! Just so glad this is never going to have happened."

"I do not approve of this randomness either," Gaster said. "One wonders why we have even been playing for so long, if our achievements are so easily brought to naught."

"yeah, dad, that's kinda what I was worried about before."

"WELL, I DON'T MIND! I JUST PICKED UP A STAR! AND... THE GREAT PAPYRUS WINS AGAIN! NYEH-HEH-HEH!"

"Shut up before I snort your dust like a Brazilian politician snorts..." Charles' parents were staring at him, and he stopped. "Can we just play the minigames for a while? Those aren't bad." They did, and those were more fun than the actual game.

The group talked for a long while when they were done, bellies full of chocolate and warmth, and
Asgore took the time to explain just what Halloween had meant to monsters before the barrier went up. The vast majority of colonists believed that monsters were the spirits of dead humans returned to walk the earth, and so monsters took on such aspects, some more than others. ("SANS! HE'S TALKING ABOUT US!" "and the blooks. can't forget them.") A human festival devoted to spirits was effectively an invitation, and human-fearing monsters and monster-fearing humans reached a sketchy coexistence on that day. Offerings, strange occurrences, and pranks impossible for humans to pull off were the highlights of the night. Asgore agreed with what Frisk had said earlier; the next Halloween, however, was guaranteed to be entirely different.

"Are we really talking about Halloween on Christmas?" Charles asked. "Actually, there was a movie about this..." They watched it together, and the humans found that monsters could understand *A Nightmare Before Christmas* very well. By the end, it'd gotten late, and Victoria had fallen asleep on her father's lap, the jingling finally brought to a halt. The group left as they had come, with joy and merriment.

"Time for bed, children," Toriel said. "Frisk, when...?"

"Tomorrow morning, not too early. I'm going to drop the SAVE early."

"This is going to sound really lame and super childish," Charles said, "but can I sleep in the same bed? I really don't want to be alone at night..." He looked up at his father, and he was worried that the great King would say something about his prince acting like a child, but instead Asgore simply hugged him, the iron flesh buried deep in the soft fur, and Toriel patted his head gently. Even with his knowledge, Asgore couldn't pretend to understand, but it didn't matter, and Charles didn't realize he was crying again until he felt the moisture on his father's fur.

"It's totally okay," Asriel said. "I know you're messed up. It's not your fault. You don't need to be embarrassed." Frisk and Asriel took off their bracelets, and Toriel helped her three children into their pajamas and gently tucked them in together, giving them all goodnight kisses as if nothing had ever been wrong. Charles started trembling once she closed the door, and his grasping hands found his knife belt on the stand and clenched it to himself.

"Are you... afraid of the dark?" Frisk asked, incredulous.

"You could call it that," Charles answered.

"What? How? You are the bogeyman! What could you possibly be afraid of? Chuck Norris?"

"Don't joke," Charles hissed. "I need something to remind me that I'm here, with you. Otherwise I'm everyone again. And now I can understand what they're feeling, I..." He clenched his knife tighter, leaving indentations in the hilt. Being alone in the hold of a cargo plane going across the Pacific had been a very bad experience for him, and Frisk's stretching out of time had doubled the pain. Jumping out of the plane at thousands of feet and into a freezing lake had been refreshing.

Frisk turned to him in the gloom. "But... you still have to sleep, don't you? I mean, that body?"

"It does, but I don't." On the other side of the world, a person he'd been trying not to pay attention to saw something he'd never wanted to see, and there was nothing he could possibly have done about it. He tossed his knife, still in its scabbard, across the room and it stuck in the wall.

"It's all right, I've got this," Asriel said. "Come here, it's okay. I can hear you. I can feel you, inside, everything that's wrong in you. Let it go, Charlie. At least here, just try to let it go." He tried to relax, and the three of them laid together on the bed, Asriel on his sister's chest listening to her heart, Charles laying against his brother, arms wrapped around him.
And humans did evil and hurt themselves as his body slept, despite his efforts. An LV 3 alcoholic felt an agonizing stab of loss every time he reached for a drink; eventually, he poured it all down the toilet. An LV 2 man, who'd grown up drinking lead-contaminated water, suffered from previously unknown guilt every time he raised a hand to his wife or children. An LV 1 woman, who'd inadvertently stepped on (or, rather, in) a moldsmal, had begged the influence to leave her alone and Charles had managed to inform her through the very poor connection that a wizard was the only option, the same wizard who'd freed many other people the same way on his journeys to make rememberers. The LV 6 boy had fled the country; his parents, who had sold him for a pittance, were going to receive a very unpleasant reunion. All the while, Charles' body hugged his brother, perpetually reminding himself that he was eternally safe, free, and happy, even while so many others were not.

The first thing Frisk worried about on waking up was that Charles had hurt Asriel in his sleep, but both of them were in the exact same positions as they were before. The only one who had moved was Frisk, her hands on Asriel's ears. "You know," Asriel said as she woke up, a wide smile on his face, "it's going to be interesting having to put up with both of you."

"It's okay," Frisk said. "You've got two ears."

"But only one snootle," Charles added, putting his hand on it gently. "Boop!"

"Charlie! You... snootle-booper!"

Frisk laughed, checking her phone. It was later than she'd thought she'd wake up; Charles' presence had been surprisingly comfortable. "Oh, cool. This works. Okay, clicking the button... and we will go back at the sound of the boop."

Asriel turned his head to look at her, scrunching his face up, knowing what was coming.

Frisk very gently stuck her fingers out at his nose. "Boop!"

==LOAD==

"so i guess it's true," Sans said as Charles opened the passenger door. They weren't that far from the protected area, but it sure felt like the middle of nowhere. Charles' oversized clothes were intact, and he hadn't kicked his boots into a dented mess. "even the worst person can change."

"No they can't, not usually," Charles replied, buckling himself in. There wasn't a lot of point in that, but he did it anyway because that was the custom. "Ordinary people can't just get new brains, even when they need them. Being truly compassionless isn't a choice, and for just evil, sometimes the person doesn't have the right stuff to make a choice. I didn't."

"well, that's your viewpoint. even if you and frisk are right, everything you do wrong now is on you. you're choosing to be mean, as frisk puts it."

"I know that. Every day I have to make so many decisions about how to influence people, trying to help as many as I can. And I know my power comes from evil, too. I'm not trying to increase it anymore. I swear. I'm just trying to save people now, the way Azzy and Frisk want."

"and me. been thinkin' about this. if you're really changed, and you're tryin' your best, kid, that's all anyone has the right to ask."

"Thank you, Sans." They drove straight through the military cordon with only a brief stop, a quick "Who's the kid" and "charles, king asgore's taking him in", and a friendly wave, the way Asgore had demanded monsters be treated; it wasn't like a human or even a robot could fake being Sans.
Frisk and Asriel waited for him to come home before going to sleep on Christmas Eve again, and he took a bath and they slept together in comfort as his mind ranged out around the world. This time, he warned people well in advance, occasionally directly enslaving people with enough LV, forcing them to issue warnings, to call emergency services, and—twice that night—to perform singlehanded heroic rescues that would not have been possible for humans with no EXP.

"Wake up, children! We have a big day ahead of us."

Charles almost complained out loud before sitting up and turning to his siblings. "I forgot she was like that."

"You get used to it," Frisk said, getting out of bed and snapping on her bracelets, Asriel climbing over Charles to do the same. "This is going to sound weird, but do you dream at all?" She had a weird one last night, but it wasn't any weirder than her life.

"Sometimes, but it's always lucid," Charles replied. "Technically, I'm always dreaming, or I'm seeing someone's dreams. I think one of these might generate a monster."

"Gaster's got to explain just how that works sometime," Frisk said, heading to go do morning stuff. "I mean, it can't just create monsters forever."

"Nah, I think there's some kind of limit," Charles said, stretching as he got out of bed. He felt much better this Christmas morning than he did during the last one. "Like, all of humanity's brainpower equals all EXP plus all monsters. Any time there's not enough monsters, more can be made. I think that's how it works, there's probably a lot more to it."

"That sounds right," Asriel said. "There wasn't this many monsters back then."

"Wasn't indoor plumbing back then, either," Charles replied, as Frisk closed the door, and she shortly re-opened it so Asriel could do her teeth and hair and she could brush his fur.

"Sorry, you don't have your own toothbrush, just run mine under some hot water," she said, taking extra time to brush Asriel properly. The charities wanted money, not fur all over them, although to go outside on a morning like this Frisk knew which she'd rather have.

"At least this power lets me know what to do so I don't make a complete fool out of myself," Charles said. He did morning hygiene like a normal person would, except Asriel insisted on doing his teeth even if there was next to nothing on them.

"Breakfast is ready," Toriel called, and the three of them walked down together in their pajamas. It was the same as it had been before, only Toriel also set out the box of chocolates that they remembered enjoying, and she finished breakfast quickly, opening a closet and pulling out some carefully packaged garments. The kids alternated bites of eggs, toast, and chocolate, picking out ones they didn't remember eating the first time. Charles got the coconut one and enjoyed it almost as much as his father had; Frisk got chocolate-filled chocolate, and Asriel discovered that he liked strawberries a lot. Toriel made a call to have someone buy more from some place still open on Christmas. "Dear, get our sons attired properly," she asked her husband when they were done eating, handing him a pair of Dreemurr robes and some shoes she'd spent last night working on. "I will attend to our daughter." Frisk stared at the bundle as they walked up together, and when Toriel unrolled it, Frisk's jaw dropped.

It was a dress, of course, a light purple dress even bigger and frillier than the one she'd worn to court, multiple petticoats attached to the inside to make it nearly as wide as it was tall, a red heart as part of the Delta Rune in the center of the chest. Toriel had asked for Asmodeus' present a bit early
once time was rewound, and she'd made ribbons from the pink silk cloth and attached them around the sides. It was carefully crafted to reach Frisk's ankles and no further. Frisk thought things like this only existed in movies. "While it may seem a bit much, it is proper for a beautiful young princess to be the center of attention," Toriel explained.

Frisk stared at her mother in disbelief before laughing uproariously, almost spitting all over the place, clutching her stomach while Toriel gently ran her fingers through Frisk's hair. "Mom, I'm always the center of attention, wherever I go! You know that! Are you feeling okay? You can't go crazy, can you?"

"I am very aware of how and why people respect and fear you. It changes nothing. You are still our beautiful young princess." Frisk, with her small features and nondescript face, was not used to being called beautiful. "Disrobe and sit down." Once she did, her palms on the bed and the incredulity never leaving her face, her mother pulled a pair of tights up her legs, and Frisk almost died laughing when she saw what would have been regular girls' flats, except they had wheels in them. "Up, arms up." Toriel picked up the dress and set it gently down, petticoats and all, on top of Frisk, guiding her arms through the puffed sleeves, tying the sash and doing up the back. Toriel handed Frisk a pair of long gloves with rows of lace to sit above her bracelets, and as Frisk put them on, Toriel placed Frisk's tiara on her daughter's head while running her thick, furry fingers through her daughter's dark hair, whistling a calming song. "There," Toriel said, a great smile on her face. "See yourself the way the world should see you."

Frisk looked at herself in the mirror. Her mother hadn't just been running fingers though her hair; Toriel had altered Frisk's long, straight hair into curls that framed her face. She turned a bit, waving her hands, shocked that she was looking at herself and not some royal stranger with her face. Toriel reached out a hand, and Frisk took it.

"I'm sorry we couldn't make you a crown that quick," Asriel was explaining to Charles, who had his back to the stairs. Both of them were wearing matching robes similar to their father's, and while Asriel had a pair of wheeled shoes that Toriel found fit for the purpose, she'd had to hastily use purple dye and magic to make Charles' boots presentable, and while he didn't seem perfectly at home in royal finery, he looked like a boy of wealth and taste. "I mean, maybe I could if I really tried, but I'd need the metals like I did for Frisk's tiara."

"Frisk's tiara?" Charles said, eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, the one she's wearing now." Following Asriel's glance, Charles turned and looked up the stairs. He drew in a breath as Frisk took dainty, careful steps down the oversized staircase. Lacking appropriate words of his own, he settled for something in French.

Asgore smiled his broad smile. "She is beautiful, isn't she? Both of them are."

Toriel looked away, embarrassed. "You know how to make an old woman feel young again, you randy old goat. Frisk, when you're my age, I hope your husband knows how to treat you properly."

Frisk stopped on the stairs and turned her head. "Mom, I can't get to be your age."

Toriel smiled at her. "We shall see about that, my daughter."
Asmodeus and Gaster knocked on the door together as Toriel helped Frisk into a Dreemurr-fur cardigan. After spending a few hours with her, the wizard had left his daughter with the skelebros; while they were certainly invited to the Dreemurrs' charity event, they decided that they had better things to do. Asmodeus had asked to come not because he really wanted to be there- he would much rather be celebrating a Christmas that his daughter would remember- but because, as the only human adult among them, he felt obligated to protect His Majesty from charlatans and chicanery.

"Hey, Frisk, Charles, we need to cast that spell now," Asmodeus said, forcing himself to sound casual, knowing that if he screwed up, that was going to be the end of all of it. Whoopsie-daisy, wrong syllable, there goes the universe. But of course he had things triple-checked on his phone, with both his and Gaster's voices saying different things at the same time.

"Are we really going to just do this right now, right here?" Frisk asked. This seemed like the sort of thing you'd do in the middle of a magic circle, with a full moon directly overhead and pillars, arcane components and strange devices surrounding you, not something you'd do when you're about to go to a Christmas party. ('Oh, hey, before you go, can you make the universe not collapse?)

"We are inside the universe, correct?" Gaster asked. "That is the appropriate place to cast it."

Frisk laughed. "Okay, then, let's not keep time waiting." The Dreemurrs' parents gave each of their children a deep, loving hug. "It's okay, Mom, Dad, don't worry," Frisk said, feeling very worried.

"It's all right, they're not going to mess this up," Asriel said, smiling. "Because they didn't mess it up, remember?"

Standing next to each other, Charles and Frisk looked up at the adults. The spell was rapid, but it took time to take effect; Frisk felt the magical pull and accepted it, wishing for it to work, and she abruptly found herself seeing everything from far too many perspectives, her mind simply unable to process so much information at once, a million distractions hitting her at the same time and forcing her to concentrate to remember what she'd gone back for. This must be the way Charles sees the world, she realized. Maybe the way Gaster did. No, it had to be Charles, because she was seeing the world through the eyes of a million EXP earners, some more clearly than others, and when she screamed "DON'T PRESS THAT BUTTON!" into the ether like she knew she had to do, it came out in Charles' voice too and abruptly the spell was finished as Charles dissipated the EXP from so many of his former followers and she was simply a time-reversing princess standing in a room with her family and friends.

"That was the weirdest thing ever," Asriel said. Part of him had been dragged along for the ride.

"Charles, is that the way you always see things? With all those people?" Frisk asked, her head reeling.

"Pretty much, yeah. I got used to it." Frisk blinked. It didn't seem like something anyone could get used to.

"With this concluded, I bid you all goodbye," Gaster said, and he opened the door and swiftly floated out of it. He had to return home, as he had a very immature person waiting to celebrate Christmas again with him. Victoria was there, too.
Undyne came stomping to the door then. Toriel opened it with a smile and a warm Christmas greeting, and all Undyne said in response was "Good Morning, Your Majesty. Are we ready to leave?" Her head slowly turned towards Charles, but she said nothing to him. She was told not to. Frisk realized. She wasn't engaging in screaming, threats, or violence not because she believed that Chara and Charles weren't really the same person but because of an explicit command from King Asgore. She was very bad at pretending, which was obviously why she was wearing the helm on top of the full battle armor; if she hadn't been, everyone would have seen her terrible scowl. As it was, her hands twitched, and Frisk could have sworn she saw flashes of blue light appear and vanish in Undyne's gauntlets as she struggled not to form a spear. Even Frisk could hear her furious breathing. She didn't even say anything about my dress. She must really be peeved.

As she led them into the armored SUV one by one, bowing deferentially to each of them, she remained totally silent save for the clanging of her boots on the shoveled walk, and by the time she got the car started (Undyne can drive?! Frisk realized that she couldn't take it anymore. "Merry Christmas, Undyne," she said.

"Merry Christmas, Frisk," Undyne replied, icily, and Frisk almost replied with 'the kid you're so mad at just helped us prevent the end of everything,' but Asriel was grasping her hand and shaking his head. It wasn't the best time. Undyne drove well, with professional precision, falling easily into place within a larger motorcade. The motorcade was only the beginning; Dreemurr family business got a couple of helicopters all the way down to the hotel, the same hotel that the Dreemurrs had stayed at before, as it boasted a particularly large ballroom.

As they approached the hotel, the sidewalks on both sides of the road became clogged with people waving American flags because that was what Americans did, some of them wearing Delta Rune-styled clothing, more than a few with 'Make America Great Again' hats. There were a couple of people holding up a sign, yelling in a way the supporters were not, and Frisk found herself staring into the palm of one of her long gloves as her hand covered her face. Protesters. We've got protesters now. There were only a handful of them, and they were largely surrounded by police and the Dreemurrs' loving fans, who were staring at them with some hostility. But the sign the small, beleaguered group was holding up wasn't 'Destroy all monsters' or 'God hates DETERMINATION' but 'Why didn't you save our son?' "Wait, what?" Frisk asked, confused.

"Figured something like this might happen," Asmodeus said with a wry expression. "I can already guess what they're going to say." Everyone else in the car except Undyne turned to look at him. "It was a car accident, a lightning strike, or some other kind of random chance. We can talk about this later."

"I... want to make sure of that. Can we stop there?" Frisk asked, pointing.

"I am not sure if that is wise," Toriel said, wary. Frisk just looked at her. There was nothing- absolutely nothing- ordinary citizens could do against all three of the Dreemurr children, but that didn't seem to be what she was worried about.

"I am sure it is necessary," Asgore replied. "Undyne, stop the car here." Undyne obeyed, parking the car next to the curb, confusing the drivers ahead of her and behind her until she radioed what was going on.

Asriel got out first, and the police pushed back the throngs of people getting close with their phones and cameras. "Here comes another billion-hit video," he said, having learned well the ways of humans, and the crowd screamed in response. Frisk followed her brother out, her curled hair flailing around in the biting wind, and the crowd almost went nuts. Supporters and protesters, and they must have stood out in the freezing cold for an hour or more, just to watch us pass by. She
would not have come out on a morning like this to watch anyone, regardless of prestige or power. Charles followed, hopping out of the car, and there were only a handful of reactions at first because only a handful of people could guess who he was (one man, then a man and a woman, quickly and quietly backed off and left- the Dreemurr kids figured they were the smart ones); then they saw his robe, and everyone decided to take pictures of the new sibling. The kids were all expecting someone to scream "That's Chara!" but nobody did. Frisk rolled towards the protesters, who had police protecting them as well, her dress waving back and forth in the wind.

"Who didn't I save?" she asked loud enough to be heard above the crowd, although she could see pictures on the sign of a boy in various stages of life, the oldest being roughly her age. Nobody she knew, nobody who went to her school. Definitely nobody she should feel responsible for; if rememberers failed to save someone, it wasn't her fault and wasn't her problem. But that didn't make him any less dead, nor did it reduce the grief of his parents.

"The truck tried to swerve, it wasn't his fault, it was nobody's fault," the woman blubbered out, and Frisk was taken aback; Asmodeus had known.

"Please, just go back and fix it," the man begged, sinking to his knees, the sign going down with him. "It was just last week, you can do a week, can't you?"

There was no way she was going to explain the limitations of her power. "I'm sorry," she said instead, shaking her head. "He's gone." Frisk was halfway expecting the man to pull out a gun or a knife, to try to force her into going back one way or the other, and then one of her brothers would instantly take his weapon away and his hand with it. Instead, he simply started to cry, and the sign fell onto the ground as his wife comforted him. Frisk wanted to reach out and touch him, to comfort him somehow, but what could she do? It was only when her brothers were helping her back into the car, Asriel pushing her dress aside and closing the door behind him, that Frisk realized she'd never even learned the kid's name.

"Hey, Frisk, remember what you said," Charles pointed out as Undyne pressed the accelerator. "When everybody else has something that someone doesn't have, that someone gets mad. Everybody else has their fatal accidents prevented."

"Envy is a powerful human emotion," Asgore said. "Even moreso when it is combined with survival."

"But why did that happen?" Frisk asked, confused. "Did a rememberer just forget and miss one?"

"I doubt this was a missed one. I'll explain why later," Asmodeus said again, as the SUV pulled into the lower parking garage and the Dreemurrs were ushered through maintenance hallways that were altogether cramped for King Asgore, who had long ago discovered the art of squeezing through narrow corridors.

The setup was simple: the King and his family would seat themselves at a large, semicircular table, and charity representatives would approach one at a time to sit in the center. Each representative would make his pitch, and Asgore would later judge how much funding to give. Frisk guessed that the setup was probably unusual, but it gave everyone face time with King Asgore (and me), which was what they'd all come for. She wondered how long they'd all been waiting and how many hadn't gotten any sleep last night, and again wondered how disappointed they were when her family hadn't shown up the first time. But that hadn't actually happened and none of them remembered it, so who cared?

Asgore began with a prepared speech, a long one with a consistent theme of charity and personal sacrifice. The children were barely even listening; all of it was either basic truths they already
knew or things they didn't particularly care about. Frisk wondered what she was even doing there—her presence put the focus on her, instead of Dad where it belonged, and Asriel wasn't even trying to hide his boredom. That, Frisk found awful; there were an unlimited number of fun things to do, Sans had bought them a hang glider, and while boring her was an annoyance, boring Asriel had to be some kind of war crime after what had happened to him.

Charles wasn't bored, though. Charles was focused, angry, staring at a few of the labeled tables and their occupants, and once Asriel heard the fury in his breathing, Asriel's boredom turned to anxiety. While Dad droned on, saying what the humans in the room expected to hear about cooperation and trust, Charles whispered something under his breath. Turning to her with his snout up against her ear (and prompting another wave of picture taking), Asriel repeated his message. Then Asgore's speech finally ended with "So we must remember that our value as people is not defined by our authority, our wealth, or our power, but what we do for others. And it is with that sentiment that I welcome you all here today." He got plenty of applause, even from Muffet's six hands, but Frisk was increasingly convinced that he could have said almost anything short of 'It's SOUL-crunching time' and he'd still get people to clap. They wanted his money, after all.

Charles got up, first tapping Frisk as he did so, and they approached the front center. "Let me talk for a bit," he cordially asked his father, and Asgore nodded and stepped aside. "One, two, three," he said quietly, and together, he and Frisk said "You might recognize this voice." Most of the audience did, and more of them realized which voice it had to be, and the room became completely silent at once. Frisk got the immediate impression that this could go south in a big hurry and visualized her finger on the LOAD button. "Greetings. My name is Charles Dreemurr. Now that I have a mind of my own, I stand with my siblings and my parents. I fight for life, for humanity, for monsterdom. And as I look around, I see some who do not. I see people whose loyalties are to a creator they've made up, the same creator that I can hear worshipped in the minds of so many monster killers and a different creator from so many more." Tension was in the air, and some people started eyeballing the exits. A few of the security personnel started talking to each other in hushed tones, and Asriel started shaking his head; if Charles got really angry, there wasn't enough firepower in miles to stop him. "None of you—none of you—know the true creator of this world." His gaze turned to a few tables in particular, and Frisk saw what they had in common: clear religious affiliation of some type or another. Some of them were clutching their religious symbols, either for comfort or as old-school protection from evil. "And you better feel lucky you don't know him!" Charles continued, enraged. Asgore shook his head at his wife, who was about to get up to try to stop this. "If any of you really do know the thing that screwed up so bad as to make me possible, to create an entire species and then create the means to imprison them in a pocket hell, speak up! I want to talk to the inventor of cancer and malaria, the one who's got kids being born for no other reason than to suffer, make more of themselves, and die! And don't say that I'll one day meet him because I won't, not the way you will. I can't die. But one day I will find him, and I will cast him down from his throne, or his admin account, or his building blocks, or whatever he used, and I'll ram all my LOVE and all the sufferings of the world right up every evil, filthy orifice he's got. Are you listening, God? Can you hear us? Can we hear you?" Nobody spoke for a long while. Asriel heard nothing except human agitation, the whirrings and blowings of the hotel's machinery, and the faraway yapping of a small dog.

Charles grinned demonically. "See? He won't save you. Maybe Frisk will, because his screwup let her do what she does, but he won't. That same screwup means that if you ever kill a monster, you belong to me." Frisk suddenly recognized the brilliance of what Charles was doing. He assuredly meant every word he said, but the way he was saying them made him sound vindictive and diabolic, exactly the way his father wanted. Undyne, who was standing on the other side of the room, realized it too and gave a sardonic smile. This was all being broadcast live and worldwide, and Charles was speaking directly into the cameras, his augmented voice needing no microphone.
There was nobody on the face of the planet, not even in the remotest hinterlands, who wouldn't get the message sooner or later. Charles looked around, noticing that nobody had fled his presence; most of them were frozen in fear. "If your loyalty is to a creator rather than to humanity or monstedom, get the hell out of here!" he demanded, clenching his fists, and while a few of the people he wanted gone kept sitting there at first, they were quickly dragged out by their wild-eyed friends. Charles relaxed. He was worried that he was going to have to break things to get his point across, and that would ruin the robe his mother had so carefully altered for him.

"Really, dearie? How about spiders?" Muffet asked, approaching the center table, and Asgore and the rest of his family approached their side of it, the King gesturing for the mass media to leave now that the speeches were done. Charles looked at her in interest, a quizzical smile across his face. Muffet was her usual self, wearing a silk gown for the event, her six arms making friendly gestures and her five eyes blinking irregularly.

Frisk took the opportunity to cool things down. "Hey, Muffet. Been a while," she said, smiling. "Dad, you know what happened when she asked me for money before."

"I'm aware," Asgore replied. "Muffet, we've been over this," he said firmly. "Especially out here in the human world, with so many other causes that need help, you cannot possibly expect me to finance yours."

"Oh, but Your Majesty," Muffet said, constantly gesturing (Frisk wondered what it would look like if Gaster and Muffet ever decided to hold hands), "there are so many types of spiders up here, types I've never known existed." A large variety of rare spiders crawled out from her gown, parading across the table. "Even the humans haven't catalogued them all. And to save them and protect them requires saving their entire habitat. I'm already working with several organizations up here. We're going to buy a whole rainforest preserve, we just need a little push~"

Asgore sighed. "I had not expected to live to see the day when humans could destroy so many other animals through their own growth, a day when they threaten the wild places and not the other way around." He stared at the spider monster, who was slowly drinking a cup of tea. He was the one who'd taught her how to make it, although she had a tendency to include arachnids as part of the recipe. "Muffet, I will consider your cause. But for the well-being of the world, not for you."

Muffet made a faint -tch- sound in response. "You're as stubborn as ever, Your Majesty." She left her seat and walked out, her lower pair of hands on her hips.

The next charity representative with the wherewithal to approach the Dreemurrs was a man who looked like one of Tolkien's dwarves had grown to full human height, his courage clearly bolstered by the armored fish with him. "Your Majesties, Your Highnesses," Undyne theatrically said with a flourish, "I bring you Dr. Grigori Greybeard, a man who claims to be able to solve Frisk's biological problem." Frisk stared at Undyne and the man she was introducing, in total disbelief that Undyne would bring up the topic in a public setting, let alone introduce a charity devoted to it. Charles was singularly unimpressed and said what Frisk was thinking: "You really brought in a charity that focuses on rare conditions that don't even do damage?"

"Actually," the man said, his voice sounding like he was chewing on his three-foot beard, "what I'm here for kills more people per day than you ever did and more than you could ever possibly save," he said, gesturing to Charles and Frisk in turn. Asriel and Frisk looked at each other, confused, while their parents simply waited for an explanation. Charles theatrically folded his arms, raised his eyebrows, leaned back, and stared at the scientist with the smuggest of expressions: Oh, I've got to hear this. Grigori looked somewhat uneasy, and not just from Charles.
In every other interview, charity pitch, and conversation he'd had, he could at least connect on a fundamental level with the personal aspects of his work; what he dealt with would happen to everyone he talked to. But of the people he was approaching, only three of them were human— and of those, one was fundamentally immortal, one could cast magic, and the last one...

Asmodeus understood. "Listen, if you're going to say that you have some kind of magic elixir to stop old age, remember that there's an actual magician at the table," he said, annoyed. Frisk was just relieved that he wasn't who she thought he was. *Oh, he's not here to treat my chimerism, he's here to stop people from ever getting old. That's cool, then.*

"Everything my organization does works within the realm of, well, call them now 'conventional physics'," Grigori replied. "The physics we all thought we had before this started."

"Indefinite longevity in a perfect universe," Asmodeus said, his expression matching Charles'. "Go on, tell us how that's supposed to work."

"It's like fixing a car," Grigori explained, going into something he'd rehearsed. "Parts break down, so you replace them. Things wear out, you repair them. You lose cells, you put in new ones. I could go into detail, but I tend to lose people when I start getting into detail about cross-linked collagen, transthyretin amyloid, and restoring body parts with stem cells. But we don't know how to do all those things yet, and discovering them requires effort, time, and funding. You can see who we give money to; our financial records are open." He looked discomfited for a moment and said what he really wanted to say. "At some point in these conversations, I usually remind everyone this is about health, not immortality, because people can still get run over or drowned or what have you." He stared at Frisk, as if trying to physically see the fundamental reality alterations that made her power possible. "Your Highness, the only thing I can tell you is that I don't think anyone wants to know what might happen if you get Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or some other form of dementia."

"What are those?" Asriel asked.

"Age-related brain diseases," Grigori replied. "They get people sent to nursing homes because they forget which end of a spoon to hold. Their thoughts start going away. They forget who they are, their friends' names, everything." Frisk shuddered, and Asriel's ears curled up in terror. Charles just nodded a bit, knowing exactly what the scientist was talking about. Some sufferers still had enough mind left to earn EXP, and he lost connections one by one when their deteriorating brains couldn't even support their SOULs anymore. It was a hideous way to die.

"Mr. Greybeard!" Toriel admonished. "You're scaring the children!"

"I hope so," he replied, grimly. "These diseases ought to scare everybody in the world. And they're not the only things. I could sit here all day and talk about blood clots blocking hearts and brains; if she ever has a stroke and can't just, well, un-have it, we're all in trouble."

"He can stop that," Asmodeus said, gesturing to Asriel.

"Really? I've been hearing things about that. Well, good. But there's also immune system dysfunction, there's dying cells and messed-up mitochondria and all the cancers we don't have good therapies for yet."

"So this is a threat," Asgore rumbled, and Grigori looked up at him, seeing how large he was, knowing that if Asgore were made of water and bone he would hardly be able to stand. "If I don't give you money, my daughter will gradually and painfully die."

Grigori spread his hands. "Your Majesty, I don't know for a fact if it'll be us that solves it, although
people have come from us to start up related companies. I don't know which of the labs our
organization funds will come up with treatments for these things, or if it'll be done by some other
organization. But what I do know is that if we don't have a functioning rejuvenation industry by the
time your daughter is old enough to need it, nobody here is going to be happy. I don't think anyone
anywhere is going to be happy. Rather, you'll all be unhappy, I'll be frozen."

"So Frisk's going to get old and then be little again?" Charles asked, amused at the idea.


"Dad, if he's for real we have to help him," Asriel said, desperately meaning it, his ears still curled
tightly. "Not just for Frisk," he added quickly, not really meaning it. He knew that he should be
concerned about this happening to everyone in the world, but all he could think about was Frisk's
cells rotting away, her muscles withering, her heart giving out, her brain activity fading, her
personality and opinions and emotions dwindling like a dying fire. And when she faded too far
away to support happiness and love, to support him, his joy of being happy and alive and out in the
world would simply disappear and all that would be left would be a single, yellow flower growing
on top of a grave that Charles, wearing a succession of bodies, would tend until the end of
humanity. Unless, of course, Asriel took her SOUL first.

"I will give your organization very deep consideration, Mr. Greybeard," Asgore proclaimed. He
 glanced at his daughter. The last thing he would call Frisk or any human was fragile, as he'd forced
her to beat him to within an inch of his life, but the same things that made humans so strong were
the things killing them slowly.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The next charity representative to approach the table was from a family planning organization that
was dedicated to reducing the uncontrolled birthrate in impoverished countries; Charles
immediately recommended that his father give generously to the cause, as it would surely reduce
the sum total of human misery and slowly abate the screaming he was trying not to pay attention
to. Asgore took it seriously.

Other charities came, one after the other. Charles largely dismissed them, pointing out that while
they gave things to the poor, they had no power to not make people poor, and his parents
understood the value of treating the disease rather than the symptoms. Eventually, as the King
knew would happen, a burly man wearing a neatly tailored suit came up to him and suggested a
visit with the President. Bring the family. Asgore would not be hurried; he saw the last of the
charity representatives off and gave a boisterous and heartfelt farewell, and the group followed
Undyne out.

As they filed into the SUV, Asmodeus took a deep breath. "This is as good a time as any to tell you
why that happened back there. Are any of you at all familiar with the trolley problem?" he asked,
and there was general shaking of heads.

"The answer I'm getting is 'multi-track drifting'," Charles replied, and the wizard guffawed a bit.

"It's like this. Frisk, let's say you have a trolley that's going to run over five people if it keeps going
the way it's going. You can pull a switch to prevent that, but if you do, it'll run over one other
person. Your only options are to pull or not pull."

"Pull it," Frisk answered immediately. "I have to. These are all the same people, right? I can't let
five die for one."
Asmodeus nodded. "Gaster could probably explain this better than I could, because he's probably seen it happen for himself, but have any of you heard of chaos theory?"

"The butterfly thing?" Charles asked.

"Sort of," Asmodeus replied. "It's any small change that can affect larger things. It's why rememberers don't even do random traffic accidents, at least not in big cities. It's pointless, because unless somebody's drunk or high or distracted" Citations for texting while driving had skyrocketed, and some cops had started openly telling the texters that they'd gotten into wrecks in other timelines, "or has a bad car, something that can be traced back to a specific cause, it's pointless to try to intervene, because the changes in traffic patterns caused by moving police and ambulances around usually make those accidents not happen the second time. The people just weren't there when they would have been. Different accidents happen instead." Asmodeus decided it'd be counterproductive to mention that a motorcade driving through on one day and not another would decisively exacerbate the problem, at least in that one area.

"So it's like pulling the lever," Frisk said, understanding. "Somebody who wouldn't have died if I hadn't gone back died when I did."

"Yes," Asmodeus answered. "That may or may not have been what happened there. The only solution would be to keep going back until we have it exactly right, every day, and that'd just drive people insane." He sighed. "I hope it never happens to some rememberer's kid, but I'm sure one day it will. I give warnings about that."

Toriel spoke with confidence and finality. "The only proper solution is to make the world a less dangerous place."

Charles laughed. "Hey, Dad, how easy is that?"

"Immensely difficult. Frisk, do not worry about this. Harm caused by truly random chance and nothing else is vanishingly rare. Humans are born with problems or cause them."

Undyne spoke up theatrically. "But that does not mean that they cannot be solved."

"Speaking of humans with problems," Asriel said, "you think the President's going to do something stupid?"

"Nah," Frisk replied. "Besides, we still have pictures of him bald."

President Trump wasn't even wearing his toupee when he met the group in the Red Room, arms folded and a smug look on his face, totally unafraid of Charles or anyone else. There were a couple of Secret Service agents there, but everyone in the room knew they were just there for show.

"Merry Christmas, everybody!" he bellowed as the group filed in. He'd have preferred it if there were fewer of them, especially the fish woman he wasn't familiar with, but he could deal with it. "Even you, you demonic little turd," he said, pointing at Charles, who made a dismissive look at this loser gesture.

"What'd you get for Christmas, that robot fake?" Asriel asked, smiling. The speaker simulating breathing and heartbeat hadn't fooled him for an instant; the robot just sounded wrong. Asriel couldn't blame the President for not wanting to be in the same room as Charles, lest the Red Room get a whole lot redder in a hurry.

"What, that fast?" the fake Trump asked, smiling in a very natural-looking way, and Asriel lifted
an ear at him. "If Ross Perot's ears could have done things like that, history would be a little different. Anyway. You know what my top brass are telling me? They're saying I shouldn't get mad. Can you believe that? I've got the kid who possessed me, standing right here in my house, and I'm being told I shouldn't try to do anything to you." General Slaughter, who'd had some famous exploits before getting an officer's commission, had been insistent on telling him what the important half of the battle was.

"It's pointless, I'm everywhere," Charles said, sitting down in front of him. "And, for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"You won't anyway. I won't let you," Frisk said to the President, quietly.

"About that," Trump said, the robot's head turning to look at her. He knew exactly how powerful she was, but in that dress she reminded him of his own daughters when they were small, and the warm smile on his face was patterned back to the robot. "I have a deal for you. I don't know how much history you've learned, but we and North Korea have been technically at war for almost seventy years now. And things look like they're getting a lot worse. That country's almost falling apart. Even China's on board with regime change. And South Korea's willing to pay us to finish it."

"Seventy years, and you still haven't finished it anyway?" Undyne mocked. "You humans have your super destructive weapons, and you can't finish a war in seventy whole years?"

"Those weapons are why we can't finish it, actually," Trump said. "Or couldn't, until now."
Another piece of advice his team had given him: don't call Frisk a superweapon. "For the last five days, we've done full-scale invasions. For the last two days, we've neutralized every single counterbattery piece they've got, especially the nuclear ones. But once we've gotten started for real-
"

"You've been using my power to practice starting a war?!" Frisk shouted, horrified. Her mother drew closer, comforting her.

"Those rememberers were to be used against him!" Asmodeus shouted, gesturing to Charles, before realizing how dumb he'd been. Of course they could and would move people around.

"Dad," Frisk asked, "do you think I should just LOAD right now and tell the news that he needs to be impaled?"

"Impeached," Toriel corrected her.

"Yeah, that." Trump's warm smile slowly evaporated; he still thought her large dress was adorable and her tantrum even more so, but he realized that she could easily end his career and possibly his entire party. This was a lot worse than the photos, now that everyone knew what she was. He trusted his own people to be resolute, but both houses of Congress would knuckle under within days. Religious leaders had deposed secular ones before, and none of them ever had real deific power- she probably could have him impaled if she really wanted to. Also, she was the only reason his approval rating was comfortably above room temperature. He was about to reply with something comforting when Frisk said, "Wait a minute- even if none of us learned because it was kept off the news or whatever, Charles, you had to know about this, right?" Frisk wondered what kind of total censorship was being employed, or if she'd just not been paying attention while cities burned and then became un-burned. The latter, probably.

"Of course I did," Charles said. "I didn't know that you didn't know."

"Patience," Asgore counseled, sitting on a couch near his daughter and taking up nearly all of it.
"After the President explains himself, going back is an option."

"My deal is this," Trump said. "You help me with this, and I let bygones be bygones, forever. I say almost anything you want me to say about your human son. Frisk, I might ask you to go back more than once or on a weird schedule. Charles-"

"You need me to go break into somewhere and stomp some heads?" Charles asked, and he looked a bit too happy at the prospect for Frisk's taste. "I told you there's someone begging me to do that," he told his sister. "They've got people in prison camps. Starving people. And like I said, they bomb monsters." The scowl on Undyne's face showed her pure hate for people who did that, but Asgore's face remained neutral. He deeply wanted to help based on that alone, but he knew better than to say it.

"I don't want you stomping anyone there, although we did talk about that," The Donald said. Although he relished the idea of the Devil rushing through old tunnels and ripping people he didn't like in half, it'd be bad PR. "I actually want you to use whoever you have left there to tell us what's going on."

"That's not going to work," Charles replied. "While I wasn't really sure what I was doing, they pretty much purged me out of their hierarchy. All I have are just people, not even soldiers. Come on, just use regular spies." Trump shrugged in response.

"I have to say, it's an interesting deal with the devil," Asmodeus said, "but he can't retaliate anyway, so, Mr. President, what are you even offering?"

"There are some things I want from him," His Majesty said, folding his great hands and looking the robot in the face. "Certain causes that the royal finances may not be able to fully support. One cause, in particular, I believe he may approve of."

"Dad... do you really want me to do this?" Frisk asked, shaking. "Do you really want me to help kill people?"

"The quicker a war is, the more bloodless it is," Trump said, using arguments his team had helped him rehearse. "Thousands, maybe millions, are going to starve if we don't invade. These Communist bastards are cracking down hard, leaving farmers nothing from their own farms. Some of their military units are foraging, which means taking whatever they want."

"He's not making this up," Charles agreed, looking around at his family. "It's nightmare city over there. Well, it would be if they had more real cities."

Trump continued. "On the other hand, if we do go in, we expect near-total capitulation within a week. A lot of them are halfway ready to surrender right now. In the end, we'll have a single country with a big national park in the middle and, heh, you think people worship you now? They'll be putting pictures of your face where Kim's used to be."

"I don't want to be worshipped!" Frisk screamed at him. "Especially not like that, and not for that!" Asriel felt the emotions well up in Frisk's SOUL, but they weren't enough to make him transform. "You're not doing this for me or them!"

"You're right," Trump snarled, the robot's eyes looking directly at her. "I'm not. I'm doing this to get rid of a pain in the ass, stop them from selling nukes to God knows who," Frisk just stared in reply. Terrorism, even nuclear terrorism, did not work in the post-Frisk world. "shore up our allies in that region, ultimately increase the economy of a trading partner, and show the world that we mean business. A couple million... people" Frisk could only guess as to what word he might have
"Saving the human world is difficult, not easy, and trying times create troublesome allies," Asgore told his daughter, and they looked into each other's eyes for a moment. "Do you trust me with you?"

Frisk looked at Asriel for a moment, who was nodding slowly. "Yes, Dad," she reluctantly said.

"Then please, some privacy. President Trump and I must... negotiate."

"Okay, Dad," Frisk said. "If you think it's right." Asgore's family and friends left without him, as he did his job.

"Humans never stop killing, do they?" Undyne asked, disgusted, staring at Charles with unmitigated contempt. Fortunately, she wasn't driving this time; she was sitting in the back of a limousine next to Toriel and Asmodeus, the three children on the other side facing her, Asriel in the middle. "Monsters. Each other. Their own people. For gain, for politics, for whims. And then others kill the killers, and then the killers try to kill them, and then even more killers come in to kill."

"If everyone were nice, there wouldn't be such thing as the Royal Guard, would there?" Charles asked flippantly, and Undyne visibly restrained herself from attacking him right there. "Aren't you one of us, too?"

Undyne was incensed. "I have never killed anyone, human or monster."

"You tried pretty hard that one time," Charles pointed out before Frisk could. "Frisk's right. I'm not Chara. I'm trying to stop the deaths and the suffering. Dad's right too, it's not easy. There are no quick solutions. Pure pacifism doesn't work. But I know what I am," Charles solemnly said. "Do you know what you are?"

"I am a protector," Undyne said, firmly.

"And what would you do, if, say, fifty nutjobs came after this car? They might do that, after what I told them back there. Let's say they blew up the other cars, and they came in and started shooting. Frisk would just go 'nope', but if she couldn't, what would you do? I know what I'd do. I know what this guy would do." He gestured to Asmodeus, who shrugged. Charles didn't know what he'd do, not quite, because Asmodeus was a wizard and had a substantial bag of tricks saved to his phone. "I'm pretty sure I know what Azzy would do." Asriel slowly nodded. Even without a formal education in the subject, spending so much time with Frisk had given him terrific, terrible insight into the inner workings of humans. Reluctantly, he would use it. "If Dad were here, we know what he'd do. Even Mom would have to do something." Toriel bowed her head. "You would throw spears, Undyne. You would throw a lot of spears."

Undyne stared at him for a bit. "I'm still not going to be your friend," she said.

"That's okay. I don't expect you to be. I feel lucky Frisk and Azzy are." He held Asriel's fluffy hand, and Asriel held Frisk's gloved hand, and they sat together like that all the way home, even after the driver dropped Asmodeus off at the skeletons' house to be greeted by an ear-piercing call of "DADDDDEEEEE!"

The agent smartly parked them at their front door, and Frisk stepped out of the limo and stared, mouth open. Papyrus had placed extraordinarily lifelike statues of the Dreemurr family on their front lawn, and, through lines and texture, Frisk could tell that the three smaller sculptures were
wearing striped shirts despite the skeleton only having one color to work with. The sculptures of their parents must have taken tremendous effort, but there they stood, horns and ears carved to perfection. Frisk immediately pulled out her phone and started taking pictures, asking her brothers to go around for other angles, while their mother chuckled and took some pictures of her own. It was still too cold to be standing around outside without heavy coats, though.

When the family got in, Frisk sighed and sat down heavily onto the nearest comfortable, cushioned armchair, her dress scrunched up around her legs and her wheeled dress shoes sinking into the carpet. "So, today... well, let's just say today, we met my brother the Devil, went back in time with that Devil to prevent the universe from blowing up, had that Devil basically declare war on God," Charles started smiling, and whether it was a genuine smile or an evil one Frisk couldn't tell. Probably both. "found out that I'm going to indirectly get a few people killed no matter what I do, agreed to try to end old age, and Dad's negotiating on how to use my powers to help start a war." She relaxed deep into the chair, feeling cozy. The weight of responsibility, of power, had gotten too ridiculous to be taken seriously. She had her magical friends and her loving goat parents and her wonderful goat brother and another brother who was straight from Hell and everything was okay.

"And you forgot my Christmas present," Asriel said, giving an exaggerated frown.

"No, I didn't," Frisk said, her small mouth making the biggest smile possible. "It's upstairs, next to the bathtub." Frisk relaxed and closed her eyes, and Asriel's surprised, joyful bleat on discovering the freshly installed walk-in hair dryer made her truly content.
Flight

Smiling, Frisk got up and went upstairs with Charles, lifting the giant dress out of her way, and on the top step Asriel nearly tackled her to the ground with his hug. "It's just like the one at the hotel!" he exclaimed, giggling, the corners of his mouth turned upwards almost to his eyes.

"Just like that one," Frisk said. She'd had it in mind when she asked Jenkins to get it installed. "C'mon, help me out of this thing." Asriel and Charles changed as well, putting on their signature striped shirts to look like identical twins from different species, Frisk in a matching dress with blue and pink stripes all the way down. Asriel's ears perked up and he started laughing, gesturing to the door, and even Frisk could hear the visitor after a little bit:

"...and you can get arms just like mine and then we can play video games together, and toys, and all this neat stuff, and we can meet Princess Frisk and Prince Asriel and Charles, oh, um, I guess he's a prince too but Undyne says he's mean, and the King and Queen, and Sans and Papyrus, and... Hi, Your Majesty!" Kid called out as Toriel opened the door. Gaster had two right hands on Kid's shoulders and two left hands on someone who looked very much like Kid but had a bright yellow bow on the side of her head and was somewhat more muted in color, as if she'd survived a close encounter with Murky and Lurky. Hopping down the stairs and feeling the plush carpet between her toes, Frisk watched the Royal Guardsfish pick up the monster girl, giving her a big hug. "Hi, Frisk! This is my sister, Kim! She's really good at hide and seek!" Frisk looked up at Gaster, suspecting where he'd found her, and wondered exactly how long that game had lasted.

"Geez, Undyne, you can put me down now," Kim said, and Undyne gently set her on the floor. "Hi, everyone. Look at him," Kim said, rolling her eyes. "Isn't my brother the biggest dork ever? And now he's got arms, so he's, like, twice the dork. Now I need to get some just to undork his dorkitude."

"Hi, Kim," Asriel said. He'd never gotten to greet her before. "There's two dorks who are much dorkier," he said with a playful smile. Frisk thought he meant the bone dork and the anime dork, but he could have been poking fun at the time dork and the devil dork, or possibly the ear dork in the mirror.

"I have to tell you guys something," she said, looking at the royal children. "No dorks allowed!" she shouted at her brother. Intrigued, the Dreemurr kids walked back up the stairs with Kid's sister, and when Asriel closed the door Kim started whispering conspiratorially. "Okay, listen. I'm really, really glad to see my brother again. You guys should know that I'm not, like, ungrateful or something. But don't you ever tell him that or he'll get even dorkier."

"You sure?" Charles quietly asked, shrugging. "I told Azzy how glad I was to see him again and his dorkiness hasn't changed at all." Asriel stuck his long tongue out at him.

"This is serious," she insisted. "Promise me you won't tell!"

"If you want us to make a promise like that," Frisk said evenhandedly, "doesn't that make you the dork?" Her brothers were nodding.

"Gawwwd," she said, rolling her eyes. "Dorks everywhere." In a huff, she bit on the doorknob to open it and left the room, stomping down the stairs.

"What were you talking about?" Kid asked.
"Cool kid stuff, you dork!" Kim answered. Asriel started giggling and bleating, and then Frisk joined in, clutching her sides so they wouldn't escape, and then even Charles' full-throated laughter was bouncing off the walls. And then there was yet another small commotion downstairs as Asmodeus and his daughter came in with the skeletons.

Of course they had to repeat some of their Christmas activities, for Victoria's benefit if nothing else; while she'd already received her presents, she still hadn't spent Christmas with the Dreemurrss. Neither had Kid, who gleefully helped the young witch and his sister with the Lego and Play-Doh, putting on a pair of large, waterproof gloves to prevent it from getting in his mechanical hands. The rest of the group sat together sitting on the couch to play the newest version of Super Mario Brothers, which with so many players made for a crowded screen and a lot of laughter. (At least nobody could take multiple mushrooms in that one.)

Undyne still considered Charles' presence an affront to monsterkind, his casual mirth a knife in her belly, but His Majesty had ordered him protected and she was determined to endure it. Kid, on the other hand, was quick to forgive, especially after having gotten his sister back, and the little monster treated Charles like just another kid who happened to have supreme, world-altering power, the same way he treated Frisk. Alphys arrived just in time to receive Gaster's distilled Christmas spirit, and it was slightly less effective after being passed around to so many people, but it restored the rest of Kim's coloration, and even Undyne's troubled soul was given joy and contentment and she sang along as Papyrus tried to shove the lyrics of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" into the iconic Super Mario tune. Charles was extremely resistant to most magic and barely even felt it, but he accepted that as his place in life and eagerly followed along in the merriment. Sans was just being Sans.

Sitting between a large ball of warm goat fur to her right and a smaller one to her left, her twitch reflexes on autopilot, listening to skeletons, goats, a lizard, and a fish shout and cavort and stutter, Frisk needed no magical effects to feel a deep and thorough sense of well-being. She felt like she wanted the moment to last forever, but that was beyond even her. If Grigori was right, the vast resources and influence of the Dreemurr royal family (and, depending on how her father's negotiations went, the resources of the United States) would lead to a forever of moments instead, even long after the Earth's oceans had boiled away. Perhaps a billion years might change her mind, she thought, noticing her brother's mouth open wide as Luigi narrowly avoided falling down a pit, but perhaps not. It would have been so easy to not have any of this, she knew, to have chosen a path of death and misery or to have walked away from Asriel in that fateful moment and so have doomed him and possibly herself. She had chosen this happiness, which made it the most savory and fulfilling of all, and her main worry was that being attached to her brother until the end of time wouldn't be long enough.

Charles' face occasionally twitched, just a little, enough to remind Frisk that so many others did not have that choice, whether from circumstances or innate problems. One day, everyone will be able to choose happiness. That, she was determined to accomplish. His face twitched again- Mario didn't- and abruptly he asked, "Hey, Mom, you have enough food for everyone? We have... three more people than last time." Frisk was suddenly, absolutely sure that someone with EXP had just died of hunger.

"Easily, my child," Toriel said, her eyes on the screen. "There is enough in the larder and the local repository for this entire community to last through the winter, if need be." You can take the Goatmother out of the seventeenth century, but you can't take the seventeenth century out of the Goatmother.

Alphys piped up. "Oh! I know what we should get you! A devil's food cake! Um, get it? Because you're, you know..." Charles laughed. "Oh, that was... that was funny?"
"Sans told the same joke before Frisk went back, but you weren't there anyway," Charles explained, his fingers blurring across the controller to do a sophisticated series of jumps. In his opinion, the supposedly challenging levels needed a bit more challenge.

"Um, I know, Gaster cast the memory spell on me," she replied, almost throwing Frisk off her game. "And then I cast it on Undyne." If Frisk hadn't just been holding right, Princess Peach would have plummeted to an embarrassing death. Asmodeus, who had been playing very casually in an armchair, sat up abruptly, his countenance regaining the dark effect that really did make him look like the Fantasia sorcerer. He chose continued silence.

"And why didn't the Captain of the Royal Guard and the Trump School's athletics instructor get it right away?" Undyne asked, annoyed.

"Blame me, I said not to," Frisk volunteered. If this Christmas was going to go pear-shaped as so many Sholeas Christmases had, she'd rather have it be her fault instead of just watching it happen. "I thought you'd go nuts having things unhappened!" she protested, noticing Undyne's scowl. "I seriously thought it'd be too much of a burden on you."

"I can endure a lot of burdens," she replied, looking at the screen instead of anyone on the couch. "And a good friend would ask these things."

"Sorry, Undyne, you're right. And if we'd've known you could, we would've invited you to the first party."

"That's fine. Alphys and I needed to spend a bit more... quality time." Frisk cringed, trying not to visualize anything and failing. Charles shuddered in revulsion, his skin erupting in gooseflesh. Humans were bad enough.

"Oh, is that the same thing you were doing in the Lab a few weeks ago?" Asriel asked. "Because I heard a lot of-

"Azzy," Charles suggested, "please stop." Asriel stopped. Alphys, her character having splashed into lava, was holding her face in her hands, her knees clutched close to her chest, rocking back and forth next to Undyne in embarrassment. Toriel gave her children a brief, concerned look. Frisk had been the one to warn her about the Internet, Charles was tuned into thousands of channels at once (some of the nicer ones were late-night HBO; the not-nice ones were unspeakable and would be even worse if he couldn't affect them), and she would never, ever ask all that Flowey had done, although it fortunately didn't appear to be all that much.

Christmas went mostly the same way, and Toriel knew very well how to stretch a fresh meal with stored foods, and of course there was more than enough chocolate for everybody, even Charles, especially after they baked the cake again. Victoria seemed quite a bit more at ease this time as well, since she had a new friend to play with (Victoria was too young and too powerful to be called a dork) and since Charles had terrified everyone in the world rather than at the table. Asgore came home halfway through, a tremendous grin on his face, and he welcomed Kim back to the land of the living before he explained that the Dreemurrs' choices of charities had nothing to worry about for the foreseeable future.

Toriel declared it to be bath time once everyone went home, and the three Dreemurr kids got in together, all of them expecting the others to say it was weird and none of them actually caring. Frisk showed Charles how she did her brother's fur, and Charles carefully followed along, being sure not to use strength when applying the shampoo, enjoying Asriel's soft, contented bleating but unable to really enjoy the feeling of a bubble jet against his too-solid skin. Then it was time to dry them off, and the whirling winds fluffed out Asriel yet again, his fur standing on end, and Frisk
picked him up and hugged him because he just looked huggable.

Her phone rang that night and she got a request to SAVE within a half hour. She chose to SAVE right then *(I bet they were expecting me to do that)*, pressed the button for doing it, and went back to sleep. It was only after she'd done it that she realized what she'd done and how dangerous it was: she'd SAVEd right next to the most lethal person in the world, the same person who'd tried to take her SOUL. Yet Charles remained quiescent, his arm around his brother, and Frisk breathed a sigh of relief before going back to sleep.

"So what are we going to do today?" Charles asked brightly, just as Frisk and Asriel sat up together.

"See if Mom keeps coffee in the house," Frisk suggested, rubbing her eyes. "Then go... oh. We could go back to Disney World, maybe? I was going to say hang gliding's better, but I don't think that glider will work with three."

"Actually, wait," Charles said, thinking. His face lit up, and Frisk could almost see a light bulb appear over his head as his grin grew wide. "No, you two go ahead. I'll be working on something. I need to get a bunch of people together and it'll take a while, but it'll be great."

"You sure?" Asriel asked.

"It's fine," Charles insisted. "You two deserve to have fun together. When I'm done, it'll be all three of us, and it'll be even better. Promise." Charles' smile was so innocent and happy that it was easy to forget who and what he was, which was just the way he liked it.

After a breakfast involving syrupy oatmeal, bananas, and coffee, the Dreemurr kids decided that they wouldn't go out completely unprepared, reading instructions and watching all sorts of educational videos on the subject. Frisk changed into her full set of snow gear, jacket zipped up to her chin and goggles over her face, and Asriel made sure his ears were properly in their warm holders. Deep winter is not the usual season for hang gliding. The two of them carried the glider gently out of the garage and up the hill, examining the complex system of straps and buckles that was to keep them in place. There was a catch to release the two of them together, after which Frisk could pull a cord to release the chute on Asriel's back. It made sense. It was safe. They'd be fine.

"Frisk, do you think we're prepared for this?" Asriel asked as they walked. It was a good day for flying, at least. Minimal wind, clear skies, exceptional visibility. There probably weren't any thermals to speak of, nothing that all the sites said that gliders needed but Frisk was happy to do without on her first flight.

"Not really. Do you?" Frisk belatedly thought that it might have been a good idea to read the instructions a bit more carefully, possibly watch some more videos, or maybe, just maybe, get someone else to help.

"Nope."

"We're all set then," Frisk said, because she was sick of worrying and full of energy and DETERMINATION and, if anything went wrong, Asriel would be able to lift them out of it. "Let's just make sure we can unfold this thing right." That turned out to be the easy part; there were a couple of struts that snapped readily into place, unfurling the bright blue and pink stripes with the Delta Rune prominently in the center, and once the kids figured out how to get Frisk's legs up into the cocoon while Asriel had himself strapped to her back, Frisk pointed the nose of the glider forwards, her feet awkwardly struggling to stay on the ground. "You ready?"
"Ready," Asriel replied, his snootle right next to her ear.

"Push us- let's go!" Asriel's magic gave them a mighty heave and abruptly the two of them were airborne, sailing horizontally over the hillside, looking down at their house, the icy air blasting into their faces and whipping Asriel's ears back and forth. Sans, sunbathing outside in the frigid weather, waved, and so did a lot of other people monsters and a few soldiers, but Frisk didn't have the guts to wave back as both of her hands were tightly clutched to the control bar, trying to keep the glider in a straight line, terrified that any deviation would result in something she'd need to load out of. Gingerly, she tried to bank to the right, and it took pulling in a way that she wasn't familiar with. Suddenly, they were pointing too far downwards, a direction she wasn't ready to go quite yet. "Azzy, can you-

"Got it," Asriel said, pointing the nose back up. Frisk sighed in relief. How did anybody ever do this without magic? She pulled back around, familiarizing herself with the way things worked, looking down and this time daring to give a brief wave before slapping her hand tightly on the bar again.

"Think we can make it to the mall?" Asriel asked loudly, because the glider happened to be pointed in that direction.

"Sure, let's try it," Frisk said, doing her best to point the glider in the right direction, following the highway she knew would take them there. Cars blurred beneath them (here we go changing traffic patterns again) as they neared the town, and she was so focused on not running into anything that she barely noticed when they got there, Asriel loudly pointing it out, and then she gradually dipped the nose down, but she was still going too fast to land in the parking lot and Asriel put his force into slowing them down and letting Frisk touch down on the mall's roof.

"Blublugurghugh," Frisk said, shaking her head, exhausted. She and her brother unstrapped themselves and carefully folded up the glider. It struck her that a mall's roof probably wasn't a welcome place to be, and then it struck her that hang-gliding down a highway may or may not be illegal, and then she remembered that she didn't have to really care. "Let's jump off the roof," she suggested, and Asriel, laughing, briefly transformed, held on to Frisk under her armpits, and glided down, carrying her under his God of Hyperdeath wings.

"Let's just hang out," Asriel suggested as he turned back, completely ignoring the various patrons staring at them, and Frisk readily agreed. The locals stopped staring after a bit, a couple making comments and pointing cameras, but none of them seemed particularly afraid of the Dreemurr kids, although Frisk was dead-sure that every one of them had watched Charles' speech, and the commentary about that speech, and the analysis of the commentary, and so on until it was all picked apart by late-night comedians. She gave them a friendly smile, posing for the cameras with her brother before going inside. She was kind of surprised that she wasn't getting more obvious attention, but it was nice to just be able to go out in public and do what she wanted, whenever she wanted, without the presence of bodyguards or minders. All the religious nutjobs who might go after the Devil's sister and her monstrous brother had either killed monsters or vacated the shadow of Mt. Ebbot long ago. Nobody was left who would seriously mess with her. It had all finally died down, and Frisk couldn't be happier.

Or so I thought. A couple, presumably married, was walking straight towards the Dreemurrs, the woman carrying a three-year-old and her husband pushing along a well-used double stroller.

"Prince Asriel, Princess Frisk, just a moment, please," the woman called out. "We were watching your brother's speech," Oh boy, here we go. "and we have to ask you;" He killed somebody they knew, didn't he? "What can we do to become better people?"
Frisk laughed gaily, not expecting that in the slightest, prompting more pictures and video. "I have absolutely no idea," she said, smiling. "Do what you're good at, I guess."

"What do you do for a living?" Asriel asked.

"I fix cars," the man replied.

"Stay-at-home mom," his wife added.

"Fix more cars," Asriel suggested. "Help your kids become better people. Just help people, in general, whenever you can."

"Just things like that?" the woman asked, surprised.

"Small? Yeah, but if everybody did things like that, humans would be less messed up. I mean, if you want to donate money, there's stuff that we're donating to, but you've got kids, spend it on them." Asriel didn't say how he knew that the couple wasn't rich, that he'd heard their conversation even before they turned the corner and spotted the Dreemurrs. Frisk could tell just by looking at them, from their old clothes to the beat-up yard-sale stroller to the fact that they were buying Christmas gifts just after Christmas to save a few bucks, that the family was almost certainly on government assistance even if the husband worked full-time. And they're coming to us, the most powerful kids in the world, for moral advice. Frisk vaguely thought it could or should be the other way around, and she seriously considered the ramifications of opening her wallet to hand the woman a fat stack of twenties before the husband and wife agreed that Asriel was right and walked away giving thanks. Thanks for what? Your lives are still screwed up.

They hung out at the mall for a while, laughing and talking to monsters they'd seen before, and they grabbed some Chinese food that few people in China actually ate. Chewing on some long-dead general's chicken, they met Bethany and Christine, who were a year or so older than they were, and Frisk recognized Bethany from math class. Sitting in the food court together, Bethany explained that due to family circumstances, Christine had missed the application date for the Trump School, and so the two long-time friends were hanging out while they had the chance. Kind of like what we're doing, only we can't have the chance. Frisk wasn't sure whether to offer help, because it'd be terrible nepotism, but Asriel agreed to talk to his mom. He even let the two of them cuddle his floppy ears, right there in the middle of everybody.

"Frisk, are you jealous?" Bethany asked, smiling.

"Nah, even my not-parents taught me to share my plush toys," Frisk replied with a grin, even though they hadn't.

"Frisk!" Asriel shouted, prompting laughter from all three girls and a few passers-by.

"They're still on TV sometimes," Christine said. "They really hate your brothers. I mean, if Charles isn't evil anymore, then they should just leave him alone being not evil so nobody else gets hurt, you know?" Frisk happily nodded, her thoughts exactly. "What's he doing now, anyway?"

"We have no idea," Frisk replied. "We'll find out."

But Frisk and Asriel did not find out what he was doing, not that afternoon after they realized that they'd have to glide uphill to go back home (and, embarrassed, called Sans to come pick them up), not that repeated day or any others that week because Charles simply told them to be patient just like he was being patient. Frisk only had to make an extra war-caused repetition once, an act for which Donald Trump paid her a small personal check of a million dollars. Frisk had considered
asking for more just because she could, but her father had been clear that he'd been very successful in his negotiations with the President and so she decided not to upset things. She had other things on her mind, like having endless amounts of fun. Sledding, snowboarding, gliding; the Dreemurr kids were always on the move, living every day like it was their last, even though it very decisively wouldn't be.

On New Year's Day the first time around, prepared with extra facial coverings and a fanny pack loaded with mall-bought fudge, they'd just begun their flight when they noticed a very small plane with four propellers on its wings, painted in Dreemurr purple, taking off from the local airfield, and Asriel's first words on seeing it were "I can't hear the engine!" Electric, maybe? Frisk gradually brought the hang glider down to earth, not wanting to share the same airspace as whoever that was, and Asriel only needed a little magic to make the landing gentle as feathers. The plane had switched from wide banks and glides to more impressive aerobatics, the pilot doing a loop and then a barrel roll - but then the plane started moving around erratically, turning and gradually spiraling downwards. A small green-and-yellow figure flung open a door of the aircraft and jumped out, plummeting straight down. Charles pulled a cord on his chest, and the parachute fully opened at once, causing a sudden stop that would have been painful for an ordinary human. The aircraft, with nothing in it, slowed down in its glide and did a few loops before hitting the snow in one piece.

"Frisk reverse it!" a man swore, clenching his fist in frustration and running to the crash site with five other engineers, and Asriel grabbed Frisk to catch up. Alphys and Gaster were part of the group, and Asriel could hear Alphys muttering "Oh me, oh my," with every rapid step.

"I may or may not reverse it," Frisk called from behind the man, not about to tell him that this day wouldn't count. His whole body was covered in thick work clothing, from the heavily used welding gloves to the steel-toed boots, and he stank of metal and sweat. He turned, and his bearded, lightly scarred face recoiled for a bit before he realized he should have expected the other Dreemurrs; one of the other engineers saluted, one bowed, and most of them kept running to Charles, who had unbuckled his harness and left the parachute to someone who knew how to repack it. "Princess Frisk, Prince Asriel! Noel Scent, aerospace engineer. Project head. Your brother is giving us a rather unique challenge." There was something in his voice that suggested that he'd leapt at the chance just because it was a unique challenge: that he was being called upon to create something that had never been created before, something that couldn't exist until the universe got broken. "What happened?" he asked Charles, who was marching towards him with an Undyne-like scowl.

"Steering cable snapped. I told you I was stronger than your materials," Charles said, annoyed. "But your materials should still be able to handle it."

"You're entirely right, Prince," Noel said. "We'll make the cables a little thicker for next time. Just to warn you, if you're going to be carrying passengers, one of them might black out if you're going to make turns like that." He glanced at Frisk.

"Wait," Frisk asked, totally confused, looking at the various engineers' faces. Some seemed anxious, some seemed frustrated, and a lot of them seemed glad that Charles' siblings were there to save them from his wrath. Gaster's expression, as usual, was unknowable. "Why would you need to pull hard? Isn't there a system?"

"Not on this plane!" Charles gloated smugly. "No engine, no motorized anything. Just some lightweight parts fused together, some basic airplane meters, some moving parts, and me. And you." He grinned. "Let's hope you don't black out."

Noel looked at Frisk and Asriel in turn. "Your brother's potential thrust-to-weight ratio is insane. He can accelerate a propeller aircraft like a rocket engine. We designed the frame and the entire
propulsion system to handle it, but apparently we misjudged his strength in other places. Apologizes, Prince."

"It's fine, I knew there was going to be problems," Charles said, clearly still annoyed. "I didn't know it would take so long either."

"We're breaking records, actually," Noel said. "Usually, just getting these parts takes weeks. But since it's well, you, people are bending over backwards." All three Dreemurrs just nodded, Frisk having gotten used to it despite thinking that she never would. "And the magic welding thing helps quite a bit."

"I can help with that," Asriel said. Knowing what was coming, Frisk opened up her pack on the way back to the hangar, pulling out large cubes of fudge. Charles' eyes lit up, and Frisk gestured with the open pack; Charles pulled out the entire plastic bag and began feeding his face one large cube at a time.

"Calories in are calories out?" Noel asked, as Charles tried not to be too greedy and failed. Frisk, snagging back a bit of her own fudge, regretted not simply buying the entire supply and carrying a bigger pack.

"I think so," Charles said with his mouth full. "For simple strength, anyway." He looked around at the clearly envious faces. "Don't any of you ever kill any monsters to get this. I'm serious. You do and I will mess you up." There was some nodding of heads. There wasn't anyone there who hadn't heard Charles' speech.

"We'll all just have to make do with combustion engines," Noel said, getting some laughter.

"Charles, why do you need all these people anyway?" Asriel asked. "I thought you could just ask, well, the people you've..."

"No, they're too good," he said, smiling and looking around. "Very few engineers killed any monsters at all. And none of these kind did. Very few doctors, very few pilots, a pretty small number of cops, believe it or not. A bunch of lawyers, though." General laughter, in particular from one of the engineers, who had started walking to his flatbed truck to go pick up the damaged plane.

"Okay, I know this day isn't going to really happen," the man said, glancing at Frisk, "because your brother didn't warn us of any problems and Gaster didn't give any suggestions. So it's not like I'm wasting time sharing a joke." The Dreemurrs waited for it, Frisk rolling her eyes. "An engineer who was supposed to go to Heaven accidentally went to Hell. The engineer livened the place up, used the fire to power some engines, got some air conditioning going. 'You shouldn't have that engineer,' God yelled. 'I'll sue!' The Devil laughed, and said, 'Go ahead, but where are you going to get a lawyer?' It took a bit for Frisk and Asriel to get it, but Charles cackled. "No offense to you or your, ah, what's his... Papuhrus, that's it."

"Puhpierus," Asriel corrected him. He nodded and went back to his truck.

"There's probably no such place as Hell, and Heaven isn't for humans or monsters," Charles said, walking towards a side door to the hangar and holding it open for his siblings. It was nicely heated inside; frameworks, failed prototypes, slabs of aircraft-grade aluminum, computer systems, and welding equipment littered the room. "We only get this universe, here, to live in. Anywhere else? Nobody really knows. Not even Dad. So, well, I'm the Devil; I hired the engineers."

"With Mom and Dad's money," Asriel pointed out.
"With ours, actually," Charles said, smiling. "Don't look at me like that, I checked. The three of us, well of course it was just you at first, get so much cash just to play around with, and a lot of these guys work for cheap just because they don't have anything better to do. Oh no, I'm spending a fraction of your annual fooling-around budget on something that'll beat the pants off of that hang glider. And we can go anywhere. Even to places where I don't have anybody. Even where there aren't any people."

Frisk didn't understand, but Asriel realized what Charles really wanted to do. "But no matter where your body is, you can't escape them," he said, and his brother's hands clenched in frustration.

"No," Charles sighed, "no, I can't. But I can at least pretend. Even if that is like... a bunch of fake stars on a cavern roof. Forget me. You two will enjoy this, and if I can at least make you happy, or I guess happier, that's... something." He needs to make up for what he did to Az, Frisk realized.

Even despite all the other lives he's taken, all the other evils he's done and the good he's tried to do to compensate, his worst crime will always be getting Asriel killed. "Besides, these people are all having the time of their lives. Especially Gaster." Gaster was about to reply when the hangar doors opened, and the small aircraft, lashed to the back of the truck, was immediately set upon. Two ordinary people effortlessly picked it up and set it in the center, and Gaster eagerly oozed his way to it, altering the metal and slowly punching out the largest dent, his other hands going over it.

"I got it," Asriel said, and Frisk felt slightly lightheaded for a while as Gaster guided him through restoring the plane. Gaster, his mask in a grin, floated towards Frisk and held out a hand; being careful not to drop it through the hole in his palm, Frisk handed him a piece of fudge and Gaster squeezed the fudge into his face.

"Your brother is quite right," Gaster said as the Dreemurr kids gobbled up sugary chocolate. "I had never imagined that simple, non-magical physics could lead to such wonders, even if we are using a diabolic power source and not a piston or jet engine. Airflow, lift, turbulence, the fluid dynamics of gases... I have learned so much today, new insights, new... ideas." Gaster's blobby form rippled in what could have been ecstasy or euphoria. Asriel ate some more fudge, and Frisk ate some more, and Charles ate some more, and then Gaster helped himself to another piece, and then there was no more.

"Alphys and I will share everything we have learned today," Gaster said. "In point of fact..." He looked around at the group of engineers. "On one hand, I do not find any of you untrustworthy. On the other hand, I believe it would cause institutional friction if one of us were to allow you to remember. On the gripping hand, you may qualify, but there is a judgment process and you must meet requirements." Frisk and Asriel looked at each other. Institutional friction, indeed. The obvious position of the American government, and probably all the reasonably civilized governments of the world, was to keep the entire business under strict control while appeasing the one who made it work. 'You don't upset the applecart, and we keep giving you and your family everything you want, forever.' Frisk had no intention of usurping the system if doing so would reduce the steady Count.

A few of them looked at each other, but the man with the truck was getting livid. "You can just do that, huh? That's something you can just make happen, any time you want." Gaster nodded while Alphys shrunk back from his anger. "Oh, yeah, your judgment and requirements. What if we tell you that we'll just walk out of here if you don't?"

"Then we will never have made the offer," Gaster replied, and the man's eyes opened wide and he drew in a breath. Frisk wondered why they were having this conversation now, after several days' worth of work, but then realized that it probably wasn't the first time they were having it and Gaster was probably trying to bring an inevitable conversation to a relatively quick end.
"Chad..." Noel said, putting a hand on his shoulder, but the man slapped it off.

"C'mon," Frisk gently said. "You've got a plane to build. You're smart, you know what'd happen if we made everyone who asked a rememberer. I'm turning eleven in a couple of months and I know that." Asriel abruptly looked at his sister, realizing that she'd never before told him anything about birthdays or age.

"Fine," Chad said, knowing a no-win situation when he saw one. "Just one last thing. If I took those bracelets off, would you die?"

Asriel was getting sick of this guy and abruptly transformed, looking down at him. "It would be extremely painful..." he started.

"You're a big goat," Chad sputtered out.

"...for you," Asriel finished. Retreating, Chad went back to the friends he brought to talk about plane crashes.

"I hope you aren't terribly angry," Noel said, looking at Charles and glancing at Asriel as he changed back. "He really is a good guy."

"Unless you interfere with what I'm doing, I'm not going to get angry no matter what you say," Charles said reasonably. "I've got people, good and bad, cursing and worshipping me all day long. There's one guy on his knees thanking me right now because the Marines just emptied out the prison camp he was at. He thinks I sent them." Charles smiled. "This was actually doing pretty good until the cable broke. Fix those, and we can try it with passengers." Frisk couldn't help but grin. It did look fun.

"That's up to you," Noel said. "I'd send someone else up first. If you have to go back early, or however it works, I take no responsibility."

Frisk smiled wider. "I'm light, I've already got a parachute, and we've got Az."

Replacing the steering cables took surprisingly little time; they'd brought thicker ones for other things, and the Dreemurrs patiently watched the group work, the three of them sitting on a nearby table, legs swinging. Alphys took a leading role in installing systems, using her limited magic to create thorough seals and strengthen connections. Human engineers went over the plane for damage, and one of them took a small rubber mallet and gently pounded on various parts, listening and occasionally calling Gaster for magical analysis and repair.

The inside of the plane was cramped; it was exactly as big as it needed to be, so Frisk and Asriel needed to climb over seats to sit down on them. "We can always make it bigger when we grow up," Charles said as Frisk squeezed in behind Asriel, who was right behind Charles. Frisk looked past her brother at the cockpit; it seemed surprisingly simple, more like a bicycle than an airplane. A few dials occupied the front, and there was a compact radio system, but Charles' main controls consisted of a pair of separated handlebars on the front, and he buckled his feet into the pedals and strapped himself into his seat with bands of thick steel. Noticing his siblings' confused looks, he reminded them that while he could push down on the reinforced pedals very, very hard, he'd be pushing himself up just as hard. Frisk and Asriel buckled themselves in with racing harnesses, the sort of thing people put on when they expect to be tossed around. Here we go.

A man to the side of the plane started waving a glowstick, and Charles started cycling furiously. At once, Frisk was shoved back into her seat, feeling like an elephant was on her chest and seeing patterns in her vision, Asriel's ears flapping to the sides of her head. The acceleration let off,
Charles yanked the landing gear up, and she looked out the window once her brother's ears got out of the way. She could see her house, of course, and it was blurring past with everything else. "You ready for some fun?" Charles asked gleefully.

"I'm still just human!" Frisk reminded him.

"No more than 4 G's. I promise." Charles yanked the handlebars for another two and a half barrel rolls, and this time the cable didn't break, and Frisk was left hanging upside-down in her harness, the blood rushing to her head. Asriel was giggling joyfully, his ears brushing against the plane's ceiling. Before Frisk could say anything, Charles gave them a gentle nose-up loop.

"Wooahhh, land, just land for now," Frisk said, pinching her nose and mouth shut.

"You really didn't have fun?" Charles protested, and Frisk didn't reply as he dived the plane downwards, gently pulling it back for the landing. The wheels touched down with casual softness, Asriel using his magic to make things even gentler as Charles tapped the wheel brakes. He felt what was wrong with Frisk and would rather not have the inevitable happen all over him.

"No, it was awesome," Frisk muttered, climbing over her brother and staggering out the door, her hand on her throat. "We'll go back up, it's just... fluggggggghhhhh." And the air was alive with the smells of bile and fudge.
"I knew that could happen, I just... wasn't thinking about it," Charles lamented, as Frisk swallowed some puke back down, trying to lick all of it off the inside of her mouth and spit it out because it tasted horrible. "How could I forget about that?"

"It's all right, Charles," Frisk said, laughing a bit in relief. "Only us three, Gaster, and Alphys will remember this. Lesson for next time, okay?"

"Never again, I promise," Charles said, putting his hand over his locket. He was feeling sharp twinges of guilt, an emotion that was becoming all too familiar to him. He couldn't afford screwups, he reminded himself, even when having relatively safe fun. None, at all, under any circumstances ever. He was too strong, too deadly, possessing and influencing too many people to ever screw up or make mistakes. Everything that Chara had ever done haunted him, and many of the morally questionable things he had done as Charles, things that he thought he'd done for the greater good, haunted him as well. He had to do the right thing, no matter what, from then on. "C'mon. When you're ready." Frisk climbed in immediately, before any of the various people approaching the plane could ask what was wrong and so embarrass her further. After her brothers followed her back in, she enjoyed a very gentle takeoff, Charles pedaling at a steady pace high into the sky.

"You want to go for a couple hours? I wanted to talk to you," Charles suggested as Frisk swallowed to pop her ears, something Asriel would never have to worry about.

"Sure, as long as it's relaxing," Frisk replied. She could never have imagined she'd feel this way, but she couldn't wait for school to start again. She'd had more fast-paced excitement over the past week than she did dodging monsters in the Underground over a month ago, and after that puking session, a nice, quiet classroom seemed like the perfect place for her.

Charles clicked on his radio. "Charles to ground, we're going to be out for a couple hours, over." He got a reply. "Charles out."

"'Charles to ground', really?" Asriel asked. "Doesn't this plane have a name?"

"What would you call it, Az?" Frisk asked, smiling.

"Air Barf One!" Asriel replied, laughing.

Frisk thought for a bit. "Satan's Subsonic Sister Sickener!"

"The Prince's Pedal-Powered Puke Propeller!"

"Going Up, Chuck!"

"Into the Air, Outta the Stomach!"

"Hurl Into the Sky!"

"Please, enough, you two," Charles said, laughing and shaking his head. "If you really want to call it something like that, call it the Emesis or something because nobody knows what that means."

"Let's ask the people who built it when we get back," Asriel suggested. "They've probably got better names. Anyway, what'd you want to talk about?"
"People are going to hate me and for good reason, are you sure you want to take me to school with you?" Charles asked. "I mean, yeah, there's some people who're gonna go 'Frisk tamed the Devil, all hail Frisk', but there's more people who are going to go 'He killed all those people and now these two are just hanging out with him.'"

"We didn't go through all that just so we can't be together when we want," Asriel replied. "They'll understand."

"They don't always," Charles replied. "Humans want revenge."

An ugly idea crossed Frisk's head. "Actually, shouldn't we be talking to Papyrus about this? Isn't someone going to try to sue you?" If she never stepped foot in a courtroom again, it'd be too soon.

"They can't," Charles explained, and she sighed in relief. "There's this law, the Compensation for Reality-Altering Powers Act. They couldn't or didn't want to name you for some reason, so they said that anything caused by deific powers couldn't be sued for, and it turns out that includes me. One fewer problem, but it's making people even madder."

"You've been working with a bunch of humans, and they didn't seem mad at you..." Asriel ventured.

"They didn't seem mad at me because they were the ones I picked. A lot of others didn't even want to talk to me. One guy I think was going to sabotage things, but he bailed before I figured him out. That head guy, Noel? He wanted to make sure that Frisk forgave me before he'd even deal with me." Her brothers heard her facepalm and groan. "Frisk, that's the exact reason nobody worships you in public anymore, because you don't like it." Frisk groaned again, more loudly, double facepalming. "Some people have, like, actual shrines to you and Asriel in their houses, with a thousand pictures. Not even kidding." Out of hands to facepalm with, Frisk gently held both of Asriel's nylon-covered ears and leaned her face into them. What kind of person would even collect a thousand pictures of Frisk and Asriel?

"All right, then, let me do the talking," Frisk suggested. "I probably can't make them not be mad at you, but I can at least tell them not to do something stupid." The stupid things Frisk was worried about involved dropping out of school. Toriel had selected the human kids for intelligence and sensibility; there probably wasn't any New Home Snail who would break a hand trying to punch the Devil. The plane kept going for a while, above seemingly endless waves of forested mountains at what felt like an easy pace. "Down there, what're those? Those aren't birds, are they?"

Yeah, those are monsters," Asriel said. "Just call them sparklebirds. Hey, Charles, slow down, get a bit lower." As the plane descended, some of the sparklebirds started to follow in the plane's wake, forming a V shape, and the Dreemurrs looked out the window in silence and contentment for nearly fifteen minutes until the birds peeled away.

"We're coming back here for next time, and we're recording that," Frisk said as Charles sped back up. There were no objections.

"Hey, what's that?" Asriel asked, pointing. "That... lighter green, where the mountains are different."

"That's where they blew the mountaintops off," Frisk said. "The grassy parts are what they did a long time ago, there's supposed to be trees again sometime. See that white stuff past it? That's the new mining."
"What's it for?!" Asriel asked, completely confused.

"It's for coal that keeps our lights on," Frisk said. "It's stuff like this, or humans are stuck in the dark, because we've got to get energy somewhere." Frisk very distinctly remembered the fourth grade teacher who had told her class that. Another trolley problem, Frisk realized. Maybe that was just the way life was, a series of less-bad choices. Maybe the least bad alternative involved reshaping the landscape one explosion at a time. But we really need something better than this.

"What if there's coal around us?" Asriel asked, and Frisk laughed in reply.

"Relax, Az. There's no coal where we live, we're too far east. Actually, we live near where a lot of people moved after they sold their land to the coal companies." Frisk wasn't quite sure who had told her that, but it made sense. "I don't know what would have happened if they tried to mine Mt. Ebbot." Attempting to bulldoze or blast a ground-fixed portal to another universe could have easily been the "hold my beer and watch this" of humanity.

"You want to go get something to eat and come back here in thirty years or so?" Charles asked.

Asriel chuckled. "Yeah, that works. Let's go to Grillby's." Getting immediate agreement, he pulled out his phone. "Hey, Sans! We're going to go to Grillby's, want to come with us?" There were so many things that Asriel felt grateful for in that exact moment. Being himself, being with his siblings, being in an airplane, having a phone to call his friends with, having friends that would answer, having a place to go... all of it gladdened him to the core.

"can't. babysitting, and victoria already ate." Toriel had found the perfect job for Sans, it seemed. A lazy, teleporting skeleton with an unflappable mindset and an iron conscience was ideal for dealing with small children.

"All right, tell her the Prince says to be good. Bye, Sans." Asriel replied, smiling. "What if he opened a, what's that called, a day care?"

Charles started laughing, and the plane shook a bit. "Can you imagine? If it were babies? And Sans had to feed them and change their diapers and everything? And he'd be by himself, and one would start crying, and he'd teleport over there, then another kid would break a toy or something, and he'd try to fix it, and then some three year old would have to go potty, and then some other kid..."

"And this is late at night, so he's trying to get them to go to sleep, but they keep waking each other up, and he finally gets the last of them and it's so late when he finally gets to bed, and then..." Asriel continued, setting up his siblings to continue.

"And Papyrus bursts in and goes 'HEY SANS, I JUST WON A BIG CASE!!'" Frisk shouted in Papyrus' distinctly non-lawyer voice, and the plane shook with laughter again.

"And then Sans just jumps on him like he's trying to strangle him, but of course they're skeletons so no throats, so Papyrus thinks he's happy and then goes 'YEAH, NOW WE CAN BUY OUT THAT OTHER DAY CARE AND GET TWICE THE KIDS!'" Charles joked. "And then his next call is to you, begging you to LOAD, and it turns out you just SAVEd so he's freaking out..."

"And then, Papyrus goes 'OH DON'T WORRY SANS, I KNOW WHAT KIDS LIKE!' and turns on this really obnoxious circus music at max volume and all the kids start screaming, and Papyrus thinks it's because they're happy..." Asriel continued. Frisk had tears in her eyes. "We're horrible people."

"You're just a baa-a-a-a-a-a-d goat, Az," Frisk replied, and both of her brothers sighed.
"We were doing so well, Frisk," Charles said. "So well. And then you had to ruin it."

"Yeah, Frisk, you... thing ruiner," Asriel said. "I do not sound like that."

"All right, I'm sorry. Anyway, there's this one lava tube in Hawaii or somewhere that blasts out hot air every few minutes, it feels like the world's biggest hair dryer." Asriel bleated in excitement. "I made that up, but you sound like that!" Charles was laughing again, and Asriel was covering his own eyes with his ears and shaking his head. Frisk reached forward to hug him around the seat.

"That's it down there," Charles said some minutes later. Frisk looked down at the three-story red-and-orange building below her, which had a line of people outside staring up at their plane. She almost blurted out that the building was way too big, that they were looking for something way smaller, but the prominent sign and the massive fire-themed decorations made it clear.

"Woah, he's gotta be rich now," Asriel said, impressed.

"He could start a franchise chain all over the world," Charles said, flying in circles. "You see any good places to land?"

"No, and how? There's only one Grillby!"

"Az, he can just hire other people to do the grilling for him," Frisk said, looking down, surprised he'd grown his business this quickly, worried that all those people were there just because she ate there. She'd never read the opinion piece *World's First Monster-Owned Restaurant Is Surprisingly Good for Humans*, which went on to talk about the small-town, laid-back nature of the place, qualities that were shortly lost once customers started flooding it.

"Yeah, but then it's not Grillby's, it's just the name!"

Charles laughed a bit, but monster naivete wasn't really funny anymore. "Okay, we're not going to be able to do this," he said instead. "There's nowhere to land."

"We can land on the roof," Asriel suggested.

"This is a plane, not a helicopter," Charles said.

"Just go in real slow, slow as you can. I've got it." As Charles moved in, the nose of the plane started turning upwards. "Okay, I'm going to point it straight up," Asriel said, and Frisk was laying on her back in the seat, looking up at Charles. "Okay, pedal a bit, slowly..." They started to gently fall. "...and I can turn it, like this." The plane's nose started to pitch downwards, and Frisk started to breathe hard, exhausted, as they landed. "You all right?" Asriel asked. It was fun moving something that big around, but even though it wasn't all that heavy and Charles was helping, it still took a toll on his sister.

"That was an awesome move, but next time... nah, we can do this again next time," Frisk said, smiling. Asriel had put the plane right next to the exterior vent, which was belching out immense amounts of warm, smoky air that spoke of the delicious flavors within. "I'm going to eat so much food." Charles just grinned at her before they left the roof, Asriel helping Frisk walk down the sheer wall and Charles taking the thirty-foot drop like it was on a staircase. They had an audience, of course, everyone who was lined up outside staring at them, police officers in uniform, families, and one particularly toothy monster who was part of Grillby's usual clientele.

One older gentleman immediately took off his red baseball cap on seeing them. Several people greeted "Happy New Year" at them and the Dreemurrs greeted them back, even though Frisk was
going to unhappen the Times Square ball drop with everything else. People got out of their way immediately, looking up from their phones long enough to take pictures with them, and a father to three young children helped an elderly woman move her walker out of the way. This is really, really wrong. But it would have made even more of a commotion if the Dreemurrs had insisted on standing in line. "I'll warn ya, he's sold out!" the toothy monster yelled. Frisk and Asriel turned to him and blinked. Being allowed to cut in line was one thing, but if someone else already eating was going to be pushed aside... "The food's still good, and the atmosphere's still kinda nice, but don't let that fool ya! He's a sellout!" Oh, that kind of sold out. Asriel chuckled, picturing Grillby alone in a room trying to count all his money and having a hard time because it was made of paper.

"Fisk-an-Asriel, are you gointa Vicky's birfday party?" the oldest of the father's children asked loudly, not recognizing Charles. Who was... oh, right. Her father always used her full name.

Asriel kneeled down a bit, and of course with such large, floppy ears dangling in front of her the little girl was going to touch them, and every camera in the vicinity got a good shot. "Wouldn't miss it for anything." The little girl giggled in glee.

A clearly nervous waitress greeted them at the door as 'the Dreemurr party' and immediately escorted them past surprised patrons and fire-themed decor up the elevator to the VIP lounge on the third floor, Charles sitting across from his siblings, a rosy-cheeked smile on his face. Frisk already knew what she wanted: thickly sliced fries and a thoroughly grilled hamburger, with a large egg nog shake (egg nog was about to go out of season, and Frisk couldn't get enough of the stuff), and Asriel surprised her by getting some grilled salmon and a chocolate shake. Finding what he wanted immediately, Charles laughed and pointed to a humongous chocolate ice cream dish drizzled with chocolate syrup and brownie bits named 'Devil's Delight'. Grillby had definitely been prepared. "Three of these and a hot chocolate, to start," he said, and the waitress glanced at him for only a moment before leaving.

"You sure you don't want to land on the roof again?" Charles asked when he was sure nobody was listening. The Dreemurr kids were the only VIPs in the lounge. "We really made an entrance. If you want to come here again, of course."

Frisk sighed. "Sometimes, stuff happens that I don't want to not repeat. Like that meeting with those people in that mall and then Christine, we had to go back for that. Ever since I did it to the guy who taught us how to snowboard, I don't even remember his name. All those people out there are so happy, or at least interested, on seeing us, and then I can say 'No, sorry, all those recordings and memories are gone, and we're staying home today'... it feels like kind of a jerk thing to do. And we should be doing mostly the same stuff anyway just because we don't want to change too much, that whole chaotic traffic patterns thing."

Charles looked at her askance. "You're worried about things that didn't happen?"

"She doesn't want to make good things not happen," Asriel said.

"Well, if you're worried about that, then shouldn't you be out meeting people all the time?" Charles asked, as the waitress came by with drinks.

Frisk thanked the waitress before taking a long sip of her shake. Sugar, delicious sugar. "I mean, every time you LOAD, it just goes back to the realm of could-have-happened with everything else, except for the memories," Charles explained. "I see the chaos theory thing, but that's really chaotic. You're just acting on a future that you knew could happen, but what about all the futures that didn't? I mean, what were you doing this whole past week?"

"Having a lot of fun," Asriel said, grinning. Even after a month, it was just so nice to not be rooted
to the ground... "Hey, Frisk, swap," he suggested, holding out his half-drunk shake. *Ah, that's why he ordered something different.* It wasn't like she could catch diseases from him, so she savored the rich chocolate as he gulped down another version of a drink he'd been enjoying for a while.

Charles chugged his steaming hot chocolate in one continuous gulp, his tongue unburned. "So then that's a whole bunch of people you never met, maybe a bunch of problems you never solved. Are you going to focus on that and stop having fun?"

"No," Frisk said without hesitation. She'd go mad, and it wouldn't be fair to Asriel.

"So then why worry about things that never happened?" Charles asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, but for the second-time stuff I **knew** it **could** happen," Frisk replied. "That makes a big difference, because I'm not just.. out, at random, trying stuff."

Charles leaned forward, his elbows on the table. "Maybe you should go out and try stuff more while you're having fun, and if it doesn't work out, make it not happen. Stop worrying about how people react so much, it's a spectacle to them and they'll tell their kids about how they saw you walking around." Frisk groaned slightly, and Asriel chuckled. "They're not afraid of **you**, Frisk, at least not anymore. They're afraid of **me**. You're the world's biggest celebrity, live with it, deal with it. It's part of who you are now. It's your **life**, Frisk. Live it."

Asriel heard something in his voice. "Is that really your own opinion?"

"No," Charles admitted. "It's somebody else's opinion, but I'm pretty sure it's right." That somebody else was LV 2 and grateful that the small voice demanding to kill more monsters had silenced itself weeks ago. The waitress came by with the ice cream, and Charles gleefully and gratefully accepted it, diving into one of his three plates, chewing ice-cold chocolate with the same gusto as he had drank the heated variety. She returned with the grilled meats a bit later, and Frisk and Asriel shared each other's food again, Asriel taking a rather hefty snootle-sized bite out of Frisk's large hamburger before he levitated some grilled, perfectly filleted salmon into her mouth.

Charles went to the bathroom twice during the meal, and as he came back the second time, Frisk and Asriel were telling the waitress that they could do with another couple of shakes, and she was looking at Charles funny. She took a deep breath. "Um, I have to ask, and don't take this the wrong way, but... are you okay with eating all this? I mean, you went in there a couple of times, and I was just wondering if there's something I can get you..."

There was an awkward silence as Charles consulted a lot of brains trying to figure out what she meant. "Oh, you think I have an eating disorder!" he shouted, laughing. "No, I'm digesting everything. There's only one of us who's puked today." Frisk leaned on her hand with her middle finger sticking out. "Get me one more Devil's Delight for energy, then... here, the grilled vegetables," he finished, tapping the menu. Smiling and relieved, the waitress went back to Grillby, who would shortly start putting 'The Devil can eat four of them in a sitting!' on his advertisements. (Charles could actually eat considerably more than that.) "He got the name right. These are delicious. Probably my second-favorite thing to eat."

"What's the first, souls?" Asriel asked, and Charles didn't realize he was joking until the little goat started laughing.

"**Om nom nom**, can't get enough of those yummy souls," Charles replied, and Frisk joined in on the laughter. "I meant Mom's pie!" Toriel had introduced chocolate swirls into her world-famous butterscotch and cinnamon pie. Out of respect for Her Majesty, Grillby's was one of the few
remaining diners in America that didn't sell some version of 'The Queen's Pie' or 'A Dreemy Dessert', although very few of them pretended that those off-brand versions were as good as the real thing.

"I'm not sure if this is a good time to ask, but what's an eating disorder?" Asriel asked. Frisk bit her lip, not sure how to answer him, and Charles took the lead.

"Azzy..." he started, sighing. "You are so lucky to be with Frisk. This whole time you've been up here, you've been separated from the bad side of humanity. At least mostly. Your school's insulated, the people you talk to don't have these kinds of problems, or they know how to hide them, and there's a lot more hiding going on than you think." Asriel waggled an ear at him. "Okay, you can hear them talk about some of it, but you've never seen somebody inject heroin, or meth, or, pfft, you've never even been around smokers, have you? You've probably smelled a couple but you don't know what the smell is. By the way, if anyone ever offers Frisk a cigarette, kill him." He noticed their shocked looks. "In your case, it's self defense."

"Charles, I can take care of myself," Frisk said.

"I hope so," Charles said. "But a lot of people say they can take care of themselves, and then they can't. Like the eating disorders, one's anorexia, you don't eat enough, bulimia, you throw up what you eat, that's what she thought I had, then there's eating too much, and a lot of people do that. You walked in, you saw them all, you just didn't notice because you've never seen anything else and you thought this was just the way humans are," he explained, gesturing to Frisk and Asriel in turn. His voice grew intense, his eyes piercing. "They're not supposed to be like that. It's killing them." The waitress returned with their shakes and ice cream. "And we get to do this," Charles explained. "Because I've got supernatural energy storage and all of us can just burn what we eat. Bon appetit." Frisk and Asriel consumed their shakes with slightly less gusto than before, taking time to savor the taste, and Charles shared some of his grilled vegetables when they came around. "You want to save the world, first you have to know what's wrong with it," Charles explained as they finished. "And what's wrong with it is in their minds. Humans are messed up."

While Grillby was still giving a 100% discount to Frisk and her companions, she made a point of leaving five twenty-dollar bills on the plate, and instead of walking back up the wall with Asriel, she let Charles jump to the roof carrying her, yet another event that would generate Youtube views aplenty. (He could leap much taller buildings in a single bound.) Magic and diabolic might gave them a rapid take-off, and they headed home, and on the way back Charles radioed in and suggested that the craft needed a name, jokingly mentioning the names his siblings had come up with. They were greeted with several suggestions on landing, but in the end, the Baby Bird, so named for the way bird parents feed their nestlings, was gently guided into the hangar by Charles' team.

"Charles, did you get hot during your journey?" Gaster asked, his mask in a quizzical smile, as the three of them hopped out.

"I didn't," Charles replied. "The seat got a bit warm, but not that bad."

Gaster merely nodded, scratching his chin with one of his hands. "Very efficient," he said, and Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, not really knowing what he was talking about. "Perhaps one day, the fruits of researching you will atone for both our sins. As always, I thank you for your cooperation." Charles wasn't sure how to reply, and the three of them enjoyed a walk home together, their boots crunching over snowy grass and squeaking a bit on the shoveled streets.

"Hey, Dad's home," Asriel noticed as they returned to their mansion. "I can hear him talking."
"During the day?" Frisk asked, smiling. A King's work was never done.

"Yeah, it's weird," Asriel said. "Mom said something about 'finally having time with each other', something about red shells, and there's this whacking sound." But it stopped by the time they got back, and their father looked very embarrassed for a reason he never explained. They enjoyed a blissfully uneventful day of casually wandering around and hanging out, even submitting to being portrayed by a fat, geeky monster with a clumsy tail, and they did repeat their day, cutting out the bad parts and the awkward conversations and focusing on the joys in life.

But the next day was school, and Charles insisted on going the first time around, because if things were to go badly he could nope out when it counted. Wearing Asriel's carefully crafted "Don't you ever blame..." T-shirts under their winter wear, the three of them walked closely together in lock step, but the first person to greet them on their return to school wasn't an irate student or outraged teacher but Agent Jenkins, who had a smile firmly affixed to his face.

"What are you doing here?" Frisk asked him. "I thought that we didn't need bodyguards, because Asriel and Charles, well..."

"Oh, no, I'm not here for you. Before the President decided to use us as a diplomatic bodyguard service, our basic job was to protect only certain people. After your father said you were okay without us, that's what we went back to doing. The inside of the school has been formally declared completely safe," Jenkins explained, giving Charles the briefest of glances, "but the way here may not be." Frisk nodded, understanding. His eyes twinkling, Jenkins stooped down to the Dreemurr kids' eye level, his voice getting lower. "By the way, she said yes. Me and the future Mrs. Jenkins tie the knot this Sunday." Frisk and Asriel started clapping, and Charles joined in. Frisk couldn't attend; her showing up to something like that would take the focus away from where it belonged. She considered an invisibility spell before remembering the decisively non-magical way to attend an event without interacting with it: a camera. And recordings had fast forward to protect against SOUL-shattering boredom. "You three have fun. Stay out of trouble." Charles, who was perpetually in trouble somewhere in the world, couldn't help but laugh.

They were relatively early, sitting up front with Charles between his siblings, and every other kid, even the monsters, took their seats in general silence, the only exceptions being Christine and Kim, who'd gotten a pair of arms just like her brother. A lot of the kids were on their phones, and only one bothered pointing it at the Devil and his siblings. It felt like a funeral. Oh, wait, Frisk suddenly realized, that's also because winter vacation's over! Mrs. McNulty introduced Christine and Kim first, and then she presented Charles to the class as "a very special boy who needs a lot of consideration," and Thomas and another, older boy broke up laughing and Charles joined in. Monsters, wizards, time travelers, and the Devil, Frisk thought. We'd be four out of four if Victoria were older. Class proceeded in a very ordinary fashion, the teacher discussing the differences between formal and creative writing, and she gave them the homework of writing 300 words of what they'd done over the Christmas break. Frisk almost laughed out loud; she could have done three thousand!

"I'm not sure if I can do this assignment," Charles said as they left the room, and Frisk just stared at him in total confusion.

"What? Oh, you don't need to write about the other stuff before you got here," Asriel said. "Just write about building a plane, about getting people together to build it and test flying it."

"That's the problem," Charles said. "I don't know if I can."

"Really?" Asriel asked, turning his head sharply enough for his ears to fly around. "You... can't be creative, is it that?"
"No, it's..." Charles started. "If I'm not just making jokes off the cuff, or piecing a speech together out of someone else's words, or something like that... I don't hear my own creativity when I really start to think. I hear everybody else, all these brains, and... I'm in them, but they're not me. If I'm going to do this, if I'm going to be in school and learn how to write, it has to be from me... but 'me' didn't exist again until a couple weeks ago."

"Charlie," Frisk said, patting him on the shoulder, "that old saying about you can do anything if you put your mind to it, that's got to be more true for you than anyone else." His expression perked up.

"Frisk, Charles," a girl said from behind them. They turned slowly and saw the pained expression on her face and her tightly clenched fists. Here we go, it's finally happening, Frisk thought. She remembered her offer to do the talking, but she didn't have the words. "I had a grandmother in a nursing home. She was on all these medications, could barely walk, and then a little monster of some kind got in her room and she freaked out and killed it. And then she felt better, and the doctors didn't know why, and she found another monster, and another, and then she stopped taking her medications and then Chara, who we're all told isn't really you, made her go to Kansas. But then you did your thing with the big voice and took away everybody's power and she died." The words trolley problem tolled around in Frisk's head like a bell. "You didn't even know that you'd killed somebody, did you?"

"We couldn't have known," Frisk said faintly. "We had to do that."

"Yeah. I'm sure you did." She leaned her head back a bit and pursed her lips.

"Listen to me very, very carefully," Charles said abruptly, and his voice was commanding enough to make her stop. "You can come after me all you want, but if you ever touch my sister with anything, in any timeline, my mom is going to get very, very mad at me."

She swallowed the loogie she was about to hock at Frisk. "You're hiding behind your mom now? You?"

"You must have misunderstood," Charles said. "She's not going to get mad at you. She's going to get mad at me." There was a brief moment of silence as the unnamed girl realized what he was saying.

"You're a horrible... thing," she said before turning around and walking away.

"Yeah," Charles said, just loud enough for her to hear him. "I know." Another, older boy started to follow her, and Charles put a gentle hand on his side. "Hey, don't. She's grieving, just let her go."

"I know," he said. "A friend lost an uncle." He stared down at Charles, letting him know what that friend had lost that uncle to, and Charles slowly withdrew his hand. The Devil continued with his siblings to his locker near the entrance, and they exchanged their books in silence.

In history class, Mr. Reed introduced Barry, a kid about Frisk's age wearing a suit and tie, and while he might have gotten a lot of attention at any other school, he was barely noticed there. The teacher spared Charles the indignity of an introduction by simply saying, "If you don't know who he is, you aren't paying enough attention to be in this class." His usually taciturn tone had become friendly, even jovial, and in a moment when his back was turned, writing the names of various important historical people on the whiteboard and explaining who each of them was, Asriel briefly showed the words 'You broke his needle' to Frisk and Charles on his laptop, and Charles grinned at him. Broke his needle? Frisk was also trying to pay attention to the teacher, so it took her a while to
get it: Charles going to school had broken the needle on his weirdness meter and he no longer seemed to care who he was teaching.

And then the lecture began in earnest, and it was very obvious that he did care, because everything he was saying was about choices in historical context, that the choices of these various kings, generals, and emperors had affected the course of history. "If George Washington hadn't crossed the Delaware when he did, the American Revolution would have failed," he proclaimed. He broke things down for the class into knowing what to do and choosing to do it. "Today," he proclaimed, "we have a nearly limitless ability to know, but so few of us ever choose." Mathematics weighed less heavily on Frisk's overburdened conscience, they spent most of their lunch hour in study hall trying to help Charles write, and chemistry was a straightforward color-changing demonstration of a relatively simple reaction.

Magical theory class was getting dense, and Frisk worried if Gaster was teaching at a level that was just too high for her, and it was satisfying to know that Charles was having similar problems, both of them frantically taking notes and drawing diagrams. Asriel would help them after school; he understood very well when Gaster explained exactly what consciousness was, how it could exist, and how it related to magic. The broken barrier had allowed for a lot of hard, testable answers to what used to be metaphysical questions.

Charles attended M.E. with Asriel while Undyne was giving the human children a vigorous workout (including running on the track outside in freezing winds), and Charles and Gaster learned a lot from each other. Despite having absorbed so many dead monsters, Charles could not cast anything, but his reality-breaking ability was tested, examined, practiced. Charles realized how vulnerable he was making himself, showing the limits of his power, but trust went both ways. Gaster even encouraged other monsters, even Asriel, to cast certain harmless spells on Charles; Gaster had even managed to change the 'color' of his SOUL, turning his locket grey but barely seeming to faze him.

They got home and collapsed on the couch together. Charles wasn't really tired, of course, but it was kind to pretend, and Frisk's touch and Asriel's fur felt nice on his skin. Sans walked Victoria there shortly afterwards, and she giggled when she saw them leaning against each other, nimbly jumping onto the couch and floating down to lay across their laps, reminding them that her birthday party was tomorrow and they had better not miss it.

"I understand there was an altercation at school today," Toriel told her children when she got home, the four of them playing Mario together, helping the little girl when she got stuck. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"Not particularly, no," Charles replied. He felt that if he were in anything worthy of the term altercation, Frisk probably would have LOADED at once.

"We'll talk to her before it gets bad next time," Frisk said, pausing the game. "Mom... it just feels like I need to worry about everything I ever do, that I keep having to feel concerned all the time, that everything I do might have something bad attached to it... that I don't always know what the right thing is." Saving the universe had been easy, Frisk realized. There was no choice not to do it. Fighting old age with their money, same story, because what was the alternative? Confronting an incredibly powerful evil like Chara was scary, but it caused less anxiety than being alongside Charles and trying to talk to a girl who'd lost her grandmother or an older kid with a friend who'd lost an uncle.

"We've got all this power and we can't always make things right," Asriel said. "What's it called when you know you can't fix things, but you want to anyway?"
"Come here, my children," Toriel said, kneeling down, holding all three of them in her embrace. "It's called growing up."
Love

It wasn't that Frisk or her brothers particularly wanted to attend the birthday party of a girl half her age, but, as they all reluctantly agreed, attending parties was what royalty did. And this particular royalty did it twice in a row because that was what they did. Sans had set up the furniture both times, Toriel had baked the cake both times, and the party was in the Dreemurr mansion. Frisk put on the dress she'd worn to court while her brothers wore Dreemurr robes, but she did everything she could to keep Kid, Kim, and all of Victoria's same-age friends and the two kindergarten-equivalent monsters focused on the birthday girl and not herself— which, considering how flashy Victoria was being with her power and her jingling dress, wasn't terribly hard. One of the monsters was a very polite six-legged ant-horse that looked halfway between Hasbro and Clive Barker, and the other was a larger version of a sparklebird that talked in a chirpy voice and ate birthday cake by pecking at it, which Victoria couldn't get enough of watching. The only notable absence was Victoria's father, but it couldn't be helped; President Duterte had demanded Filipino rememberers to protect his people, openly offering to bribe the wizard to make some. ("The only bribe I'd take is one you cannot possibly offer me," Asmodeus had replied before conducting rememberer interviews.) Asgore wasn't there either, but the King of Monsters' schedule was so merciless that he wanted to clone himself.

Naturally, Victoria got presents: dolls, candy, a huge book of Junior Jumble courtesy of Sans, and many plastic things she'd either never use or use in very unexpected ways, but Frisk knew very well how she'd use pink-pastel Play-Doh and tinkertoys. Of course a lot of Victoria's friends were jealous, for reasons that had nothing to do with birthday parties or presents, and it didn't help that the birthday girl flatly refused to walk anywhere in her bright pink shoes, instead choosing to float through the air from spot to spot because she was full of Toriel's cake and because she could. But the kids had mostly learned to live with it, having been in school with her and magic-wielding monsters; as usual, the adults were the problem, hovering over their own children protectively, and it took some clever suggestions from Sans, Toriel, and the Dreemurr children to get them to socialize with each other in another room and let the little kids have their fun.

Fun they had, all of them, playing easy video games ("Who needs legs with arms like these?" Kim asked after winning a race, and the ant-horse had got mildly annoyed) and asking Victoria to do all kinds of tricks involving fire, momentum, and electricity, just so they could show their nervous parents things that they'd mostly seen before. Toriel stepped in only once to say "Do not do that one" the second time around, as she remembered quite clearly what had happened when Victoria did. One rotund little boy asked to be flown around, and although Victoria tried courageously, she was barely able to get him off the ground and told him why in the straightforward manner of small children, which sent him crying to his mother; his mother was angry enough to approach Victoria with her fists clenched, an act that got some other parents and Charles agreeing with the nature of Darwin's influence on the world. Toriel intervened, and, both times, mother and son wound up leaving early rather than admitting the problem. "Told ya, they do it to themselves," Charles had pointed out the first time, and neither of his siblings had disagreed.

One kid asked Asriel if he could beat Batman in a fight; the first time, the Dreemurr had demurred, suggesting that Batman wouldn't be dumb enough to fight him; the second time, Asriel said that because he knew what would happen in advance, he would win— and he said it before the kid even got done asking the question, making the kid gasp in astonishment. Another kid of the same age explained that Frisk had obviously used her power to reverse time, causing the curious kid to complain and demand to know what Asriel would be like without Frisk around.

"You really, really don't want to know that," Asriel replied, but of course that only made the kid
more curious and Asriel had to give him the silent treatment for a few minutes until he got
distracted by the cake Asriel was eating. Frisk helped him with a piece, reminding him not to
annoy her brother so much, which was when a little boy next to Asriel grabbed his ear and pressed
it onto his own mouth, making vague 'mmm' sounds. "Why do we keep putting up with this?"
Asriel asked with a bit of a smile, realizing that the four-year-old wasn't just cuddling his ear but
using it to wipe his cake-stained face.

"Noblesse oblige," Frisk replied with a giggle, using a phrase gleaned from their history teacher.
Asriel sighed, but Frisk had been patient with him through much worse things, and the little goat
gave the kid a gentle admonishment and a finger wag, and naturally the kid grabbed Asriel's soft
finger. Frisk giggled louder and wiped the cake off Asriel's ear with a napkin.

"I wonder what your birthday party's going to be like," Asriel said, smiling.

"Don't even remind me, that's..." Frisk shook her head, and her brothers shared a chuckle. People
falling over each other to make her happy even more than usual and with presents? It already felt
like every day was Frisk Dreemurr Day, as if the Mad Hatter had declared that her unbirthday
should be celebrated and everyone just went ahead and actually did that. That led to an amusing
chain of thoughts; what if she fell not to the Underground but Wonderland instead? Comparisons
drifted into her head, and she burst out laughing at the mental images.

"What?" Asriel asked.

"What if you were the White Rabbit and Mom was the Red Queen?" Frisk asked, giggling and
picturing Asriel in a waistcoat and worried about being late, although she didn't like the idea of Toriel going 'Off with her head!'

"No idea what you mean, Frisk," Asriel replied, and Charles just looked quizzical for a moment
before finally nodding.

"Oh my God, of course you wouldn't, it's not that old. Anyway, what about your birthdays?" One
look at their faces showed that she shouldn't have asked that question, and she bit her lip in silent
apology.

"I don't know," Asriel replied, surprising his sister. "We had no sun, Frisk, except for that one little
spot sometimes. We didn't have clocks for a long time. We didn't even know what day it was
until... Charles fell down." Asriel almost said that he wanted to celebrate his rebirthday instead, the
day that Frisk freed him and everyone else, but he knew she'd find that embarrassing and it would
surely be a holiday anyway, which would be even more embarrassing.

"I don't know mine either," Charles said. "We didn't celebrate them back then, not where I lived
anyway. I know it was in the spring."

"Then we can all celebrate our birthdays on the same day," Frisk said, and her brothers nodded.
"March fifteenth."

"The Ides of-" Charles started.

"Oh, not you, too!" Frisk shouted, drawing attention and causing her brothers to laugh. "Yes.
Beware the Ides of March. I know. And now it's yours too. I just hope nobody thinks we're
triplets." The kids laughed together and returned to the festivities.

Somewhat later, Toriel announced that she'd be giving an extra gift to the birthday girl and all her
friends, handing each of them a goat-shaped plushie made of cotton stuffing and Dreemurr fur. One
of the parents suggested that the plushies might be worth money; both times, Charles pulled him aside and whispered something so faintly that even Asriel could only make out the words 'eBay' and 'in half', and Asriel didn't think his brother was talking about prices.

"You are so determined to spoil her rotten," Charles pointed out after the kids and their parents had left the second time, the new five-year-old taking a much-needed nap.

"She was living in a trailer when we met her," Frisk pointed out in return. "Her mom's... somewhere, and her dad's too busy to come home."

Charles got annoyed. "You know how many other kids live in much worse?"

"Too many," Frisk immediately answered. "But her dad's still off helping the world. Helping me help the world. I kind of have to help take care of her, and since we've got the money, she gets spoiled." She leaned in a bit. "Besides, do you want one of the world's only two human mages getting mad at us for childhood stuff?" Frisk feared that Victoria would treat her the way Frisk treated her not-parents, deserved or not.

"Not particularly, but what are you going to do when all the kids have magic powers?" Frisk and Asriel thought their brother was being facetious and didn't reply. Instead, they helped him and each other with their homework, trying to make it not sound like gloating. As they all agreed, because they could do things that no one else could do, it was their responsibility to talk about them, not to belittle everyone else but to give them hope. As such, they played up the roles of other people in their adventures, talking about how their friends and associates had helped them learn, play, and create. This effort was not lost on Mrs. McNulty, who encouraged them to keep helping each other with assignments.

They did, and in so doing were on course to get straight A's through genuine effort and hard work. While it was impossible for Charles not to cheat on basic factual questions, those sorts of questions were mercifully few and far between, the teachers focusing on explanations, ideas, and the use of knowledge. Gaster in particular was consistently ruthless in both studies and homework. Frisk had been pushed into being clever through hardship; being pushed further by her teachers and mother filled her with determination. The work was tempered with love and play; every day, Frisk woke up next to her brothers, put on a shirt or dress with a red heart affixed to the center, ate breakfast with her family, and depending on what day it was and whether it was going to actually happen or not, she either studied and played with her brothers or walk-rolled to school with them. Every evening, she enjoyed dinner and dessert cooked by her mother (occasionally with Frisk's help), then a bubble bath, a brief jaunt into a walk-in dryer to the sound of contented bleating, and a restful sleep with a cuddly goat and a protective Devil. Every unhappened morning, she got the Count from the previous day, parts of which were slowly decreasing as the bad guys in the civilized world learned the hard way that ordinary crime no longer paid. Whether she and her brothers were chilling with Childrake on a chilly Saturday at the summit of Mt. Ebbot or exploring a perfectly ordinary cave system because Asriel had never even seen a story involving a cave before, Frisk counted herself to be as satisfied as she could possibly be.

Gaster got around to teaching Asriel and other monsters the invisibility spell, which had three parts to it: one to tell the light to pass through them, one to make their eyes not invisible because otherwise they were blind, and one to redirect the light reflected from their eyes so people didn't see eyeballs floating around. Since Gaster had helped Charles learn how to drop his spell resistance when he wanted, Asriel could take his siblings with him by casting spells on each of them, but making something the size of a hang glider or plane invisible was something Frisk couldn't tolerate for long, at least not in bright sunlight. (Asmodeus, on a much-needed day off, had made a joke about Wonder Woman's airplane, but none of the Dreemurr kids had even heard of Superfriends.)
They could walk around a mall invisible for a little while, perusing the various knick-knacks and clothing stores (colorful striped shirts had become tremendously popular), which was a fun experience for the first hour or two, but Frisk had been invisible her whole life and, in the end, there wasn't much difference between that and online shopping. They did overhear people talking about them, but Asriel could always do that.

They watched the news every so often in their usual way, flipping channels to see if anything interesting was going on. "what we hypothesized, but it doesn't make it any less surprising to see somebody's brain activity change in zero time." "Zero time?" "As near as we can detect. From one instant to the next. There was initial evidence of blurring, but that actually turned out to be an equipment" *click* "signed a bill removing the drug from Schedule One. In a press conference, President Trump stated that the overcrowding caused by the sharp increase in arrests of violent offenders had been a strong" *click* "AND IF YOU CLEAR THESE TILES WITHIN TWO MINUTES, YOU WILL WIN A BRAND! NEW! CAR! GOOD LUCK, DARLING! HOPE YOU READ THE FINE PRINT!" *click* "I'd have to say it's a problem for fiction in general, at least modern fiction. Big example, urban fantasy has been devastated, just devastated, and it's going to need to adapt. In a story, there's ways to work around people who can remember the future, but you can't write a typical vampire novel when we actually have monsters walking down the street in broad daylight." *click* "WHETHER YOU WANT REPRESENTATION FOR YOUR MISDEEDS OR YOU JUST WANT TO SUE THE PANTS OFF SOMEBODY EVEN GUILtier THAN YOU ARE, CALL 1-866-NYEH-HEH TODAY! THAT'S 1-866-" *click* "from the former North Korea show some interesting habits, such as using a hyphen, underscore, hyphen combination at the end of their messages. While we're not sure" Asriel clicked the news off, laughing like a maniac, his brother sharing a few chuckles because he already knew.

"I don't get it, what's funny?" Frisk asked. Asriel pulled out his phone and typed it in: -_- "Az, what does- OH COME ON!" If Asriel had organs to rupture, he would have ruptured them. "They've already got one for you, oh wait, no, that's Kyubey." The three of them had watched all three Madoka Magica movies last week.


"Fiends. Both my brothers are fiends." But they were her fiends, and she would not have traded them for anything.

Valentine's Day appeared on the calendar, and Frisk mentally kicked herself for not seeing the heart frenzy coming. While the Delta Rune was copyrighted and trademarked to the Dreemurr royal family, and its misuse had resulted in a briefcase-wielding skeleton showing up on more than one schlub's waiting room or front porch, American Greetings and Hallmark wasted no time in placing a single red heart on cards, memorabilia, and suspiciously shaped 'rabbit' plushies that were nowhere near as good as the ones Victoria and her friends had. People everywhere had started wearing red hearts, from Toronto to Tokyo- except in Frisk's neighborhood, where most people considered it pointless copying and others considered it outright sacrilege. Very few other kids at her school wore striped anything, either, except for the ones who already did before they went there.

Charles gave her a card on that day, some meaningless piece of paperboard with a bright red heart and some generic cutesy words on front, but within the card itself he had written 'Thank you for showing me that even someone with LOVE can know love. -Charles' Which was good, because Asriel and Frisk had teamed up to surprise him, giving him a huge, densely packed heart-shaped box of assorted rare chocolates that ordinary mortals could never afford. Frisk stored the card in a very special place in a drawer, and thought about what it meant, and wondered how he really thought of her, which was silly because they were brother and sister... except he wasn't physically
her brother any more than Asriel was, and he was the only human who had, who could ever have, anywhere near her kind of power. Frisk fretted and worried and mentally cursed herself for it because she was way too young and way, way too godlike to worry about that kind of thing, wasn't she? Besides, it didn't matter, she wasn't really a girl (or a boy, or an anything...), at least not yet, and it was just a single little card bought at the store, and she'd given him something in return... They slept next to each other that night as usual, and absolutely nothing was happening or could happen because they were still just children, and that was when Frisk cursed herself again; she'd gotten so worked up, she'd missed the obvious. Charles was inhabiting thousands of people and many of them had relationships and had even started families. She figured there was no way he didn't know everything there was to know about small-letters love.

"Charles, that card you gave me this morning... did you mean it like that?" she asked, in a voice she hoped was confident and matter-of-fact.

"Did you want me to mean it like that?" he asked in reply, and Frisk's emotions were so tangled up that she didn't know how to respond. "Frisk, you know you're the only person in the world, well, the only human, who I don't completely overpower. Even if I found a girl who wasn't scared of me, I'd still be... this. You're the only other human who can understand what this is like." He paused for a moment. "That sounded so emo, didn't it." He had so many thousands of people to draw from, but none of them knew the right words either.

"No, it's fine, I was going to say the exact same thing," Frisk said. "Can we just... stay regular brother and sister for a long time? Until I'm... you know..."

"We've got forever," Charles replied, and no one spoke for a few seconds. "Sorry if this is making you uncomfortable. You too, Azzy."

"I knew it was like this as soon as you gave it to her," Asriel replied. "Frisk, your breathing, your heartbeat, your SOUL, it's all been-"

"Az!" Frisk exclaimed, yelling at him as much as herself. Of course he would know! "You're not supposed to just say that!" Their parents probably knew everything, too, and neither one of them had said a word about it, and that made Frisk's chest constrict even more. "Can we go to sleep and not talk about this until the next decade starts, at least?" Silently, Asriel rested his fuzzy head on her chest and closed his eyes, and Charles' body fell asleep, and Frisk finally relaxed, easily falling asleep with a smile on her face, and they exchanged gifts again on the day that counted and went to school together like usual and none of the teachers did Valentine's-themed anything, much to Frisk's relief.

February passed as January did, and on one unusually warm Sunday, Kid and Kim led the Dreemurr children out of town, around the side of Mt. Ebbot and up another way, to watch the snow melt off it in the noonday sun, the white glare hurting Frisk's eyes. Undyne was standing in a miniature waterfall, washing her armor, ignoring the hundred-foot plummet inches from her feet, water flowing through natural valleys and drainage pipes and eventually to the river. "Hey, guys, come on in, the water's fine!" she called out. The children had trudged around the mountain and through the muddy slush in their snow gear, and they exchanged gifts again on the day that counted and went to school together like usual and none of the teachers did Valentine's-themed anything, much to Frisk's relief.

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"Rafting?" Asriel asked, confused about the concept. He knew what a raft was, but how did someone raft?

"I always wanted to do that!" Frisk abruptly shouted, somehow finding the thought buried under the ever-shrinking pile of things I was never allowed to do. She pulled out her phone, looking things up, her rainbow-striped snow boots splashing into the slush as she led her brothers and friends home. Within two hours, they were at one of the largest whitewater rafting enterprises in the state, sitting in a three-person kayak with Asriel up front and Charles in back, taking a journey down some double-diamond rapids with an age rating well above Frisk's age as Kid and Kim ran down the shore and Undyne swam nearby. Asriel liberally made use of his magic to compensate for their inexperience, Charles was careful not to snap the reinforced oars in half, and Frisk did what she could to keep them pointed forward and not to the side. The water was still plenty cold, and after three straight hours of high-octane exhilaration involving some not-really-near misses with pointy rocks and a lot of mildly gutwrenching bounces that got them all heavily splashed several times over, she was shivering as Sans drove them home and Victoria asked a lot of questions from her car seat, but between the roaring fire, the furry dress, the thick blanket, the warm goat, and the deliciously thick hot chocolate her mother was serving her, Frisk warmed up quickly.

For her and her brothers, it was a rather ordinary weekend.

Then her phone rang.
Having been around humans for months, Asriel knew very well that there are some callers who people don't like receiving unexpected calls from, because it probably isn't good news. Employees and bosses generally dread receiving calls from each other, parents usually aren't fond of surprises from their younger children and vice versa, and nobody likes being called by reverse 911, which was frequently how rememberers informed people of the horrible fates they suffered in other timelines. ("Please stay calm. You're scheduled to have a debilitating brain hemorrhage at 2:30. Can you drive yourself to the hospital or should we send an ambulance?") The pattern was predictable: the human looked at the phone to find out who was calling, made some sort of faintly stressed, worried sound that was usually inaudible to all but monster goat ears, steeled herself to the near-certainty that today was going to go horribly awry, and reluctantly answered it.

Frisk followed that pattern to a T when receiving a call from the director of FEMA.

"What's the problem, Alice?" she answered the phone with, still cuddled up next to her brothers.

"Frisk, did you SAVE before you told us? By a few minutes, an hour...?" Alice sounded desperately hopeful that this was the case, that maybe they could go back and fix things.

"I never screw that up," Frisk replied, dashing her hopes. "What happened?"

"Our best estimate is that a monster started killing people a half hour before you SAVEd," Alice explained in a rehearsed, matter-of-fact voice, and Asriel's ears sprung out in shock. "I'm not blaming you, you couldn't have known," she hurriedly said. "Communications are extremely spotty down there, and we've got nobody in the field. What we do know is that it's in downtown Caracas, and here's what it is." The picture was clearly taken from a very high angle, but the devastation was palpable; a huge swath of homes on the side of a hill were torn apart, and the thing doing the tearing, a red tornado thousands of feet tall, had made its way to the downtown area, leaving wrecked buildings, burned trees, and a gigantic cloud of dust in its wake. To Frisk it looked like a frame of a Godzilla movie, only more blurry. "Gaster suggested the possibility, although he doesn't seem willing to explain how, that you might be able to do something about it." Frisk choked out a high-pitched not-laugh. Do something about that? With what?! Fighting Flowey was one of the most difficult things she'd ever done, and Flowey had only wanted to play with her forever. This thing was destruction incarnate and would probably kill her without even knowing she was there. "That's what I suspected. On the next LOAD, we're going to attempt non-nuclear solutions first, but if those don't work, we're going to have to escalate." Frisk couldn't reply. "I'm sorry."

Frisk muttered a goodbye and hung up the phone, showing her brothers the picture, and Charles sucked air between his teeth. Something that enormous would paste him if he managed to somehow get its attention. "How many SOULs, Az?" she asked, in lieu of better questions.

"Hundreds, at least," he replied at a glance, and Frisk's heart sank. "Maybe more, but do you see what it is, what it looks like? Remember what Gaster said about what we look like."

"Form follows thought," Frisk knew. A monster's appearance was determined by the dreams, ideas, and random thoughts that had coalesced to form it. "It's not holding itself together very well. It can't, it can't hold onto those SOULs for very long, so... oh, no."

"Yeah," Charles said. "It's taking SOULs faster than it's losing them. It'll keep going until it runs out of people to kill or someone blows it up."
Frisk drew in a breath. After warning the class that the topic would be uncomfortable (and it very much was, particularly to Asriel), Gaster had explained that a monster being able to kill a human was a rare occurrence indeed. He had emphasized how unlikely it was for a monster capable of unwarranted murder and SOUL theft to be able to exist in the first place; a monster dominated by a single, simple emotion, such as anger or rage, would probably dissipate before it could even be called a monster. He had continued by discussing how difficult it was for a monster with a human SOUL to control it, as the SOUL would have ideas and desires of its own.

But rare, unlikely, and difficult do not add up to never.

"Charles, why didn't you know about this?" Asriel asked.

"In that city?" Charles rhetorically asked. "That's the murder capital of the world, a place where they don't even have enough toilet paper. I actually had a nexus there that we purged. Once I started getting my brain together, I told everyone left there to just get out. Now it's illegal there to be an EXP earner. Anybody they think is influenced by me? They shoot 'em. They think I'm an agent of the American government." Which wasn't entirely wrong; Charles occasionally got eyes-only texts on unremembered days asking for sensitive information from other countries. Usually, he had nothing of value to offer. "Pretty much everyone with EXP who's still in the country lives somewhere they'd never hear of this."

"You're controlling where they live?" Asriel accused, turning and causing the blanket covering them to shift.

"Yes, I'm... do we really have time for this?"

"We have all the time in the world," Frisk said, meaning it literally. "Just how much are you doing to them?"

"I suggested, some cases more forcefully than others, that they should all go live in a ghost town. That now has actual ghosts. They all ended up going, even a woman took her husband and kids there because it's better than what they had. I tell them not to hurt each other, not to kill any monsters, and to live peacefully. That's it, that's all, I don't control them control them, at least not without a good reason. The mayor was a mass murderer. Of humans, too. Now he helps build and fix up houses, and he hammers the nails in by punching them. The government barely knows there's anyone there at all, and it doesn't know anything about who they really are. They're still dirt poor, but it's better than what they had." Charles felt it would be better not to tell his siblings about the time a small gang decided that this quiet, out-of-the-way village with no police force to speak of would be a perfect target for late-night home invasions and general banditry. Innocent people would have died if Charles had left any gang members as witnesses, although he didn't really need to get quite as creative as he did the second time around. "I would ask them to help, but it's way too far away."

"So are we," Frisk said. "I don't know why Gaster would think I can do anything about this." But when the words left her mouth Frisk knew what was wrong with them, and her brothers did too. Stopping unkillable monsters without physical force was how she had gotten out of the Underground to begin with. Fighting something like that was hopeless, practically quixotic, and she felt the familiar DETERMINATION welling up inside her, suggesting that she could do it anyway, regardless of how obviously impossible it was. "Okay, but I can't get there in time." Even if Frisk asked to use the world's fastest jet- which she could- and left as soon as she LOADed, it still wouldn't be fast enough.

"Yeah," Asriel replied, "it's a shame we don't know anyone who can teleport."
"Especially not anyone who lives right next door and who comes over to our house," Charles added. "And definitely not someone who you've taken shortcuts with before." Frisk mentally kicked herself for not thinking of him, but then again, he was the guy who drove them places. Charles pulled out his own phone and called Alice back, asking where it had been at the exact time Frisk SAVED. No, she didn't need to know why Charles needed that information, any more than he really cared about how she examined the trail of destruction to get it.

Asriel's conversation was simpler: "Hey, Sans, come on over. It's important. Yeah, you can bring her." The skeleton was knocking at the door in moments, Victoria in tow.

"Did you take a shortcut to get here?" Frisk asked, opening the door as her mother wasn't home to do it. She was off spending a romantic day with her husband, King Asgore finally having made time in his schedule just for her.

"Yeah!" Victoria answered. "He opened the door and we walked out and poof, we were here!"

"eh, uphill it's more like a jump."

"Can you take a shortcut to Venezuela?" Charles asked. "I've got the spot we want to get to."

"Kid... you know we're on a rotating planet? with a sun, and a moon, and elevations, and everything? you know how much math it'd be just to not fly off the side of the world?"

"This isn't a vacation, Sans," Asriel said. "A monster's chewing up SOULs. You can do the math before Frisk LOADs."

Sans would have sighed if he had lungs to do it with. His lazy imitation came out as a clearly artificial psssh of air. "had to happen sometime. and now you want me to take you three to be big damn heroes. because you can. and because you can, you have to. we all have to." He pulled out his laptop from elsewhere, sat on a comfortable armchair, and started doing calculations. "hey, can you three go weigh yourselves? need to see how much draggin' i'll have to do."

They had to go buy a scale at the K-Mart that had replaced the military PX, but Frisk found it illuminating to know that while she weighed a lean 72 pounds and her devilish brother's main body weighed a burly 90, Asriel barely registered. "Seven pounds, Az?!!"

Asriel smiled. "I told you before, you weigh ten times me."

"Wait, I have to check this," Frisk said, pulling out her phone and browsing for large stuffed animals. "Yeah, here. This one's about our size. Weight: 6.5 pounds." Frisk broke out laughing while her monstrous brother shrank back in embarrassment. Her other brother started chuckling. "Charles! He is literally a living plushie!" Asriel was tempted to add force to the scale, to make it say something more appropriate for a human, but his thoughts were broken up by a joint hug from his siblings. "What about you, Sans?"

"fifty-five in imperial," Sans said without a second thought.

"Wow, really? I thought it'd be a lot less," Frisk said.

"i'm not fat, i'm just..."

"Oh come on, Sans!" Frisk shouted.

"Don't say it!" Asriel warned.
"Oh, boy..." Charles sighed.

"Why, what's wrong?" Victoria asked.

"...big-boned." Victoria giggled as the Dreemurr kids groaned. "all right, got the math squared away. cubed, divided, and vectored away, too. 'm ready when you are."

"So what's the plan?" Frisk asked. "I know I'm going to have to try to save the SOULs..."

"I don't know how much I can shield you from that stuff," Asriel said. "Maybe the dust, but those bigger chunks are too much."

"I can block the concrete and metal, the magic's what I'm worried about," Charles said. "But we can dodge that, can't we?"

During her time in the Underground, Frisk had never been hit with a truly undodgable attack. Some monsters had an innate sense of fair play; most simply didn't know how to hurt humans; some weren't really trying to hurt her at all. This thing was made of murder. "I'm seriously not sure," Frisk replied.

"Well, you know what they say, if at first you don't succeed, come back with a couple hundred pounds of C-4," Charles suggested.

"What about Asmodeus?" Frisk asked.

"he was on a plane when you SAVED, and i ain't doin' skeletons on a plane," Sans replied. "really, i don't think you can plan for this thing. you'll see what i mean."

"Well, we'll have to do it as soon as I LOAD, and it's a little too early," Frisk said, getting a text from Alice: 'Twitter figured out today won't happen.' The more people knew they weren't living in the final version of events, the less point there was to going on with it. "Or not." She clicked the button to warn everybody. "Let's do the time warp again!"

==LOAD==

Frisk blurred out of bed, snapping on her bracelets and yanking them out of their chargers, throwing open the closet door to grab a pair of sturdy hiking boots. She'd dodge powerful monsters in her striped jammies if she had to, but she was not going to a Third World country barefoot. Asriel, having snapped his own bracelets on with magic, helped her tie one of her shoes while she did the other. Charles belted on his knife, his locket around his neck.

"Frisk, your father and I were in the middle of-" Toriel started, opening the door.

"Sorrymomgottasavethousandsofpeoplebye!" Frisk blurted, rushing past her mother with her siblings, jumping down the entirety of the stairs and relying on Asriel to catch her. Sans was at the door, holding out a bony hand, and as Frisk accepted it she felt like she was holding onto the Reaper, an entity she never intended to meet. Her brother held onto her other hand, and Charles held onto his. Sans took a step in a direction that wasn't east, west, north, south, up, or down, and there was a sharp jolt as if she were on a jerky amusement park ride. She felt light drizzle on her face as she stood in the center of a muddy dirt road covered in donkey and tire tracks, and her very first thought on being teleported was that she had clearly chosen the right shoes.

*Maybe this is why they didn't see it earlier. Because it's cloudy out. But beneath the clouds it was very clearly visible, a red tornado among green trees, only (only!) fifty feet tall and sparking with menace. A full-sized bus rotated around the monster, as did many chunks of rubble and metal and a*
huge cloud of dust. Shacks that could barely have been called houses were in ruins around it, the
decrepit village pulverized into even more decay. Frisk couldn't see any dead humans- not from a
mile away- but she felt in her gut that they were there, possibly incorporated into its mass. No, no,
that really can't be why it's red, it's glowing red, not... that red.

"There's people running from it!" Asriel shouted, hearing them scream. Focusing, he pointed his
finger at the monster, concentrated, and Frisk felt herself being drained as a small chunk of rubble
exploded from the thing's body.

"Well, you got its attention," Charles said, positioning himself to the left of Frisk as the thing was
spinning counter-clockwise. Frisk took deep breaths, slowly getting her energy back, her
determination swamping away her fear. She had never been happier that she couldn't be
killed, but the tremendous dervish quickly bearing down on them promised all kinds of pain. A
quarter mile away, the thing was trying to change their souls to a burning, angry crimson,
possibly even to take them from that distance, but Asriel leached the supernatural hatred out of
Frisk, spitting it out into the mud, and Charles just laughed it off. "No!" Frisk shouted at it. "I
won't hate you!" It responded with a stream of Spanish profanity, and Frisk swore to herself; of
course it wouldn't speak English, English speakers didn't create it!

Charles, who spoke every language an EXP earner did, translated, bellowing loud enough to make
the mud vibrate beneath Frisk's feet. Accepting it as a challenge, the dervish bore down on them,
and within moments Charles was punching away bowling ball-sized chunks of rock with loud
cracks audible over the thing's constant, hideous roar. Asriel, wincing against the wind and the
noise, shielded away the splinters and dust that would have flayed Frisk's skin off. The school bus
descended on them like a hammer, and Charles pulled out his six-inch knife, slashing it in half with
a reality-breaking swipe, the two pieces flying away in a spray of greasy metal chunks and
upholstery. "Attack us all you want!" Frisk shouted at it with her hands splayed, Charles still
translating. "We can't die! But don't take it out on people who can!" Abruptly, the tornado
stopped, and Frisk thought it couldn't possibly be that easy- and it wasn't, the thing throwing large
chunks of rubble, rocks, branches, and messier, worse things directly at Frisk. It knows my brothers
are protecting me, so it wants to kill me. But Frisk was not so easy to hurt, nimbly dodging every
object her brothers didn't push aside, their thin pajamas getting soaked with splattered mud. Frisk
felt her hair tingle, and she leapt away just before a huge bolt of lightning fried the place she just
was. She spied Sans out of a corner of her eye, who was casually leaning against a tree, his
shoulders and hands up in a clear what do you expect me to do about it? expression. More lightning
followed, an unrelenting stream of bolts and hatred from the tortured souls inside it, and the
thing screamed a horrific shriek and took tornado form again, half its previous size.

Some souls already freed themselves. All I have to do is keep going and let this thing drain itself
out. "Winning so far!" Frisk shouted, relieved and running on pure adrenalin, and it formed a
gigantic cannon-shaped something out of random pieces and aimed directly at Frisk's face.

Charles stepped between them just as it fired and took three undodgable shots to the head. "That
actually hurt!" he complained, rubbing concrete dust off his forehead, but the thing gave him no
time to think; it dumped a ton of rubble on top of him, and as he flung some of it aside, it rushed
towards Frisk, enveloping her in its mass, trying to absorb her soul through pure willpower.

Big mistake, Frisk thought, her determination refusing to bend, seeing the crimson souls
whirl around inside it. She reached out and grabbed one- suddenly her right bracelet flashed red,
Asriel gasped, and it was green again and the thing flew away from Frisk to regroup. "Az, did you-

"I did have it. Someone else's soul. For a split second and then I let it go. The dervish's coming
And it did come back, a torrent of rocks and anger and crushing hatred, and Frisk cartwheeled and spun and limboed under everything she could possibly avoid while her brothers blasted and punched away everything she couldn't. It was still shrinking, its destructive rage and hatred destroying its hold on its own SOULs, and suddenly what faced the Dreemurrs was a needle-toothed, spiked, clawed mass of evil the size of a polar bear. *This is why they're called monsters,* Frisk had just enough time to think before it leapt at her with missile-like speed. A gasterblaster caught it from the side in mid-air, sending it sprawling.

"They say it takes two to tango, but there's still more than two of you, isn't there?" The thing leapt at Sans' face and he stepped thirty feet to the other side of it. "What, you think I'm just gonna stand there and take it?" Frisk was again left to wonder at Sans' real power, and she breathed hard while the two monsters went back and forth, Sans seeming almost amused at its frantic attacks while it took every single beam to the face. *I just hope Sans isn't as tired as I am.* The thing grew even smaller and faster, Sans needing to pop in and out like crazy to avoid its claws.

"Oh, enough of this," Charles said, running into the fight. It whirled on him, and he grabbed its bladed arm and smashed it repeatedly into the ground, blocking every strike and throwing it fifty feet away. His pajamas were in shreds, and his body and hand had a few thin cuts on them. It jumped at him again, and he pulled out his knife and impaled it as it clawed at his head. "Sorry," he said, as he reality-divided its last human SOUL from its form. "I've been where you are, and I can't let you win." He sheathed his knife, tossing the thing at Frisk's feet. "All yours."

Bereft of human power, it was the size of a housecat and almost looked like one, although it had spikes instead of fur. Yowling, it leapt at Frisk's face, but all she had to do was take a few quick steps back. "It's all right, kitty," she said, knowing that even if it couldn't understand her, it could get her tone. "It's over now." But it just kept attacking as she tried to calm it, its leaps slower and shorter, leaping with its front legs when its back legs were fading away to dust. Eventually, it stopped, and yowled as its dust blew away and faded into the mud.

"Did... I kill it?" Frisk asked, disturbed by the concept and ready to curl up into a ball to try to process everything she'd seen.

"Not in the EXP sense," Charles replied. His hair was a badly-cut mess, a few thin lines of blood running from his scalp. "You killed it with kindness. It couldn't get its vengeance, so it... fell apart."

"Its vengeance? On what, humans?" Frisk asked, confused. A newly created monster couldn't have been wronged by them.

"No, it was created from a desire for vengeance. That's what it was made out of," Asriel explained. "Anger, hatred, and vengeance, with human SOULs to keep it going."

"People get hurt here by other people, all the time," Charles explained. "The whole country's gone insane. Maybe whoever wished this thing into reality wanted to destroy the government, that's where it was headed before. And I bet you, that last SOUL? That was someone who created it. And who sacrificed himself to it." Frisk almost asked what kind of maniac would be insane enough to sacrifice himself to a monster just for revenge and then remembered who she was talking to. She might have made the comparison, but with the adrenalin draining out of her, she just wanted to go home and get some rest.

"Let's get out of here before someone sees us," she suggested, and her brothers rapidly agreed.

"Take my hand, off to never never land," Sans said, holding out his reaper's bony hand again, but Frisk didn't fear the Reaper and the four of them were at the door where they'd started, the amusement-park jolt somewhat less. "Thanks for y'help, Sans," Frisk said, slurring the words as
she opened the door, looking at her parents' horrified stares (yeah, Mom, we're coming home covered in mud and blood, but that's not too unusual, is it?) and remembering that she had to call someone. Alice was the first name in her address book, making it easy. "You can tell Donald to call off the bombers," Frisk slowly told her, feeling dizzy. "It's gone."

"How?" she asked. Frisk heard everything in that one word: 'How did you go thousands of miles instantly?' 'How do you do something without weapons that takes us tons of explosives?' 'How many more powers do you and your friends have that we don't know about?'

"I'm not telling you, it's not my secret to share," Frisk tried to say, but the words came out jumbled and she was seeing patterns in her vision. "Gotta sit down for a bit," but it came out "goddasiddonfubbitt" and she couldn't make it all the way to the comfortable chair ten feet away and suddenly she was on the floor without knowing how she got there. Her parents and siblings rushed to her side, Sans standing back, and Asriel was yelling something about blood sugar and yellow, and all Frisk could think was that yellow was the color of a bad flower. Toriel opened the refrigerator door and poured a cup of milk, magically guiding it down Frisk's throat, and Frisk thought that maybe her mother was bottle feeding her as if she were a baby. I'm sorry, Mom, Frisk tried to say, but no words would come out. I fell down too old for you to do this. And then her sweet brother with the cute ears was getting excited about the color orange, and Frisk fell asleep in her mother's tender arms, dreaming of orange juice.

Frisk blinked awake, squinting against the brightness of the fireplace, lying under an extraordinarily large blanket with her family, and held in Asriel's tight embrace, her parents and her other brother watching over her protectively. She was cleaned up and wearing a Dreemurr-fur nightgown, her stomach was strangely full, and her head felt like it should hurt but didn't, and she twisted halfway around in confusion, looking her brother in the eye nose-to-snootle. "Did I faint?"

"Yeah, and you almost scared the fur off me," Asriel said, loosening his hug. "You weren't going to die, and your brain didn't lose anything, but we had to fight to keep your SOUL in there. You were losing your connection to yourself." He stopped hugging her to hold up his green-glowing bracelets, and Frisk remembered how he had been yelling about colors. Yellow. Orange. I almost-

"Nothing happens when you sleep, but don't ever get knocked out, Frisk. Not if you don't want a plant for a brother."

"Az, no, I'm so sorry," Frisk sputtered out.

"No, it's absolutely my fault," Asriel said, hugging her again. "I'm the one who used all your blood sugar before breakfast."

"Which you didn't get to taste," Charles added. "The sacrifices we make for heroism."

"A heroism only a handful of humans know about and no one has witnessed," Asgore said. The Dreemurr children sighed in relief, and Asriel's sigh was much more human than Sans' had been. "As usual, you never wish to take the credit for your actions."

Frisk turned around again, looking up at her father's great bulk beneath the blanket they shared, his horns holding it above his slight smile. "Dad. Seriously. People already worship me and they really need to stop." The religious cataclysms the broken barrier had left were only getting worse as the shock wore off. Frisk wasn't masochistic enough to go around looking for a 'Church of Frisk' which she was sure existed somewhere, but every online religious discussion, on every forum, wound up with a reference to monsters, Frisk, and/or Charles in it. She'd sworn off Googling herself out of morbid curiosity a long while ago. Her name appeared in other, completely unrelated, contexts; it felt like half the kids in the world wanted to be a Dreemurr, and although she could
hardly blame them for it, she couldn't escape herself, wherever she went. "If they found out I was taking shortcuts halfway across the world to stop rampaging monsters in person, it'd just get worse. And does Sans really need the world knowing he can teleport? You know what everybody would start asking him to do?" Asgore's brow furrowed, but he already understood.

"other than victoria, there's a few kids who know i can do it," Sans said. "but they're too young to talk or remember it right." Sans sighed his artificial sigh again. "hey charles, before you finally kill god, tell him he should have made quantum physics a little more fun and a little less hardcore with the math." Charles sharply laughed in reply.

"Ask your dad to make a program that'll do the math," Asriel suggested. "Or ask Alice, they already know one of us can do this, so... admit it, I guess."

"yeah, no sense hidin' it anymore." Sans seemed to look grim, but as a skeleton, how could anyone tell? "stay out of trouble, kids." He took a shortcut and quantum tunneled home.

Toriel gave her husband a certain look under the blanket, and he nodded. "Children," he began, "your mother and I did not reserve this day solely for making smoochies." Hearing their gigantic father say the words 'making smoochies' sent Frisk and Charles into fits of laughter to the point that Frisk thought she was going to pass out again. "We had spent our un-time discovering locations, but now that the real time will be spent with you..."

"Hey, no, I'm fine," Frisk protested. "I've got food in me now, it's been some time, I'm not going to pass out again."

"Is that so?" Toriel asked, putting her large, fluffy hand on Frisk's head. Az really does take after his parents. "Well, then, we shall be off preparing for your birthday party."

Frisk sighed. " Aren't there any more giant evil monsters to deal with instead?"
"Happy birthday, children!"

The Dreemurr kids had just finished their morning ritual. Frisk would never be ten years old again; she'd done her usual thing, setting an alarm to let herself SAVE a couple of hours ago, as she'd LOADED on a normal wake-up the previous day—this was a ritual that her mother wasn't particularly fond of ("Eight hours of uninterrupted sleep is important for young ladies") but was starting to feel comfortable, and with her ever-huggable goat brother by her side it was always easy to go back to sleep.

She looked up at her mother, who was carrying an armful of clothes and wearing a great smile. "I would like you to go to school today," she informed them. It was a Friday, the last school day before spring break, but of course it was a to-be-unhappened one. "There is a certain chain of events that should occur."

"That's a really great explanation, thanks Mom," Charles said, rolling his eyes.

"I will not spoil any surprises," Toriel said patiently. Frisk mentally flinched at the word *surprises* but that was another artifact left by her not-parents, from whom surprises were never, ever good. With Frisk having a much better mother and total control over whether time happened or not, she saw no reason to disappoint her mother by not playing along. "Here are your clothes for the day."

Asriel and Charles received matching silk green-and-yellow striped shirts and dark brown pants that seemed meant to coordinate with Frisk's ensemble, a lightly ruffled pink-and-purple short dress with the number 11 emblazoned just below the red-heart Delta Rune on the chest and a pair of matching dark leggings, a fanny pack in place of pockets. Frisk stared at it for a moment. In her old life, this was the kind of thing guaranteed to get a kid picked on, something that a mother with zero common sense would inflict on her daughter in the face of loud screaming and defiance.

But no one without mental problems or a serious death wish picked on Frisk Dreemurr, and she would only have two eleventh birthdays in her life so she put it on with a smile. It was easy to move in, at least, and she had to admit that she did look cute. She popped on her hairband, socks, and shoes, and went downstairs with her brothers to a pancake-filled breakfast. Frisk almost laughed at how fatherly Asgore looked, with his large robe around his shoulders, although the full-sized newspaper was like a comic book in his huge hands. Toriel did not say one word about parties, presents, or cake, and the Dreemurr children decided to let her surprise them, each of them giving a hug to their father on the way out, their mother walking with them to school.

Sans left home with perfect timing to approach them, holding hands with Victoria. "heya, old lady. heya, birthday kids. sorry i only got one present for one of you."

"If he holds out his hand, don't shake it," Frisk advised.

"nah. it's a question for you, frisk." She expected a joke of some kind but got a philosophical question instead. "do you think that you think like other people think?"

"Do I... yeah, actually," Frisk said. "I mean, other than that birth defect and other than everything I got falling down the hole,"

Charles laughed, interrupting her. "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?"

"Well, yeah, okay, but I don't think weird, if that's what you're asking."
Sans smiled at her. "weird's in the eye of the beholder. and that's what i thought you'd say." His eyes closed. "i think you're wrong. just food for thought." He gave Victoria's hand to Toriel and started back inside. "happy birthday, kids."

"Thanks, Sans." Asriel chuckled as the skeleton closed the door. "He is such a lazybones. What does he even do all day?"

He wasn't expecting an answer, but his mother gave him one. "I do not know, my child, but I suspect there is much more to him than it seems. And I do not just mean shortcuts." She led them into the school, where everyone could see right on Frisk's dress that she was eleven years old and that her mom obviously still picked out her clothes.

At least there's not going to "Happy birthday, Frisk!" be a lot of tests today, Frisk figured. The teachers don't show movies here instead of teaching but "Hey Frisk, happy birthday!" nobody's going to get anything done on the day before spring break. "Frisk, happy eleventh birthday!" Especially not with every single person in "Happy birthday to you, Frisk!" the school trying to wish me a happy birthday. I should "It's really your birthday?! Happy birthday, Frisk!" never have agreed to wear this. She wanted to tell them 'Hey, it's my brothers' birthday too,' but 'It's their birthday too because I say it is' would have been very counterproductive.

Even her English teacher greeted her with it, and Frisk tried not to be obvious about rolling her eyes. "If they sing the song in class, I swear I'm going to LOAD," Frisk whispered very faintly, and her brother giggled. They did not sing the song in class, although each student entering the room felt obligated to greet her with it (because everyone else, humans and monsters alike, did), and history class was the same way. Even Barry, whose own birthday was in a few days, greeted her like that. I hope he's not coming to our party. That'd be a whole new can of worms.

Ms. McNulty was not so cruel as to give homework over spring break; Mr. Reed was, demanding three-page, single-spaced essays on the fall of Rome.

"Hey, guys, we gotta talk after class," Jack said instead as she walked into math, providing a merciful exception to the rule. He and Nicole had stayed the Dreemurrs' school friends over the past months, hanging out with them during the lunch period and occasionally doing assignments together. "I got something weird in my locker."

"Don't say that, Jack," Charles said. "Now we're going to spend the whole class waiting for it." The teacher successfully distracted them with lessons instead; the big test was yesterday, and Ms. Nguyen spent time discussing the more advanced concepts she would feed the class after spring break. No homework, fortunately, but there was an overlay of 'oh hey kids you better look this stuff up because we're going full-bore no-mercy on it when school comes back into session'.

Walking with them to study hall ("Happy birthday, Frisk!" "Oh, hey, uh, Frisk, just wanted to wish you a happy birthday..."), Jack pulled out a letter with a purple seal on it that must have been made of actual wax. Crowded together in their usual cubicle, one of Asriel's ears draped around Frisk's shoulder, Jack laid it down so everyone could get a look. The seal had the Delta Rune on it, and on the front was Jack's name in perfect cursive.

Asriel laughed. "You can't get something like that and then not open it! It's got your name on it!"

"Yeah, but what's in it?" Jack asked.

Charles laughed harder. "Probably not anthrax."

"Did you get one too?" Nicole asked. She'd neatly opened hers up and set it down in front of them. It was a birthday party invitation, a message (in the same perfect cursive) that her bicycle would be
found in front of the school and that her books would be taken home without her if she left them in her locker. Her mother had already been informed. "Your mom bought a bike for me yesterday," she explained. It had arrived with a simple notecard and a ribbon. It had taken all afternoon for her to stay up on it without falling over, but it was a gift from the queen and principal so she felt obligated.

"Your mom bought her a bike?" Jack asked, snapping the seal on his. The message was the same; he did have a bike but hadn't ridden it since last year. "What's she trying to do?"

"I have no idea what's going on," Frisk said. Nicole made a faint, nervous 'mmmm' noise in the back in her throat.

"Our mom's not going to put you through something bad," Asriel said, smiling. "Other than giving you more stuff to wait for." And they did wait, but lunch was meaty and delicious, chemistry was a frantic dash of the teacher trying to finish up the lab work so he could introduce new lessons when spring break was over, and gym class was a real frantic dash, Undyne sending the kids over hurdles and obstacles placed on the track, telling them to use the technique and pacing tips they'd learned. There were no more truly fat kids in Undyne's class. (There was a rumor floating around that she'd gone to the house of one kid, kicking down the door and demanding that her parents stop feeding her fatty foods and fat propaganda, but the kid's name changed every time Frisk heard the rumor and Undyne would neither confirm nor deny it, so it probably didn't actually happen.)

The Dreemurr kids opened up their lockers at the end of the day to find matching envelopes with simple instructions: "Leave your books in your lockers. Your bikes are outside. Follow the clues. Love, Mom" Frisk was the only one who got the clue list, a series of rhymes, the first of which was "For a day of birthday mystery fun, head towards the setting sun." And their bikes were outside waiting for them in a bike rack that probably didn't exist the previous day, Jack and Nicole getting there right after the Dreemurrs did.

"You know what is the weirdest thing about this school?" Jack told the Devil, his time-reversing sister, and his monstrous brother. "Not needing to lock up your bike." Frisk laughed and pointed out the first clue, which was easy enough to follow, if confusing, because the exit to the south had been the only unfenced way out. Frisk laughed when she saw the small guardhouse and swinging arm. Who puts a military checkpoint on a bike trail? The MP waved to the kids, who waved back and followed the steep, winding path. Nicole had to walk a few times, and Jack was half a foot from taking a very bad turn down a cliff, but they were all going slow and enjoying the scenery, looking down into the green valleys and breathing the fresh air.

"Hey, I hear something," Asriel said. It sounded like chipmunks arguing. "Frisk, what's the next clue?"

"To make your way around the trees, follow the path of the three," Frisk read aloud.

"Yeah, there's three of them," Asriel said, his ears perking up in interest. "This way." There was a steep, dirt-path turnoff, which seemed like the kind of thing that bicyclists would leave behind, which confused Frisk; wasn't this paved trail brand new? Or, perhaps, people had been using local trails long before Newer Home was built. His siblings and friends followed him down, the path going next to a deep, fast-flowing stream, and Nicole giggled listening to them and finally seeing them, three cat-sized fluffy balls chasing each other around, white and yellow stripes flashing around, up, and down trees. Occasionally, two of them would start to tussle it out, only to have their fight broken up by the third; the second one would chase the third, then the first would chase the second, and they were at it again.

"Oh my God. They're so cute," she said, pointing.
"They're not acting cute," Asriel replied. "Guys! Stop! What's this about?"

"We're on the wrong side of the stream, and it's all her fault!" the first one yelled.

"It's not my fault!" the second one yelled. "He's the one who got us lost!"

"Nobody did anything wrong!" the third one protested. Charles abruptly started laughing.

"Charles, what-" Asriel started.

"You don't get it, do you? Oh man, this one's old. Older than me. This is the puzzle, Az."

"Ohhhhh, yeah, I know this one," Frisk said. Jack had heard of it before, too.

"How is this a puzzle? Better question, what do we have to do to get you to stop?" Asriel asked the three monsters.

"Get all of us home!" they chimed in unison.

"Where's home?" All three of them pointed to a small hole on the other side of the stream.

"Here, I'll just fly you over," Asriel said, levitating, but he found himself having to grab them harder than he'd liked to keep them from savaging each other. "Am I really going to have to- I can just throw you, you know."

"You're supposed to carry them one at a time, Az," Charles pointed out. He felt a bit thirsty, so he took a drink from the stream, not really needing to care what was in it. It tasted exceedingly fresh and devoid of contaminants.

"One at a time? Well, it's going to have to be you, first, because this guy wants to kill you and you want to kill this guy," he told the second one, before cradling the little monster in his arms and returning her home. Annoyed, she sat on the bank, staring daggers at the other two, who stared back. "Does it have to be one at a time? I could just carry both of you."

"Don't carry me with him!" the third one protested. "He's too mean!" Nicole started giggling, and Frisk joined in.

"Fine. I'll carry you back alone, then. Oh. I get it. I can't leave you two alone over here, either. So I have to carry you back, " he said to the second one, "then bring you over," he said to the first one, "and finally come back for you." The three of them promised to stop fighting and retreated into their hole. "Next clue?"

"When you see the water bright, go towards the rainbow light," Frisk said. "I don't get it. Okay, this might be the water bright, but... what rainbow?" Nobody knew. "I don't-" Suddenly, a flock of sparklebirds flew away from the mound the small monsters had entered, their iridescent feathers shimmering. "Follow them!" The kids jumped back onto their bicycles, Charles flying down the dirt path at motorcycle speed, soon out of sight. Crossing a rickety bridge, the group followed Charles' voice for a half mile up an extremely overgrown trail to a wooden framework built onto the side of a mountain, where Charles stood, waiting.

"I'm pretty sure this is the place," he said. "The birds nest here, so... I think we have to go in there. What's the next clue?"

There was a white sign marked 'Broken Flank Exploratory Mine DANGER Do Not Enter', with a list of penalties from some state department, but the 'Not' had been graffitied over and the entrance
was wide open. Frisk grinned. It might as well have said 'Adventure and Excitement This Way'. "If you wish to see the hidden appeal, first you must remove the wheel," Frisk sing-songed. "Oh, I get it. We can't take our bikes in there, and should take these out, too." Frisk and her brothers took the wheels out of their shoes, so as not to get hurt while strolling around the completely dark, long-abandoned mineshaft.

"We're going down there?" Jack asked. "Seriously? With no flashl-oh."

"It's just light, geez," Asriel said as the human stared at the beam emanating from Asriel's palm. Nicole looked about to say something, but didn't, and Asriel led the way inside. It was very cool, and Frisk half-expected to be mobbed by bats or a bear- "Relax, everyone. There's nothing in here but us. No way forward, either, unless you want to go into that." The path in front of them sloped down into deep water, an orangish, stinking mess of extremely cold, long-stagnant filth.

"Is the next clue about boats or submarines or swimming?" Jack asked.

"Ewwwwww," Nicole said, gooseflesh on her back and arms tingling. She didn't even feel comfortable standing near it and wondered if it would eat her skin off.

"I'm just messing! But seriously, how do we get through this?"

"I think we made a wrong turn. When you're in a bad place to play, a skeleton will show the way," Frisk read aloud, confusing the group and making Nicole wonder if the skeleton was someone with his skin eaten off. They backtracked a bit before finding a crevice in the rock that they could fit through single file, a small, presumably natural tunnel that curved around and down. Wind rushed through more than once, making Asriel's ears vibrate. Charles broke off some of the jagged bits that looked likely to hurt someone, often creating twice as many jagged bits. A six-foot drop placed them in a central room filled with ancient wooden structures, rusty iron chunks from ancient machines, and tunnels leading off to every compass direction, long-unused minetrack aligned down each one. Although there were assorted unpleasant smells, the air was surprisingly clean.

"Okay, now this is a bad place to play!" Jack shouted. "Where's one of your skeletons to get us out of here?"

"I think... that's a skeleton," Nicole said, squinting and pointing to a round hemisphere sticking out of a pile of rubble. "Oh my God, it's real!" Frisk didn't even want to know the circumstances that had led to someone being buried and lost in a place like this.

Jack's face scrunched up. "Damn. Your mom is hardcore."

"Well, she'd been talking to a skeleton for a long time before I fell down, so she probably just doesn't worry about it," Frisk guessed. "It's not like this guy died recently."

Nicole shuddered. "This is really creepy."

"I know!" Charles said, smiling. "It probably wasn't just Mom who gave us this, I bet everyone helped. Frisk, next clue?"

"On the path and in due course, you must use the right amount of force," Frisk said as Asriel provided reading light, looking around. "On what?"

"That, maybe?" Jack suggested, pointing to a rust-covered iron lever with a wooden handle, connected to a complicated system of chains and a counterweight, all connected to a heavy hook and pulley embedded in the overhead rafters. Frisk tried to guess what it had originally been built
to do and came up blank.

"Stand back, she meant me," Charles said. "I need to pull this thing without breaking it." He put one hand on the handle and another farther down, giving it a slow, steady pull that ripped the rust off. The counterweight fell down partway and abruptly stopped with a loud snapping of wood.

"Aw crap, it's broke," Jack said. A second snap joined the first. "Aw crap, it's really broke, look out!" The group hustled away from the snapping timbers and rusted ironwork hurtling to the mine floor, and it was swiftly joined by a trickle of water.

"We have to get out of here now," Asriel said, transforming, picking up Frisk under the back and legs, and flying her down the track as she belatedly realized that they were beneath the lake. "Charles, grab them!" Charles snagged Jack and Nicole by the ankles in one smooth motion and leaped up before their heads could hit the ground, holding his hands up high and rushing alongside Asriel as the kids' feet dragged against the ceiling.

"What the f" Jack's voice was drowned out by a terrible roar of tumbling rock and rushing water. Upside-down, Nicole screeched as Asriel's reflected light showed her a glimpse of the flood coming their way, an orange torrent of ancient, stagnant water that reeked of toxic sludge and things long dead. There was no way Frisk could keep this up, Charles would have to grab her too-but she saw a minecart in their path and got a desperate idea. "Jump in that!" she yelled, not even able to hear herself above the torrent, but of course Asriel heard her and dived in, Charles taking half a second to toss the other two kids to Asriel before jumping in himself, and Asriel lifted the overcrowded minecart, moving it forward just as the flood slammed into it.

This is one ride they don't have at Disney World, Frisk thought, breathing hard, and Asriel bit back all the many swear words he'd learned in the past few months as he used as much power as he dared to make sure they didn't get any hard bumps, the children packed on top of each other with their heads down as the minecart scraped the walls and ceiling like a dull knife on an old chalkboard. Nicole clutched her glasses protectively to her chest, keeping her head down. Asriel and Charles took a split second to look out the top, just in time to see their way blocked by an iron grating.

"Az, throw me!" Charles screamed, and Asriel tossed him into the grating with every ounce of force he could, and Charles tore it away just in time to get smashed full in the back by a wall of water propelling a minecart full of screaming children, which toppled over and pitched them into the air. Asriel protected all three of them in his arms as he rolled down the hill, bouncing his back off a tree way too hard and coming to a magical halt in mid-air, setting them down onto a somewhat elevated patch of ground and de-transforming. Frisk's vision swam, and she took deep breaths while Jack and Nicole tentatively, numbly stood up, watching the water flow around them like so much spilled Sunny Delight.

"All things considered, I think I'd rather have the purple stuff," Charles said, wading through the ankle-deep slop. His shirt had nearly been torn off his body and hung off his shoulders. His pants were gashed in back, although at least the waist hadn't been ripped.

"Lemme see," Frisk said woozily, and he turned to show strips of orange-tainted cloth stuck to his skin next to deep bruises. Frisk could see how the minecart had hit him, the wheels leaving indentations into his back. If you wish to see the hidden appeal, first you must remove the wheel. There was nothing appealing about what Frisk was looking at, although he didn't seem concerned about the pain. She saw what'd happened to herself: her mother's gift was covered in reeking, polluted water and mud, although it didn't seem to be ripped and she wasn't hurt. Her human friends were similarly messy, Jack helping Nicole get mud and twigs out of her hair. She looked
shocked, as if unable to process what just happened. Asriel- "Az, you okay?!" Frisk asked, mental finger on the LOAD button. His clothing was in much better shape, having been protected by his transformation, but it didn't seem to fit right on his side, as if some of him were missing.

"I'm fine, don't worry about it. Just don't get excited, that's more dangerous to me right now than this is." Frisk sat back down, recovering her energy. Asriel lifted his shirt to show how his side and back had been caved in, as if someone had taken a baseball bat to a block of foam. It slowly expanded back out as Frisk watched. Just like a plushie. "What's the last clue?"

"The last clue?" Jack shouted. "The last freakin' clue?! This little game took us through that and you want to keep playing it?! You're all psycho!" He pulled his phone from his pants, but, waterlogged, it didn't even turn on.

"You wanna've gone through all that and not finish this?" Charles countered with as Asriel checked his phone to make sure it worked. Gaster and DARPA had made the Dreemurrs' phones practically indestructible.

"The way this goes on, we're prolly going to be fighting some big monster demon thing," Jack replied.

"Nah, we dealt with one of those last week," Frisk said, before realizing she probably shouldn't have. Whatever, it was a to-be-unhappened day anyway, and from the way her human friends were staring at her, they probably thought she was joking. She unzipped her fanny pack to look for the clue list before realizing it was still in her tightly clenched fist. She made out the words on the soaked paper half from reading and half from memory: "Once you go around the bend, you'll reach your family and the end."

"You're already around the bend," Jack said, twirling his finger around near his head in the universal symbol for insanity. Charles chuckled and fidgeted with his shirt before deciding to just get rid of it, letting Asriel fix his pants with very gentle use of magic. Frisk felt the sudden urge to pretend to be too tired to walk, just to be carried in his bare muscular arms. Smiling faintly and discounting the idea, she stood up, and stumbled on her first step.

"I gotcha, sis," Charles said, picking her up and carrying her over his shoulder like a child. Surprised, she started laughing in joy and comfort, and then her brothers joined in, and their human friends had no idea what was wrong with them. "I hope all our birthday parties are like this," Charles said after a minute, a wide grin on his face. "I want next time to be longer. More stuff that we really need to solve and push through."

"It's hard to give us a challenge," Asriel said, beaming back at Charles, his little teeth poking out from his wide smile. "Give you a challenge, anyway. Frisk just needs to eat more before we do this stuff."

"Yeah, a warning would have been nice," Frisk said. "I mean, that was awesome, but-" She noticed Nicole's slow walk and downcast, zombie-like expression. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?! You traumatized her," Jack said, looking somewhat traumatized himself. "Good job, guys."

Frisk might have replied 'That's not our fault' or 'She didn't have to come with us' but that would have been ridiculous with Dreemurrs encouraging her to come, so she chose not to be mean and played one of her trump cards instead. "Hey, no, it's all right," she said, patting Charles on the back so he'd let her down. Frisk gently touched Nicole's face so their eyes could meet, smiling gently.
"You're with me, you can't really be hurt when you're with me."

"My ears hurt," she quietly said, and Asriel rushed over and put his hands on her head. She giggled a bit. "That tickles." Even in the giggle, there was something cold about her, as if a large part of her brain just wasn't really feeling up to it right then.

"She's fine physically," Asriel said. "I think. Hey, Nicole, you remember what happened?"

"We saw an old skeleton, then we went down in a metal cart and got flushed out the exit," she said as if reading a book report. Her emotions flicked back on in a rush and she started shivering in place. "It was scary..."

"Damn right it was scary," Jack said. "Now maybe your brothers never felt it, but Frisk, have you really forgotten what being scared is?"

"Almost," Frisk admitted. "I was scared a lot before all this. I don't really want to remember what it's like."

"Speaking of, are we gonna remember this?" he asked straight-out. That was a taboo topic. Jack could talk to Frisk about practically anything at school, what her family was like, what she did for fun, all of that, but she was obligated to shut him down every time he mentioned whether or not any given time period would actually happen.

"No," Frisk replied, and he sighed with relief.

"So this isn't going to happen? Thank you," Nicole said, smiling. Frisk looked between Nicole and Jack in confusion, not understanding. You wouldn't want to remember that? You wouldn't want to have survived something like that, you wouldn't want to tell your friends about this totally wild thing you did with the Dreemurrs? Her brothers didn't get it either, and the five of them stood looking at each other for a few seconds before they kept going around the bend, where, in fact, the Dreemurr parents waited.

"Uh, guys... I think we might have messed up," Asriel quietly said, overhearing their tones of voice before the words.

"Frisk is still a loser, but I'm sure one of them would have figured that one out by now!" Undyne shouted.

"Maybe it was our puzzle they got stuck on," Kid replied. "Or maybe it just didn't work? You think maybe Charles broke it?" Asriel looked at Charles sharply, the latter having no idea why.

"No, child, I'm certain they could have figured it out even if it were broken," Toriel patiently explained. "I worry if that rumbling was involved. Perhaps they discovered some calamity, or perhaps Papyrus had given them a tougher puzzle than expected?"

"YOUR MAJESTIES! EVERYONE! I CAN'T FIND THEM ANYWHERE ON THE PATH! OR OFF IT! OR HALF ON AND HALF OFF IT!" Asriel heard Papyrus shouting. "BUT I HEARD A BIG LOUD NOISE!"

"Yes, so did we. I believe we should search..." Asgore was saying, and none of Frisk's group could hear why Asriel was cringing.

"You might want to LOAD soon," Asriel suggested very quietly, and Frisk pulled her phone out of her fanny pack and sent 'Five-minute warning' to rememberers, which she usually did when she chose an unusual time. She didn't want to persist much longer in the doomed world she'd created.
"Hey! Mom! Dad!" Asriel called out as they got the text. "We went the wrong way!" His companions stared at each other in disbelief. A few more steps and they could see each other; Asgore was wearing a gigantic button-down T-shirt, shorts, socks, and sandals (Socks and sandals, Dad?! Frisk would have preferred being flushed down a mineshaft again), her mother in a light dress with purple flowers, and everyone else, even Gaster, dressed in casual clothes suitable for a day of frisbee golf, a bored, inattentive Victoria tossing a disc up in the air and using magic to catch it. Toriel immediately hurried towards her children with her surprising speed, looking down at them in shock, her husband and the others following closely behind.

"My children! What has happened to you?!!"

"We went down another hole," Charles replied, and Frisk giggled.

"Well, Mom, we..." Asriel started, and as he explained everything they'd done, Alphys went "Oh my" a few times and Undyne laughed uproariously and Papyrus clearly understood the source of their confusion. Asgore laughed a booming, belly laugh more than once. Sans remained silent, smiling. Toriel sighed and shook her head and wondered how they could even think that she'd meant them to undergo such a thing rather than the perfectly harmless puzzles she'd planned on.

"So, wait, that was all a coincidence? The clues that led us in the wrong direction, the mineshaft, the skeleton, the lever? No. No, I do not believe that," Jack said.

"We kinda did it to ourselves," Asriel replied. "The three monsters were like a puzzle, but a rainbow meant sparklebirds? 'Remove the wheel' meant getting off our bikes? 'The right amount of force' meant some lever in an old mine? We were, what's that called, seeing what we wanted to see."

"I just can't believe we did that at all," Jack said. "Like, that doesn't happen to anyone else."

Charles, whose distributed existence was an endless parade of things he found ugly and weird, just laughed at him.

"Yeah, that's our lives," Asriel said, shrugging and smiling a bit.

"Chill out, Jack," Frisk said. "You live in a world where I can just do this." She snapped her fingers.

==LOAD==

"That was so much fun," Charles said, smiling.

"For us, maybe, but-" Frisk started.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah!" Charles interrupted her. "Is there any of us who remembers not having fun with that?" Frisk silently conceded the point. "It's a shame that wasn't intentional, though. We'll have to ask for something way better next year. Or maybe I'll make one for you two." Frisk felt Asriel's ears perk up.

"You know I shouldn't do unexpected LOADs," Frisk said, "but yeah, if you can make one that wouldn't actually kill us if we screwed up, that'd be awesome."

"Tarring and feathering isn't fatal, is it?" Charles asked, and even Frisk could hear the grin in his voice.

"Oh, go back to sleep already," Asriel said, laughing, and the three of them did.
"Asriel, Charles, Frisk," Toriel said, handing each of them their clothes again that morning. "I still do not understand why you would think that I would want you to ruin these."

"I thought it was okay because I'm only ever going to have worn mine once," Frisk replied, changing into it. Toriel looked disappointed. "C'mon, Mom, people would think it's my birthday every day! Even more than usual."

"I can remove the numbers, my daughter," Toriel said. "We may be wealthy, but there is no need to be wasteful. And you have other clothes that seldom see any use." Toriel was about to say that Frisk did not always act like a girl should, but wisely kept that thought to herself.

"I almost never go to formal events, Mom," Frisk said. "And I'm really glad you didn't make this party like that."

"Even though you should have sent us through that on purpose," Charles said.

"Yeah, with more monsters who do special stuff," Asriel added. "Dad can do that, I thought that's what he did."

Toriel sighed, smiling faintly. "As ever, all three of you are hopelessly incorrigible. Come along, it is time for breakfast."

Asgore chuckled from his seat at the table. "For all your bravery in the face of adversity, there are still things from which you flee."

"Well, yeah," Frisk said as her brothers dug into syrupy pancakes. "Nicole was scared, and Jack was mad, and we were all messed up, so how was that going to be good? Battling some big vengeance-monster, or surfing a minecart, those are things we can just do things about, and if it gets really bad I can just snap my fingers, so that stuff's way easier than... people." Frisk almost said something about changing up LOAD times, just to prevent people from guessing the daily schedule, but everyone knew that'd be just an excuse.

"Yeah, and that hit was pretty painful, I wish we would have seen that earlier," Charles said. He smiled a rosy-cheeked smile. "We can a second time!" His family gave him disapproving glares. "I'm just saying, I'm not saying we should actually do it."

"I didn't know you felt it," Asriel said.

"Pain doesn't work on me like that," Charles explained. "I'm not completely here, so I can just decide not to react to it." That was a power Frisk would have loved to have been born with, for all kinds of pain.

"I don't really feel it," Asriel said. "A lot of monsters... don't even know when they're getting hurt. Just like a lot of humans don't know when they're hurting others." That hung in the air as the Dreemurrs ate breakfast. Toriel seemed more protective than usual as they left, helping each of her children put on their backpacks and herding them out the door in front of her. Sans did the same thing he did before, giving Toriel a fourth child to hover protectively over.

"another question for the birthday girl," Sans said, eyes closed. "are you the same person today as you were the last time we talked?"

"I changed a little bit because I experienced something," Frisk said, as if Sans were one of her teachers. Perhaps he was. "But am I the same person, yeah. Oh, about your last question, I don't think that I think like other people at all anymore. At least not most people."
"and that's the truth. nobody can be who you are and be like other people. you decide whether that's good or bad." Sans walked back inside his house to do Sans things.

School progressed as it had the unhappened time (Frisk counted; nearly a third of all the kids in the school wished her a happy birthday), Jack and Nicole were surprised by their letters from Toriel again, and Frisk dropped her SAVE right after gym class. Biking down the hill the same way as they had the previous day, the air was just as fresh and clean and the trees were just as green; the only difference was the EPA-labeled trucks and heavy equipment they could see driving down a faraway road, because polluted water draining from old mines was a very bad thing. Asriel was going to solve the monster trio's problem again, but they weren't audible this time and Frisk guessed that someone else had taken care of it.

And, of course, the puzzles they were supposed to be doing were silly little things, a 'correct path' determined by numbers divisible by three, a clever little mirrored setup involving a prism, and a locking-puzzle setup to which someone had pasted a 'No magic!' sticky note. The skeleton was, of course, Papyrus, who gave them a "DOUBLE PUZZLE!": a shifting maze made of squares with foam, ankle-high walls on springs that popped in and out, asking them to solve a word scramble every time they stepped into a different square, giving them each a randomly determined scramble every time they moved. (One time, Charles got 'tca' while Jack got 'itsadabsietseiiaaminmslrhnhnt'.) The force puzzle did require pushing on a pendulum and a bit of timing from all five of them, but it was simple enough that they got it on the third try. And around the bend was their family, ready for a very large game of frisbee golf (too large; they had people start at different places just to have any hope of getting done in a reasonable amount of time), and there was Toriel's homemade cake and homemade ice cream ("Wait, what?!") ("Yes, my daughter, it was rather simple."). and in lieu of store-bought crud that they could have gotten at any time, Frisk and her brothers got signed cards, monster-created artifacts, and hardened clay models of themselves courtesy of Victoria, who had used her magic to create strikingly detailed models for a five-year-old. It was a perfectly ordinary eleven-year-old's birthday party (except for the monsters and the magic and the everything), one at which nobody said anything at all to the non-rememberer kids about deadly minecart rides. And then, of course, they did it all over again, although Papyrus had made sure that most of the puzzle solutions weren't quite in the same spots and Asgore placed everyone on a different frolf hole to start with. Kid and Kim's mechanical arms proved amenable to frolfing, Gaster proved himself a master at it, and everyone enjoyed themselves.

But the Dreemurr kids knew what they'd rather have been doing.

"thanks for all y'help." Sans said, feeding Skittles to the sparklebirds and cheese to the monster trio, although the little monsters had no idea what he was rewarding them for.
May Flowers

Going on a road trip for spring break was something that Frisk had only heard about from some movie on TV, but when Charles suggested it, she and her brother readily agreed. Road trips were something that college students enjoyed with free time and access to transportation; the Dreemurr kids, with nine straight counted days of free time and instant, unfettered access to every kind of transportation known to man (and one that wasn't), shared the sentiment. Then again, it wouldn't really be a road trip, because where they could go, they didn't need roads.

"City or country?" Charles asked, turning down the volume on the TV and leaning back into the large, comfortable couch with his siblings by his side. The Mother of Bronies had created a Saturday morning cartoon featuring real monsters (voiced by same), and Asriel found it silly and hilarious on several levels, especially since many of the commercials were for officially licensed Dreemurr merchandise. He'd let it slip at school that he was a fan of the show, inadvertently tripling its ratings and selling even more goat plushies and Delta Rune-branded clothing.

"Do we have time for both?" Frisk asked. "I've never been to New York, and I've never been on a camping trip with people I care about." She had once been on a camping trip with people she didn't care about, which was a miserable experience for all involved.

"Ugh, can we go south instead of north?" Asriel asked. He had studied everything he could about geography, both physical and political. "We just got done with winter."

"I don't know if we really want to go to the Deep South," Frisk replied. Charles nodded in agreement. There were certain churches down there that had been preaching doom ever since the resurgence of monsters, and there had been an embarrassing number of EXP earners, almost all of which were restored in the time-traveling purge. The resulting chaos had metastatized into everything from Frisk-worshipping offshoots of existing churches to all-new demented conspiracy theories, and Charles figured that, in any given town, they had a roughly fifty-fifty chance of either being worshipped or getting holy water splashed in their direction, with someone possibly dumb enough to try to shoot them. He still felt glad the crazies had scurried far away from Mt. Ebbot before he came home. "Oh, I know! There's a bunch of museums in the middle of Washington. The city, I mean."

The show was starting to come back on ("We now return to Hailey, Hank, and Humans!") and Asriel laughed at some antics before abruptly wincing. "Hey, there's something big coming our way. I mean, really big. And seriously mad." For Asriel to talk over his favorite show meant he was serious.

Frisk sat up on the couch, her dress brushing her ankles. "Give us more than that, Az."

"I'm trying, it sounds... it's booms, and rumbles, and it's really far away. This thing is huge."

Charles looked concerned.

Frisk, looking at her brothers with a wide smile on her small mouth, abruptly started laughing. "Really, Charlie, all those people can't tell you what's booming, rumbling, and far away?" Charles was not going to tell her what was distracting him; this time, it was a Janjaweed commander using slaves to kill certain monsters and then killing the EXP-earner slaves. Frisk pulled out her phone, showing her brothers the local radar. Plenty of green, with a wide yellow stripe in the center and even a little bit of red, a saber-shaped band with the densest part heading straight for them. "We should probably stay inside today." Asriel was shivering a bit despite being very warm, and Frisk felt his fear bleed through their link. "It's just a storm, Azzy," she said, trying to project calm.
"I know what we should do," Charles suggested. "Find a cave, or an overhang, or one of those pavilions that's exposed on all sides. And then sit in the middle of that and watch the wind blow the rain all around us while we're in a little shelter. It's great." One minor EXP earner had become a homeless traveler after his brush with Chara, using his bloated bank account to spend time appreciating the simple things in life, taking the broken universe for what it was.

Somewhat unnerved, Asriel hugged his brother with one arm, who eagerly hugged him back. "That's one of the first things we did, but not in a storm," he said. "We were on a playground under a roof. Remember, Frisk?"

"How could I forget? And, Charles, we have a covered patio," Frisk pointed out. Said patio was home to His Majesty's gardening tools, although there wasn't anything planted yet. Apparently, their father had finally made time to indulge his hobbies.

"Well, yeah, but it's not quite the same," Charles said, holding out his arm and letting Frisk lean into it for another hug, holding his siblings close to him. He wanted as much sensory overload, as much closeness, as much light and sound and touch, on his main body as he could get; Frisk and Asriel always indulged him, because they knew what kinds of things made him clingy and distracted. "I used to love the rain... before. I know, I shouldn't talk about it." For the young Chara, rain washed all kinds of things away. They watched the show ("No, Bob, you can't tie me to something to climb down on! Pyrope, not rope!") for a while, Asriel and Charles distracted by different things their sister couldn't sense, before Asriel perked up.

"Mom and Dad are home," he said, and a few moments later their parents walked in together, arm-in-arm.

"It's going to be a doozy today," Asgore warned his children, his wife helping him with his greatcoat and hanging it up. He had enjoyed the morning's walk with his wife; being able to take it and having someone to take it with were luxuries that he'd gained an appreciation for.

"We know, Dad," Asriel called back. The approaching thunder was getting to him, and while Frisk and Charles could catch the occasional, far-off boom, Asriel was hearing boom after boom after brutal thundercrack, some near, some far.

"Do you remember the first time we saw one together, dear?" Toriel asked, smiling, her husband slipping her out of her coat. "The children were so scared. We were, too."

"I was afraid the roof would fall in," Asgore said. "And here we stand now, in a house that will not collapse with children who are not afraid."

"Well, Frisk and I aren't," Charles said mischievously. "Azzy, on the other hand, is, ah..." Asriel, embarrassed, gave him a please stop look. "...ever so slightly perturbed."

"Oh, my son," Toriel said warmly, sitting down next to Asriel. "You have survived far worse things than this."

"Yeah, that's what I was going to tell him," Frisk added. "C'mon, Az, you helped us stop a giant evil tornado. This is just an ordinary storm."

"It's bigger and louder," Asriel replied. "Mom, Dad, you hear it too, don't you?"

"Yes," Asgore replied. "Though I suspect not quite so well as you." A loud rumble rolled through, making Asriel flinch. "And your siblings surely heard that."
"Az, you know what's making that noise? That's lightning. The same stuff you threw at me back then, remember?" The Dreemurr parents looked at Frisk. "Oh, sorry! Mom, Dad, you don't remember that part. Just... forget I said that."

"That's why I used it! Because it was powerful and scary," Asriel replied, not in the mood to care how his parents would react. "And there's a lot more of it, and a lot more powerful. There's a lot of wind, too."

"Sounds like something Undyne would say, 'The wind is howling...'" Charles said, amused. "I bet she loves this weather. I'll call her up and ask where she's at."

"There is no need," Toriel said. "We have seen her at the top of the mountain, in full armor, holding a spear in defiance of the sky. It was quite poetic."

"She's gonna get zapped!" Frisk warned.

"That seems to be what she seeks," Asgore replied. "What she attempts to accomplish, I don't know. Perhaps she wishes to remember what it's like to die."

"I can spoil that one," Frisk replied. "It's not fun." She tried not to glare at her father too hard when she said that, but he had been the only one to kill her before her DETERMINATION de-terminated her.

"Seconded," Charles said.

"Thirded," Asriel added.

Toriel's smile was gentle, and she picked up her little goat in her arms, and Asriel bleated in surprise. "My child, you need not worry about such things any longer. Let us go and watch the rain together."

"Fine, Mom," Asriel said through his mother's fur. "But I'm watching the show next time." Frisk and Charles looked at each other, giggling and chuckling, and followed their parents out to the patio. Of course it had a tremendous view, over treetops and far away to the west, which had a panoply of dark clouds that occasionally flashed with lightning. The rumbling was getting closer, the air damper. Asgore had been right; this one would indeed be a doozy. Nestled between her parents and siblings on an enormous beanbag seat, the wind tickling her feet through her Dreemurr-fur socks, Frisk patiently waited for the storm to hit.

The wind was first, the trees in front of them swaying back and forth. Asriel heard the snapping of faraway branches and smelled the deep, rich scent of moist air before the rain started coming down. The wind blew it in their direction, lightly spraying them all, and Toriel pulled around a heavy plastic curtain that none of her kids even realized was there. The wind blew it back and forth a bit, the rain thudding against it as a million tiny drums, the unfamiliar sound making Asriel smile despite the noise. A great bolt struck a tree directly in front of them, a brief fire extinguished by the pouring rain, and the terrible thunderclap made even Charles wince and sent Asriel huddling against his family and the beanbag, as if trying to burrow.

What do ordinary goats do to get out of the rain? Frisk wondered.

Asriel heard a loud snapping sound from far off, and the lights abruptly went out behind them, the soft glow turning to total darkness in an instant. This time it was Charles who was startled, making a faint "Gyah!" sound in the back of his throat.

"A tree fell on the power lines!" Asriel figured out, the words coming out in a rush.
"I'll get it next time," Charles said. He'd reality-divide and kick the thing down. No mere plant was a match for him, and so far he'd managed to avoid saying so when beating his brother in video games.

"Patience, my children," Toriel said, and the lights came back on within a minute. "The diesel generator under the school can power our entire village." Even with Frisk around, Toriel was a stickler for emergency preparedness, and she'd eagerly paid attention back when one of Trump's men explained how to keep the community self-sufficient for months until the fuel and food ran out.

Asgore did some business on his phone, Toriel ran her hands through her children's hair and occasionally made comments on the snails she'd collect once the storm was over, and the children watched it like it was a thriller movie. Asriel was curled up against the terrible sounds near and far, pressing into the beanbag and leaning into his mother and sister. And this storm'll happen all over again, Frisk knew. Sometimes, the sheer scope of her own power scared her.

It lasted no more than an hour, leaving broken branches in its wake, and as the rain petered out and the rumbling went away to the east, Asriel slowly uncurled himself, sitting up. "Oh my God, Az, look!" Frisk exclaimed, pointing and laughing. "You indented the beanbag!" Asriel had magically shoved himself into it, leaving an indentation in the shape of a goat in the fetal position. Frisk ran her hands through the shape left by his ear, comparing it to the real thing.

Making sure his parents couldn't see, Asriel showed Frisk a gesture he'd learned from her.

They didn't go north or south for spring break; instead, they went east, taking in the National Mall in Washington, DC (the Museum of Natural History had an entire section devoted to monsterkind), Baltimore City, the beaches of Chesapeake Bay (Asriel particularly enjoyed the crabs, both playing with them and eating them, and he sent his mother enough pictures that she decided to start cooking crab at home), and a hotel in Delaware, Charles flying them from private airstrip to private airstrip. They made a brief sojourn to Atlantic City, although there wasn't much to do there for them and casino owners generally didn't like Frisk very much; rememberers were, by federal law, not allowed to make bets, but the industry was terrified anyway. From there, they stopped at Philadelphia to take in a ball game (the Phillies got trounced, and both the coach and the announcer apologized to Frisk personally), camped out in the woods in central Pennsylvania, playing and laughing in a clear stream, and took in one last baseball game at Pittsburgh (the Pirates won the first time around but lost the second, as someone on the opposing team avoided an injury) before heading home to see their father putting finishing touches on a new bush outside the school: a perfect rendition of Papyrus' face in shrubbery.

It just wasn't fair to the other students when their English teacher asked them to write about what they did that week, especially when they read their essays out loud to the class.

March and April's showers had brought May flowers, as Asgore had planted a lot of them all around the Dreemurr mansion, including the golden flowers that Asriel had once loved so much. Asriel had learned the word 'triggered' from the internet and decided he did not want to spend his whole life being 'triggered', and his sister would never, ever let him turn into one again, so on one warm Sunday he happily drank his father's goldenrod tea and happily helped his mother fuse together matching flower crowns for himself and his siblings, the yellow petals and green stems framing his white fur, matching his own clothes and those of his siblings. Asriel smiled widely. Gold and silver were just rare metals; these were the crowns of royalty. The three Dreemurr kids looked at each other and laughed, hugging and sharing the moment, and of course their parents
took pictures to be stored in Charles' locket.

Frisk had come nose-to-snootle with Asriel when she first saved him, and she'd come nose-to-nose with Charles when he'd first shown up at their doorstep in his tattered clothes, but in that hug Frisk realized that it was getting closer to forehead-to-snootle and nose-to-mouth, and when she looked ever-so-slightly up at her brothers, smiling, they smiled back at their little sister.

She broached the topic with her mother, and after a very short conversation, they scheduled an appointment with an endocrinologist.

As her patient sat down on the chair looking around the office nervously, Dr. Geld gave her best understanding-doctor face, sizing up the not-quite-girl in front of her. She knew about Frisk's condition, as did nearly everyone else in her field, and of course she'd accepted a Saturday appointment with her, despite her clinic being only open Monday through Friday. She'd fantasized about having Frisk as one of her patients, but the Frisk in front of her wasn't the Frisk she'd imagined. The Frisk she'd heard of was a fearless immortal of untold power; this Frisk was a scared little princess in a striped dress who'd brought in a stuffed animal for comfort. Then again, this was very much That Frisk because the stuffed animal was alive and just as nervous as she was.

"Normally, these meetings are conducted one-on-one due to privacy concerns," the doctor began, glancing at Asriel.

Frisk held up her bracelets, as did her brother. They had more than enough range to cover the entire building, but Frisk wasn't in the mood to explain that. "Yeah, that's not going to happen," she said instead.

"You'll have to tell me about those," the doctor replied. "They're not in your medical records." Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, chuckling. Spontaneous Floral Reversion Syndrome was not in the ICD-10.

"Can you just tell us what you're going to give her? If she does it, I mean." Asriel requested.

"Well, as I'm sure you're aware, your sister is a very special case. Frisk, normally, for someone your age, I give my patients puberty blockers, to stop the normal growth of hormones until the patient is ready to fully transition. But, for someone with your condition, so you can have a normal puberty appropriate for your age, I would start with a very small dose of estradiol. This is a synthetic hormone that mimics estrogen, which will make you develop female characteristics, and we can discuss how far we're willing to go with that. There aren't normally any complications, but there are some side effects, and normally, they're mild." She didn't want to get into those quite yet, but her patient was staring at her and she was ethically obligated to explain them. "Some of my patients have reported nausea and vomiting, um, some people get cramps, there is a slight risk of depression-

"Noooooope!" Frisk shouted before the doctor even finished the last syllable, leaping out of the chair and throwing open the door hard enough to make it bang on the wall, tearing down the empty tile hall on her roller shoes like Undyne was leading all the devils of Hell after her, her brother flying along with her in agreement. "Nope! Nope! Nope!" She could have explained why, but she didn't need to do that and didn't feel like it.

"My children, there is no need for this behavior!" Toriel called, as Frisk jumpkicked open the door to run out of the building, still noping out and shouting for her mother to follow. Dr. Geld slowly followed with an amused look on her face. "I am terribly sorry about this. I do not know what has gotten into them."
"This happens more often than you'd think," the doctor replied, although she had the very correct suspicion that this appointment would not actually happen.

Toriel sighed and walked to the car. Asriel had magically unlocked the doors, and the Dreemurr kids were sitting in the back seat together, seat belts buckled and impatiently waiting for their mother, Frisk making a frantic get in here gesture.

"I am very disappointed in you both. That was a very immature thing to do," Toriel lectured as she opened the driver's-side door. The Ford Motor Company had made this car specifically for her family—even her husband could drive it—and Toriel was exceptionally careful on the road, ignoring her children's occasional requests to go faster.

"Who cares, she won't remember it," Frisk spat out. "Okay, Mom, you're right, I'm upset, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have freaked out like that. Can we just go home and pretend this didn't happen? Because it won't have." There were days when Frisk was very, very glad to have her power, and this was one of them. Then again, it was the whole reason she had left in a hurry. "I can't do it, Mom, I want to but I really can't do it. It might hurt Az. It might mess with my DETERMINATION." Any risk to Frisk's ability to SAVE, no matter how small, was not worth it.

"She said depression, Mom," Asriel explained. "You had to have heard her. You know what would happen."

"I understand, and I apologize. I should have asked for an explanation before we arrived here. You have my sympathy for being unable to grow up properly."

"It's fine, Mom, I don't care, maybe I'll get it one day," Frisk replied, and it was clear that she did care. She'd have preferred an endurance match against a dozen tornado monsters over dealing with this. "But it'll be Dr. Az giving it to me. Not Dr. Anyone Else."

"I was going to bring this up at a later time," Toriel said, "but I should do it now. Asriel, do you truly wish to become a doctor?"

Asriel smiled. "Asmodeus says I have more talent than anyone, I want to help people, and I need to be able to take care of Frisk. Yeah, Mom, I do."

"Then I will arrange for your education. There is a medical professor with whom I have been in contact, a human who has worked with monsters before and who has accepted the idea of being your tutor. I will tell Gaster to make him a rememberer, and you can learn human biology from him while you are not attending school."

"Wow, Mom, already?" Frisk asked. She was going to say that Asriel was a bit young for it but 'young' wasn't the right word.

"Yes. In my time, children learned trades from their parents or teachers. There is no reason why the same cannot apply to the two of you, even while you are being educated in the modern way. Would you like to attend these sessions as well, Frisk?"

Frisk took a deep breath, feeling a lot more calm, resolving to sound mature. She'd looked this stuff up and talked it over with her brothers last month. "Mom, there's only one career I can ever have. I need to be an expert in me, in DETERMINATION. I need to know everything Gaster knows, and human science knows, and Asmodeus knows, and even things that nobody knows yet. That means I have to study nee-yuro-science, and to do that I need to know medical stuff. So yeah."

"It is settled, then," Toriel said with a smile. "You wish to travel with your brother this summer, do
"You know us too well, Mom," Asriel answered, giggling. Spring break had been two months ago, and although the time since then had been a generally enjoyable mix of school, study, and play, they looked forward to another journey.

"Then I will have your curriculum planned for you when you return." As she so often did, Toriel resisted the motherly urge to tell them to be safe. She couldn't ever explain how hard it was for her to have such powerful children whom she could never truly mother, just as she could never explain her joy when they appreciated her, which they so often did.

But when they arrived home, they saw Charles and Asmodeus waiting for them, their looks promising neither safety nor enjoyment.
Dour was the right word for Asmodeus. Countenance was the sort of thing he had on his face; Charles might have a pallor, Asriel might have an expression, but Asmodeus had a countenance, and so when her English teacher asked if the class knew anyone with a "dour countenance," Frisk failed to not react to it because those were the perfect words for him; pressed by her teacher, she'd reluctantly explained to the class that little Victoria's father did, indeed, have one. And Asmodeus' countenance was especially dour that day. He was wearing fitting black hooded robes; although his hood wasn't up, he looked like he was ready to start some dark conspiracy that involved thirteen black candles, the sacrifice of a goat to the Devil, and the blood of a maiden. Except here, the lighting was electric, the Devil would rather sacrifice the wizard to the goat if it came to that, and the maiden was most dangerous of all.

"Your Majesty," Asmodeus began immediately, "I would like to speak to your children privately." She gave him a very concerned glance in reply.

"Mom, do you trust me?" Charles asked.

"I... yes, my son."

"Then listen. You don't need to be involved for this one." Charles' voice was even, his breathing steady, and Frisk got the impression he wasn't as distracted as usual.

"I will busy myself outside, then," she replied. "Try not to break anything important while I'm gone." Toriel didn't keep precariously placed expensive vases in the house, but Asriel wondered if the fabric of reality was less safe. (Dangit, how do I fuse this back together?! Anybody got some tape?)

"All right," Charles said. "Tell it to them like you told it to me."

"And tell us why you didn't just call or send a text," Frisk added.

"Because I'm pretty sure this house isn't bugged," Asmodeus said quietly. "The phones might be." Frisk and Asriel raised eyebrows; their phones were mil-spec, and they'd heard something about a private frequency band although they didn't really understand what that meant. "All right, from the top, then. You remember that human magic is inherited?"

"I'll never forget it," Frisk replied. That conversation at that donut shop was burned thoroughly into her brain.

"Well, it's inherited through a gene, of course. I have it; my daughter has it. Genes, as you may know, can be altered," He didn't even have to finish the sentence before Frisk and Asriel stared at each other and at him, wild-eyed, Asriel's ears sprang out like television antennae, Frisk sucking in a huge breath. "and this particular gene is rather easy to modify. It's in the non-coding DNA, the packing." Asmodeus had taken a panicked crash course on genetics. "It doesn't express any proteins, which means that by the conventional laws of physics, it doesn't do anything. Our friends in the Shop, and you've probably never even heard of that one, have found a way to do this. They have asked me to train their wizards, and I've told them I'll think about it."

"So, wait," Frisk said. "Anybody can start casting magic?" Asriel's jaw dropped, visualizing a future in which every human would be a wizard. Not just two, not just a handful. All of them. Everywhere. Every human he'd ever met. He couldn't help but recall something Mr. Reed had
shown his class: *Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons.* The humans knew it was a gene, genes could be modified, therefore humans would make it happen because that was what humans did.

"Anybody with the gene," Asmodeus replied. "The only two people in this world who have powers that can't ever be duplicated are you and Charles. What I'm afraid of is that they're going to try to change that." Frisk sucked in another breath. "Remember, it only took seven human SOULs to bring up the barrier. It only took one human SOUL to try to take your DETERMINATION. We live in a world of seven billion people." Frisk exhaled sharply. "So. I don't know what they're going to do. I've never thought about my powers in that context, never imagined what I could do if there were ten of me, or a hundred, a thousand. The only thing I can think of, and this is a thin reed indeed, is to make sure that you get it. You and your brother."

"You think it's safe?" Frisk asked. "It won't do anything to me?"

"Frisk, if magic and DETERMINATION were incompatible I could not have gotten as close as I did that time," Asmodeus replied. "And the Crispier Casten virus has worked on fifty people so far. Perfectly. All of them. There's no side effects because there's no proteins. And I think that you and your brother will be able to cast spells that no one can cast. Spells that might prevent other spells, or stop some other threat to your power. Because I'd rather rely on your good will than that of whoever happens to wake up a sorcerer."

"And that's why he's been talking to me about breaking into the Pentagon," Charles replied. "You like adventures? There's one for you." Frisk looked at him a bit askance. "I'm not just going to be able to burrow in there, not without them knowing about it, and invisibility only goes so far. Hey, is there a way to stop sound? Like to the point that not even Azzy could hear it?"

"No, and if there were, you'd die from it," Asmodeus replied. "I think I can get the exact GPS coordinates, then we can have Sans-"

Frisk imperceptibly rolled her eyes. "Who's in charge of this?" she interrupted him with.

"Colonel Jesse Nathan, supposedly, but there's a bunch of spooks I'd rather not-"

"Do you have his information?" Unsure what she was getting at, Asmodeus showed it to her on his phone, and his eyes went wide as she casually dialed his number.

"What. The hell. Are you doing?!" he asked.

"Waiting on hold," she replied, tapping her foot, rolling the wheel around on the carpet. "Oh, hey, Colonel Nathan? Yeah, this is Frisk. Please don't call me that! No, it's fine. Yeah, Asmodeus's been telling me about your project. Oh, no, of course not. I just want to know if you can spare a couple of doses, if it's ready? Yeah, me and him. Are they the same? Oh, yeah, definitely the nasal spray then. That'd be fine. Can you do both times, actually? Oh, never mind then, just send them as soon as I LOAD. Sure, I'll be waiting. Hey, thanks for this. You guys are doing all the real work, Colonel. You too. Bye." Smiling, Frisk hung up and gave a wry look to the other humans, not even needing to chide them. Charles abruptly started laughing, doubling over in mirth, his sides squeezing hard enough to crush diamonds, and Frisk suspected that he knew she'd do that all along. Asriel just grinned. Asmodeus looked shocked. "Seriously? Really?! He wasn't going to say no! Asmodeus, you're the one who told me I'm super scary."

"I hadn't imagined that they would give over their advantage so quickly," Asmodeus said slowly. "Even with the implied threat of noncompliance."
"What? No, I'm never going to stop saving people!" Frisk replied, more shocked than Asmodeus had been. "The implied threat is I can get on the news any time I want. It'd take thirty seconds for me to ruin their everything."

"Fifteen," Asriel said. "No, fewer. 'The government is secretly making wizards. You should impeach the President.' What was that, three?"

"Well, I'd have to say more than that," Frisk said, shrugging. "But yeah, Asmodeus, not everything is magic power or deific power. People have power, too."

Asmodeus sighed and grimaced. "I have been spending too much time in places where they don't. Anyway, I hope you've been paying attention in magic class, because there's some homework that-"

"No, no, it's Saturday, I've done enough today," Frisk started, and over her brothers' riotous laughter, continued with "I promise I will not cast anything that has even a little bitty chance of ending the universe. Thanks for telling me I can get magic, though. I was going to get myself changed today, but I'd rather have this kind of change instead." That was Charles' cue to ask how her appointment had went, and he raucously laughed for the third time when she and Asriel explained her reaction.

"I guess this means you won't need me for magic stuff anymore," Asriel added.

"Not for magic stuff," Frisk said, "but I'll always need you, Az." It occurred to her that saying that in front of Charles and Asmodeus might have been embarrassing, but she really, really didn't care. She tried to visualize a world in which she wasn't with Asriel- a night spent without a fluffy goat to hug- and just the concept was SOUL-crushing and terrifying, making her feel like a trapped rat with claustrophobia.

"Speaking of which, there may be a way to disentangle you," Asmodeus said in a very low voice, suspecting that Toriel was still listening in, and all three Dreemurr kids listened intently. "If your parents cooperate, I believe that, with the right syllables, they can create a new SOUL inside you without changing who you are. The downside is that this would slowly deplete them towards old age."

"So there's no way to do it," Asriel very quietly said before Frisk could. "We're not going to kill Mom and Dad to do something we don't need to do."

"That's what I expected you'd say. I just wanted to bring up that the possibility's there. Now, I've got to go scout some more; as Charles well knows, I am still a very busy man."

"Hey, thanks again," Charles replied. "Every person you de-level is another voice out of my head."

"Yes, well, it won't be just me doing that anymore," the wizard replied, and the three Dreemurr kids looked at each other, knowing very well that their world had changed forever and unexpectedly with no input from them. But that was exactly what they had done to everyone else the moment the barrier broke. It was what cars had done, what the printing press had done. It was what technology companies had done when they let anyone have a phone to call anyone else in the world, when they put an Internet-connected computer into every household. Anyone could talk to anyone, anyone could read anything. But most people just spend their time talking to their friends about nothing, playing games, and reading fanfiction, and so it would surely one day be with magic.
Frisk and Asriel tried not to act bored and failed miserably.

It wasn't the formal wear that bothered them; Asriel looked like his father in his robe and Frisk's light, knee-length, thoroughly be-ribboned dress was perfect for a sunny day in early June. It wasn't the cameras; Frisk had talked to the TV crews beforehand, and the cameras would be pointed at the lectern rather than at the three Dreemurr kids, one of whom was paying attention to other things far from home. It wasn't just the fact that this was the last school event before summer vacation, and that every other kid there, even the ones who liked school (and vanishingly few of them didn't; it was the monster school after all), was also itching to get out of there. The worst part wasn't even the poorly written and clearly heavily edited fluff coming out of the speaker's mouth, a senior who was just so happy to be there with everyone and whose grades had gone way up from her old school and who was going to an Ivy League college and who appreciated the principal for everything she did and who oh my god could you just shut up and let us get out of here.

The worst part was that because them not being there would have made people question whether it was really going to happen or not, they had to sit through this vapid tripe twice.

"Star Blazing," Frisk whispered very, very faintly, and realized she shouldn't have done that because now her brother was visibly struggling not to laugh. Frisk, as usual, resisted the urge to play with her magic in public; the therapy was still formally a state secret until it got leaked, so she couldn't even practice it at school. Instead, she spent practically every unremembered day using it, floating around, juggling objects, having all kinds of wonderful fun with the little magnets Asmodeus had gotten them for Christmas, playing with Asriel in ways she couldn't even conceive of before. (Magical tennis is best tennis.) The only thing she couldn't do was play with Victoria with it, as five-year-olds are poor at keeping their mouths shut. Charles had been playing as well, flying through the air like a superhero, and he'd been using so much energy that even Toriel had commented about the tremendous amounts of food she'd been serving him, despite the kids' numerous trips to the candy store. The Dreemurr kids weren't the only one enjoying it; everyone from the CIA to MI5 to the Mossad was using it for all sorts of spycraft, and multiple research organizations were learning about its abilities and limitations from an increasingly resigned Asmodeus. (Gaster had adamantly refused to join the effort before school ended; he had failed his duty once before and would not do so again.) "There's so many people involved with this, we know somebody's gonna Snowden it sooner or later," The Donald had explained in a call, "but let's try to make it later." Frisk did not ask whether or not he, himself, had received it, but picturing Donald Trump in a wizard hat was enough to get her through a boring speech.

Charles took them to a very special beach that summer.

The California beach had once been notorious for its regulars, a group of rich thugs who were well-known for terrorizing anyone who dared surf on their beach. Once the barrier had broken, some freshly-minted Aarons had coalesced in the surf at night; the next day, they slithered up to the thugs, offering flexing contests and other displays of muscularity; one of them had responded by punching an Aaron in the face. The inevitable result had sent the other Aarons fleeing, and the newly reborn Chara had no idea what to do inside the man's mind, causing him to act in strange and violent ways towards his fellow humans and hunting more monsters before the police finally, after a long and terrifying struggle, managed to take him to jail. He'd been purged in Kansas and promptly moved to North Dakota, taking a construction job with MTT.

Very few of the other erstwhile surfer thugs ever went to that beach (or any other beach) again, and, due to its reputation ("Possessed beach bullies from hell" headlined a somewhat local paper), almost nobody else did either. This isolation had made it something of a monster sanctuary, with several Aarons playing in the surf and a yellow, onion-shaped head visible above the waves.
"When You Say Goodbye It's Like Magical Bullets Are Slowly Flying Out of Your Mouth and Hitting Me" was still sitting comfortably at #5 on Billboard's top 100 (when it came out it had crushed the charts), and the Shyren and her talent agent were rumored to be even richer than the Dreemurrs, although that didn't stop them from frolicking in the waves with everyone else. Sans and Papyrus, who looked like they'd stepped off the set of a Pirates of the Caribbean movie, were trying to teach each other to surf, leading to several entirely expected visits to Davy Jones' well-traveled locker. Frisk and Charles weren't the first humans to be there in half a year, but it felt like it. They'd considered inviting their other human friends, but Jack and Nicole still weren't up for the kinds of things that really got the Dreemurr kids excited, and, even if they were allowed to know about it, watching Frisk sip her lemonade without touching the cup would have only made them more jealous.

The only ones who weren't there were the Dreemurr parents, who were both invited to oversee the restarting of the European Economic ("No, Seriously, We Swear It'll Just Be a Trade and Visa Agreement This Time") Pact after Fruckoff, Latervia, Departugal, Gretout, and Italeave had finished what Brexit had started. "These functionaries need someone to whom to bow down," their father had explained, "and, all things considered, it might as well be me." The ECHMR, the UN, and, in their father's words, "a swarm of those NGO nuisances" were also hovering around like flies, turning the whole business into a clusterfluffle that Frisk could spend her life doing entirely without, even though she herself had been invited. (Her mother had helped her politely decline with gracious and formal words. She had wanted to impolitely decline with the opposite.) Charles had suggested simply floating in with his full magical and demonic power and going "HI GUYS, WHAT'S UP!!" right in the middle of negotiations, just to see what would happen, but his siblings had talked him out of it.

Instead, Frisk and Asriel, exhausted from magic-assisted surfing, reclined next to each other on a folding chair sized for their father with their legs stretched out. Alphys was sunning herself a few yards away with her camera out, and Undyne and Charles competed to do tricks on the bodacious waves. "You're still not my friend, you little punk!" Undyne yelled after Charles did a ridiculous upside-down spin that took the laws of physics out behind the woodshed, and Frisk and Asriel shared a chuckle. Normally, Frisk would have wanted a bit of sunscreen for hanging out on the beach all day, but Gaster knew exactly how to speak math in universe, and an easy-to-maintain spell made her invisible to ultraviolet light, x-rays, and worse. (She and her brother were still mulling over Charles' suggestion that they hang out inside the Chernobyl sarcophagus next week.) Undyne called something unpronounceable and mostly outside Frisk's hearing range out to the water and, a few seconds later, did an impossible flip stunt alongside the two very ordinary dolphins she'd asked to help.

"How do you talk to dolphins?!!" Charles yelled.

"Politely!" Undyne replied, smugly riding the next wave high.

Watching them surf, Frisk absently stroked Asriel's ears, which like the rest of him were growing even longer, and she felt something hard on his forehead just under the fur. Her brother recoiled, pushing away from her, looking like she'd discovered his browser history. It took her half a second to figure it out. "Oh. My. God." Her small mouth opened in a tremendous, mirthful smile, and she couldn't keep the glee out of her voice when she shouted, "Charles! You've gotta come and see this!" Asriel looked mortified, his mouth wide open in shock.

Charles angled his board straight into the beach, leaping off and grabbing it in a move that would have sent an ordinary human face-first into the sand, Undyne right behind him, Alphys still pointing her camera. "What's up, Frisk?" Asriel was curled up in the folding chair, looking embarrassed and making that scrunched-snotle face Frisk associated with blushing. He looked
like he wanted to run far, far away from his siblings, his friends, and everyone else, but that was
the one thing he could never do. "Did Az do something cute?"

"No," Frisk replied with a grin, "he is something cute." Her brother still looked like he wanted to
bury himself in the sand and fuse it to black glass above him. "Come on, Az, they're all going to
find out sometime."

Asriel slowly uncurled himself and sighed. "I was hoping they'd go past the fur first." Resigned, he
bowed his head and gestured, letting Charles feel the two small, hard bumps on his head.

Charles' face lit up in childish joy as he gently tapped on them, running his fingers through the fur.
"Azzy! Azzy, you've finally got horns!" Undyne grinned with her pointed teeth. Charles turned to
Frisk, beaming. "When I first fell down I didn't know how fast Az would grow up. I thought he'd
turn into his dad real quick. Even when I was Chara... I wanted to see that."

Asriel chuckled in spite of himself. "Hey, it only took a few centuries. At this rate, I'll be as big as
Dad when we've got five-digit years!"

Frisk giggled at the joke, but Charles frowned a bit. "That, ah, that reminds me... are you two
going to be okay like that? I mean, Az, if you grow up that big, then that means Frisk is basically
keeping you transformed."

Asriel shook his head. "It's not like that," Frisk replied, and Charles breathed a sigh of relief. "This
is all him, SOUL or not."

Undyne, still grinning, looked down at the reclining goat. "So, it's true? You are growing up, my
prince? You are no longer quite a child? Then welcome... to the beach!" Theatrically, Undyne
lifted her foot back and, to everyone's surprise, kicked sand into Asriel's face, her body poised in
challenge. "One day, you will--" But of course Asriel still had every ounce of Frisk's lemonade-
fueled power at his fingertips and countered with a devastating torrent of sand, knocking her back
twenty feet and burying her under a layer a few inches thick. Coughing and spluttering, she sat up,
the smile never leaving her face, and she began to laugh- but she stopped laughing when she saw
what Charles had in store for her.

Charles had a lot of energy at his command and the cheat code to use it.

If he used a sandstorm it might have actually flayed her apart, so instead he settled for a wave of
sand, the turf turning into surf. Alphys stared in shock. Papyrus' jaw fell off his face and he leaned
down to pick it up. Sans' expression didn't change. Undyne blocked her face but the wave buried
her, smothered her. A little white flag poked up from the mound and waved back and forth. The
dolphins made ke-ke-ke-ke noises and swam away.

Everyone at the beach, other monsters, Frisk, and Asriel included, stared at him.

"What?" Charles asked. "Haven't you heard of a sandfish?"

And then Frisk began to giggle, and Asriel started giggling, and Sans started chuckling, and
Papyrus and Alphys and Undyne herself, digging out of the loose sand, started to laugh.

They didn't go to Chernobyl. It was a bleak place without anything to do.

The Chilean beach they went to was the opposite of the one in California in practically every way.
Asriel noted how silly it was that they were going to a beach in South America in the middle of the Northern Hemisphere's summer, wearing long sleeves and long pants to protect against the wind and the sea spray, but of course they weren't going for the surfing this time; they'd decided to go see this half a year ago and so they did. The eclipse's schedule wasn't going to change for anyone, after all. The Earth orbited the Sun, and the Moon orbited the Earth, and the dance continued as it had long before the first monster sprung out of the mind of the first hominid. The idea was humbling, majestic, and in the face of such a thing, the Dreemurr kids, even their parents, even Gaster as spooky-looking as he was, found it easy to commingle with the thousand other skywatchers who'd shown up to see it happen, and the Dreemurrs waved hello to the viewers of three different livestreams. Human and monster, king and techno-peasant, sunlight shone down on them all, except when it didn't.

Frisk, her eyes protected by a pair of deep shades, watched the Moon parade across the Sun, occasionally lifting them to watch the gigantic shadow head west to east across the water and straight towards the cheering crowd. She stared at the corona along with everyone else, looking at the prominences and around at the deep blackness in the middle of the clear day. As slowly as it had began, it ended, the shadow going off into the scrublands and the midday twilight turning to sun once more.

*And all I have to do is wish for it, Frisk knew, and it'll happen all over again.*

There were **definitely** times when her own power scared her.
The Dreemurr kids were taking a vacation from their vacation in mid-August, relaxing on a Tuesday morning after having helped their mother clean the house, playing a cooperative indie game starring the Nightlord children: Frank, Carly, and Uriel, whose looks and abilities were just far enough from the actual Dreemurr kids not to get anyone sued, although Papyrus could have probably put together a case if he'd wanted to. (The game was too much fun for that. If it'd sucked, they would have probably gone for it.) The Count had been exceptionally high that day; it was at least fifty thousand (with a note that this was the low figure); a massive Indian Ocean tsunami had flattened coastal villages yesterday, causing a phenomenal death toll and causing survivors to scream bloody murder asking why rememberers didn't warn them and why no major news organizations were reporting on their plight- an experience none of them remembered having. The smarter ones knew they'd be warned in the final timeline, and a few of them walked right into the wave joyfully chanting adapted versions of Hindu prayers. Such was life eight months after the broken barrier.

Asriel's horns had started poking out of his head (making Frisk squeal in glee once she saw the little nubs) and Frisk had eventually noticed that his voice wasn't exactly the same as when they first met. Even his occasional bleating was lower in pitch. ("It took you that long to notice?!" "I don't have your hearing, Az!") His voice would never 'crack'; he had no vocal cords to crack. Rather, it'd smoothly gone from cute and chirpy kid to the beginnings of a confident adolescent, who would normally be growing towards independence. Sorry, Azzy. I still wish I could give you that. Independence Day had been bittersweet, but that was mostly because Asriel hated fireworks for the same reason he didn't like thunderstorms.

Frisk and Charles had practiced their magic enough to play with their controllers sitting on the palms of their hands; Asriel, whose existence was magic, understood what they were practicing but still thought it was silly. His siblings were made of water and muscle; why rely on magic when you've got that to work with? Even Kid and Kim used their mechanical hands to play games. Even Mom was using a vacuum cleaner, an invention she found amazing even if it was loud. Even Dad was using conventional gardening tools to turn a growing section of backyard into a home for all kinds of rare flowers.

"Asmodeus and Dad are talking outside," Asriel told his siblings over the noise, and nodded on hearing Frisk's faint sigh. That guy seldom brought good news.

Asgore walked in moments later, his stern look matching Asmodeus' dour countenance. "Children, put on appropriate clothing," he commanded. "We shall be meeting the President forthwith."

Frisk's groan was not faint as the kids reluctantly saved their game and turned off the console. They'd expected to finish the game on a single unremembered day; if they didn't, their save would be overridden by Frisk's LOAD.

"It finally got leaked," Charles knew. Nobody needed an explanation, and Frisk just shook her head. She didn't feel like dealing with this, not today, not the day after she magically climbed up the other side of Mt. Ebbot with her siblings, seeing the wonderful view from the top and relaxing on a blanket, enjoying the wind in her hair and watching Asriel's ears flop around like agitated snakes. Wasn't this an adult problem? But her parents had been treating the Dreemurr children somewhat like adults for quite some time. Frisk hustled up the stairs in her light pajamas and picked out the ribboned dress she'd worn to graduation; while it was frilly and girly, it was the only appropriate thing she had for a formal meeting on a burning August day. (Magical air conditioning was possible, and several monsters could basically tell thermodynamics where to cram it, but even
Charles had problems keeping it going. She helped Asriel get his lightweight robe over his ears and horns and Charles picked out an outfit that looked altogether like well-crafted lightweight ceremonial armor, something both his parents had helped him build. They all wore roller shoes, as magical gliding was exhausting.

Toriel carefully drove them to the hangar, and Agent Jenkins was in the plane waiting for them. "Hey, Jenkins! I thought you weren't doing this for us anymore," Asriel noted as he got in.

"I wasn't," he replied. "But they said I was the right person for the job, because you trust me."

"This is going to be bad, isn't it," Frisk said, taking a seat.

Jenkins thought for a moment before replying. "Yes, inevitably, it will. For somebody. It can't possibly be you, and certainly not me." Jenkins held up a single finger, from which a small flame emerged. "I don't even have to keep this from my wife anymore."

"How is she?" Toriel asked.

"Very well. She's going to have a girl in two months." All the Dreemurrs started clapping and Asmodeus joined in. "Yes, thank you. We're considering what to name her, and, ah, Your Majesty, she's talking about naming her after you."

Toriel was beginning to say something kind and approving, but Frisk blurted out "Don't do that!" over her. "Do you want your daughter to be picked on her whole life?"

"She's right," Charles added. "Bad idea to name a kid after any of us. Especially me." 'Charles' had swiftly fallen off the list of common baby names since he revealed his identity to the world.

Jenkins laughed in reply. "I was thinking the same thing. I'll tell her you said that."

Toriel gave her human children a disapproving look. "Mom. Seriously. She'd go to our school, right?" Frisk explained. "That means she'd be going to a school where she has the principal's name." Toriel nodded in understanding.

"At any rate," Asmodeus asked, "Let's use this time to discuss what we're going to do."

"Do with what?" Asriel asked, confused.

"With magic," the wizard replied.

"What we usually do with magic?" Asriel replied, even more confused.

"I don't think they'll want me to do magic in there," Charles said, chuckling. "What kind of spell are you going to cast?"

"What? No, I'm not going to cast spells, I'm not talking about-" Asmodeus started, frustrated.

"Then what, just regular magic?" Frisk asked.

"No! No, I'm not talking about- we're not going to use magic!"

"If your President believes he can stop anyone capable from using magic, he has a very inflated sense of his own authority," Asgore rumbled.

"No, that's not what I meant, this is becoming stupid. Okay? Stop." Asmodeus said to the group as
if he were talking to his daughter, waving his hands to illustrate his point. "I meant, what are we
going to recommend, suggest, or attempt to enforce in regards to the government's ability to create
wizards? Now that everyone knows governments can do that?"

"Governments, plural?" Asgore and his goat son asked at the same time, then looked at each other
and laughed.

"It was a Chinese leak," Charles explained. "They actually caught them practicing cheating for the
Olympics or something. Who knows how they got it."

"Could've been spycraft, but your kind aren't the only ones who shed," Asmodeus said, looking at
each of the goats. "My little cheat code falls off me with every piece of dandruff. Yours, too," he
said, looking at the other humans. "At any rate, after we're done here, we're going to have to go to
the UN and-" Asgore's deep, low groan mixed well with those of his children. "I know. But you're
the only ones with the deific authority to make it stick, and" More groaning. "I know you don't like
me saying that either. But you've had it long enough and you understand enough theory to grasp
the dangers. If this-"

"I know exactly what to say," Charles interrupted. Asriel heard something in his voice and Frisk
noticed Asriel's slight reaction. "I know exactly what you're talking about, and I know humanity
very, very well. If they were as nice as monsters we could do something different, but we have to
do this." He turned to his family. "Just trust me. This won't be that hard, really." Frisk and Asriel,
who could only guess what they were talking about, just shrugged and decided to let their brother
take the lead. Toriel and Asgore looked at each other and nodded. Asmodeus didn't reply.

Asriel spent the rest of the flight looking out the windows; it wasn't curiosity, not after having done
it so many times before, but a deep sense of inner peace, like he was a dandelion seed on the wind.
Hearing Frisk's even breathing and the powerful motors keeping them aloft didn't change that
feeling. The windows in the limo taking them to a tunnel leading to the White House were tinted,
but of course that didn't stop him from overhearing people outside. "You saw them?" "Yeah, a few
months ago, the Dreemurr children were right where you're standing..." Asriel covered his hands
with his face, his ears flopping back and forth, and Frisk, giggling, could only guess why.

"No robots this time," Asriel said before the group entered the Roosevelt Room. Charles smiled,
and Frisk shook her head at him. ('No! Bad Devil! No viciously slaughtering elected officials!) He
still hadn't actually hurt anyone in her presence, not even when it didn't count, although she was
very well aware that he made greater-good choices in places where pacifism wasn't an option.
Please, let it be an option in here, whatever we're doing.

Nearly all the people sitting around the round table were antsy and fidgety, but it wasn't because of
Charles. Even after having powers for more than a month, the officials facing the Dreemurrs, even
the President (Frisk got a mental glimpse of him in a wizard hat again and kept herself from
laughing), were uncomfortable in their own skin, as if their own hands were going to explode
unexpectedly. Perhaps, in some fortunately cancelled timeline, they had. Frisk and Charles,
familiar with their own powers and immersed in a magical home for so long, had taken to it like
ducks to water, particularly with a magical brother who enjoyed teaching them. The three of them
found it convenient and poignant to float into three chairs between two very large ones.

"So you brought out the big guns." The Donald said to Asmodeus, glancing at the Dreemurr kids
instead of their parents. "You kids ready for a nice, big lesson on civics and American society?"

"I think I'm better equipped to teach it," Charles replied coldly, floating into a chair between his
sister and father. His posture, clothes, and small grin all spoke of threat, as if he was looking for a
reason to get into a fight, and nobody on Donald's section of the table liked that look at all. The kid
could immolate everyone in the room with a casual wave of his hand, and all of them would remember it.

The Donald, unflappable, smiled faintly and began introductions, none of which Frisk would remember by the end of the day. Congressional leaders and Cabinet bureaucrats, most of them, although of course she recognized Alice on sight and they exchanged friendly waves. Asgore seemed to know most of the people there, although he clearly wondered what they were doing there. Frisk and Asriel looked at each other, wondering what they were doing there and when they'd be able to get back to their game, when President Trump opened up in his characteristic voice. "Well, now that we've all gotten to know each other, we need to talk about what we're going to do with this genie we've created."

"You could have not created it at all," Asmodeus said.

"Yeah, well, we did. And if we didn't, the Chinese would have anyway. They're why we're in this mess to begin with, but I think they've got the right idea." Charles blinked, and his threatening posture relaxed a bit, but Asmodeus looked outraged. "It's a resource. A human resource. And we need to be smart about the people we start selling it-"

"Are you out of your mind?" Asmodeus said, thumping his fist on the table. "Every time I try to tell one of you, no one listens. Magic is dangerous. I won't even tell you the spells I won't cast. But if you let this loose it'd be like giving everyone in this country a loaded gun!"

"This is America," one of the Congressmen said, laughing. "You might have forgotten, but they already have them."

Asmodeus whipped his head around, looking for allies. The Democratic minority leader looked sympathetic, but he needed someone who could actually accomplish something. He was being disingenuous with this one, but he had to say it anyway: "Frisk! You know what'll happen if everyone can remember? Do any of you understand what you're losing here?"

"We already did cost-benefit on that," Alice said. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but we've been at the point where any smart people who want to know what kind of day it is can usually figure it out by counting Twitter hashtags. A lot of the time, this'll just let them remember what got them killed."

Asmodeus looked consternated and constipated, like he wanted to poop out his stress and terror but couldn't. "Your Majesty. Both of you. Please. Strictly speaking, even I shouldn't have this. This is something that properly belongs to monsters."

"That is foolish," Asgore sharply rumbled at him. "That is the equivalent of believing that technology belongs to humans. Which it does not."

"They're not trained, and we're so much stronger than you are," the wizard growled in reply. "Even the ones I taught the basics to don't really understand what they're dealing with. I worry about my own daughter sometimes and she can't even use syllables yet."

"Then our duty is to train them," Toriel said. "Mr. President, I would like an adequate supply of this development to be delivered to my school." Frisk and Asriel smiled. With that, Jack, Nicole, and all the other humans they knew would get to enjoy superpowers while the Dreemurr kids wouldn't be quite so scary anymore. Frisk wished she'd thought of that herself. "W.D. Gaster and I will take responsibility for instructing students in its use."

"Of course," Donald replied, smiling, liking where this was going. A few hundred doses of magic
elixir, as the CIA had taken to calling it, were easily worth the Queen's approval of his plan. "We
do have to start small, of course, like any great business. A couple hundred thousand for the early
adopters, some obvious exceptions for veterans and some folks who really deserve it, but by this
time next year we can lower the price down to fifty-"

"No," Charles stated, very, very casually, and all heads turned to look at him. The room was very
well air conditioned and Frisk's legs were already chilly, but as he spoke, the temperature seemed
to drop twenty degrees. "While you might have discovered how to grant it, this ability is not yours
to sell," Asmodeus looked relieved, even happy. "and you've already been rewarded enough by
having it all to yourselves for so long." Asmodeus stopped looking happy. Charles' siblings
couldn't even guess where he was getting his words and ideas from, but this didn't sound like
typical Charles. The tone sounded like Chara on steroids. "You have more than enough resources
to give it to every human on this side of the wall within the rest of the year." Asmodeus looked
unhappy. Nobody needed to ask 'what wall', as the Dreemurr kids had flown over it on a trip to the
Baja. "This planet has enough resources to give it to every human, rich or poor, on its surface by
the time you're up for re-election." He smiled at The Donald. "I dare say you'll win, pursuing that
policy." Asmodeus looked singularly upset, with his fists unconsciously clenched and his teeth
grinding under pursed lips. He looked like he wanted to cast something, but Charles would have
rushed through the oaken table and smeared his face across the wall by the time the fourth
syllable left his phone.

"Even convicted felons?" one of the Congressmen asked.

"If you don't trust someone to use magic, you shouldn't trust him to live," Charles replied. "There
are a lot of people, and entire societies, you shouldn't trust to do that. But, as my family is giving
me the stink eye for that one," Combined, the four other Dreemurrs were giving him several
Gaster-pukes' worth of stink-eye. "I accept that there are exceptions. But they should be few
exceptions. You should still give it to everyone you can, because the poor are the ones who need it
most. And you should train them, so give it to the people who can do the training first. One day,
we'll live in a world where kids will grow up not knowing what a world without magic was like.
And nobody in my family wants a human underclass."

Donald laughed. "Hell, kid, ya sound like Bernie! But that's not how politics works in this country.
It's all about funding. Project like this'll cost, who knows? And if it doesn't pay for itself I'd have a
tough time getting it past Congress, and, ah, the Speaker here isn't really fond of giveaways."

"That's nice," Frisk said. Charles looked like he was ready to shove the Speaker's intestines down
his throat, but Frisk made a point of solving things without violence. "Hey, Azzy, what's the
number for MTT? When I LOAD, I need to let everyone know who's not letting them have magic
powers because it's too expensive. We should make sure everyone in his district knows too." The
Speaker looked like he was ready to puke up his own intestines and choke on them. He blubbered
out something about how it wouldn't really be a problem and how they'd definitely have bipartisan
consensus for the program.

Donald laughed again. "It's like ya've read my book! I brought a whole printout of stuff I was going
to say about freedom, and responsibility, and the right to bear arms- and I betcha the NRA'll love
me for this- but it looks like I didn't need any of it. Eh, what's another wasted lecture?"

"Don't fool yourself," Charles replied in the same icy tone. "I don't care about your political
ideologies any more than I care about your fake hair. One day, this'll all pass into the history
books. Don't you remember what I said on Christmas?" None of them would ever forget it. Some
of them didn't even want to be in the same room as him because of it, and others would have
preferred being on another continent. The Congressmen had some constituents demanding that he
be brought to trial and executed, as impossible as that was. "My allegiance is to humanity and our
monsters. And we live in a universe billions of light years across." Everyone stared at him, having
no idea what he meant. Charles slowly turned to Asmodeus. "What makes you so sure that the
artifact your ancestors found was the only one in the universe?" Asmodeus couldn't reply.

"Yeah," The Donald said, "but what's this got to do with us?"

"We have two things that can't be replicated anywhere in the universe. One of them is me. The
other is my sister. So I think all of you should stop worrying about costs and desires and start
thinking about you're going to advance your civilization before somebody else out there finds out
who's making time go backwards. Especially if this jackass's ancestors made all their monsters
disappear, too," he said, gesturing to the very perturbed wizard and smiling. "Are we done?
Because we were in the middle of this awesome game and I want to see how it ends today."

"You children go on ahead," Asgore said. "Our course is set. You would not like discussing the
wheres and wherefores of its navigation."

"I'll go with them," Asmodeus said in defeat.

"Before ya leave," The Donald spoke up, and the kids turned. "Nobody likes dealing with politics, I
don't, neither does your dad. I'd rather have Melania sitting in my lap than my butt sitting in this
chair. 'Specially not with devils, monsters, wizards- well, that's all of us now- and whatever the
heck you are running around," he said, gesturing at Frisk with a pen held firmly in mid-air by
nothing. "But sometimes, ya have to. And you better feel damn lucky it's my butt and not Hillary's
butt in this chair, because she would have never allowed this to be released, not while she still sat
here. And your first meeting with her would probably have taken a few LOADs. Freedom, kids.
Enjoy it. Some people don't." He waved them out the door with his empty hands and levitating pen.

"Hey, Charlie, what you said about alien monsters, is that because an alien killed one and got EXP
for it?" Asriel asked on their way out.

"I wouldn't know yet," Charles replied. "I'm speed-of-light lagged. If there's a civilization a million
light-years away that's killing monsters I won't know for a million years. I don't think Frisk is,
though, that would be really broken." A Gyftrot had trotted in front of a physics teacher's car on a
final day, and the laws of physics, both conventional and altered, had earned him EXP. Before a
DHS wizard had purged him, Charles had found the man's mind so orderly and well-maintained
that he couldn't help pirating everything he could learn from it.

As Frisk and Charles relaxed and Asriel looked out the windows, Asmodeus remained cagey on
the way back, keeping his own counsel until the kids got home, walking into the Dreemurr
mansion behind them as they slipped off their roller shoes. "Frisk, there's one option I didn't
mention back there. But I think now that everyone will be a rememberer, it might be time to bring
it up." He took a short breath, and the kids just looked at him, rather bored of his shenanigans.
"Multiple SAVEs and passworded SAVEs."

You can't have more SAVEs than you have SOULs. Just trust me on that, okay?"

"You already knew?" Asmodeus asked.

"Can we not get into what Az knew and how he knew it?" Charles asked. "I don't think Frisk wants
to go back to that either." Although she'd never forget it, all of it was just a stuffed-away memory
to her. It had been a very long time since she thought about why she couldn't be separated from her
brother, and Charles was right; it wasn't pleasant for those memories to come flooding back.
"Well, he's right. And that's the thing. To make another SAVE, you need another human SOUL to help. Which means a magic user you trust not to try to grab your power." Asmodeus didn't even bother telling her how much of an Obviously Bad Idea it was to trust Charles with it. She surely would, and he couldn't think of any good logical reasons not to. Betraying his siblings was simply not part of his plan for eventual universe-sized revenge against God. "And it's a spell, and since you don't really seem interested in learning those-

"Would you stop that already?" Frisk asked, annoyed. "Just because I don't get everything about the hooba-jooba of magic doesn't mean I can't record something."

"Script kiddie," Asmodeus muttered. "How would you even know if I were lying to you?"

Frisk casually pointed to Asriel, who waggled a growing ear at him. "Can you just make us a guide?" she suggested. "Like, here's what each syllable means in context, here's how we pronounce it, here's what we should do? You know? Like a teacher does? Like Gaster does?" Now that she could do a lot more with what she was learning in magic class, Frisk was more than ready for school to start again. "Instead of throwing information in our faces? That's not how you trained the CIA guys, is it?" It obviously was, and she resisted the un-princesslike urge to call him a spergelord or a spaz.

"Fine," Asmodeus spat out. "One day in the future, when you grow up, if you grow up, you might start to understand what it is I've been trying to tell you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to my other immature little girl." He magically slammed the heavy door behind him.

"I really wanted to thank him for giving that to us, but... what a spergelord spaz," Frisk said, and Asriel chuckled. She took off her roller shoes and plopped down on the couch, still in her frilly dress, and turned their game back on. "Hey... you know what that means?"

"We can go volcano gliding?" Asriel suggested. Using an active, lava-spewing volcano for updraft thermals was something that Frisk, scolded by her mother for even discussing, really wanted to try sometime, and Charles would gladly take the dare of not using magical flight in mid-air.

"Yeah, that, and I was thinking stuff like what Charles said before," Frisk said. "Like with the mineshaft thing. Only more awesome. Not Deadly Danger Dungeon." They'd been bored on the Internet and found an old Nerd video with that title, and it'd spurred their imaginations. They'd even broken out the Play-Doh, Lego, and ultra-powerful magnets to make something with lots and lots of spikes, because that was what the kids were still into. They'd even called up Papyrus, who, after a hard day of lawyerating, was more than eager to help them. The end result had been a hilarious and implausible mess with a permanent portal to the Sun, which was about the only technically impossible part of it. The kids shared a laugh when Asriel said that Alphys was at the door.

Sure enough, the little lizard, her hands meekly pressed together, was at the door, looking slightly up at Frisk, more up at Charles, and plenty of up at Asriel. "Hello. You're all looking very nice today! Um. Your parents aren't answering their phones..."

"They're talking to the President," Charles said. "This is probably more important. What's up?"

Alphys tried not to be afraid of Charles, but given what he was, that was a losing proposition. She was very glad she wouldn't ever have to fight him, which would have involved every trick in the book, a swarm of robots, forward-and-reverse waves of magical bombs, and lasers. Lots and lots of lasers. "Well, ah, the project we've been working on, the, ah, the prototype is done. Oh! Um, that was kind of supposed to be a surprise..."
"If it's done, you can probably spring the surprise," Asriel said. He looked down at his wrists and the faint green glow of his bracelets. "It's not about us, is it?"

"Oh, no, it's not you. It's portals, you see. Stable portals."

"Hopefully not to the Sun," Frisk said, causing her brothers to laugh.

"No! That would be very bad. And impossible. They need to be at the same gravitational, ah, potential energy, so the same elevation, and the same latitude, well, I guess you could have one North and one South..."

Asriel, who never tired of learning about his planet, picked up on it at once. "You mean we can walk to Japan?!"

"I didn't... I didn't even think of that! Oh my, you're absolutely right! I can go buy anime and doujin at the source, and watch it in the Lab here!"

"Reminds me, we haven't been down there in a long time," Frisk said. "What's the Underground like now?"

"Oh, yes, well, there were some people studying those portals, and we decided not to really, um, analyze them because we're scared of what could happen, and the, ah, temperatures are starting to average out some now that it's not its own physics anymore, but it's fine, we'll be able to go to California... and Japan! I've gotta go tell Undyne!" Alphys rushed out the door, tapping on her phone.

"I know this is just what humans do, and I guess monsters too, but... everything's changing," Asriel said. "Humans with magic, portals across the world, you said there might be alien monsters..."

"Change is part of life," Charles said. "It's only just started. By the time we grow up, it'll all be even more different. It's what doesn't change that matters."

"Yeah, Az," Frisk said, smiling. "We're not always going to be the same people we are now, I mean, you're changing right now," she said, giving his little horns a gentle brush with her fingers. "But I'll always be here for you. And that won't change. Ever." She grinned with her little mouth at him. "C'mon. We've got a game to finish."

Volcano gliding in Hawaii was fun, but magically making sculptures out of cooling lava was even more fun. They even got Sans' and Papyrus' teeth right.

"When I first agreed to tutor you, I hadn't imagined it'd be under these circumstances," Dr. Home explained. He made a move as if he wanted to push his glasses up onto his bald forehead, which was strange because he wasn't wearing any. "I hadn't received this genetic modification, for one thing. While we did employ monsters, there was no such thing as a 'Department of Chirurgery'." The word was preferable to 'healing magic', as the news misnamed it, or 'flesh-shaping', as the internet liked to say. "But make no mistake, Asriel; your ability to 'see small', as Mr. Riddle tells it, is wholly nonpareil. Since these days don't exactly count, in the greater order of things, perhaps we can judge your skill with an investigation? What, right now, is wrong with me?"

Asriel rose to the challenge as the doctor laid down on the bare wooden table. Dealing with a doctor's demand was much easier than dealing with all the kids going "We're gonna get magic powers?!" in school when they weren't commenting on his growing horns; Jack was especially
insufferable and flew around too much for his own good. Asriel put his hand on the doctor's head and found nothing particularly unusual, then reached down onto the man's torso and winced.

"Agh, what's that in your heart?" Asriel asked, his fur standing on end.

"One part's a stent and the other part's double bypass surgery. What else?" Frisk half-expected Asriel to discover something nasty in the doctor's body, like pancreatic cancer, and then the doctor would go 'No, I don't have that' and Asriel would go 'Yes you do' and the doctor would freak out, but nothing like that happened. Rather, Asriel found a fused spine, a few bone pins, a small, benign cyst that the doctor really didn't know about, and a small fragment of metal near his femoral artery.

"What's that one?" Asriel asked.

"Bullet fragment from a conflict nobody cares about anymore. Inoperable. Too much risk for too little gain, given where it's placed. At least there was."

"Want me to get it out? I bet I can." The doctor stared at him. "I promise I won't cut the blood tube, I mean the artery. My mom can do this."

"As much as I'd like to experience that, I fear it'd do damage to other tissues on the way out. And you're certainly not ready to do anything related to anaesthesia."

"I think I can stop your nerves. Without hurting you."

"We've had people attempting that for weeks on animals and it never works properly. Try it," Dr. Home demanded. "This won't happen anyway, so go on and try it and we'll see what you actually do." Asriel put a soft, fluffy hand on the man's leg and his body twitched as large sections of muscle instantly became numb and non-responsive, and then a sharp sensation of pins and needles came back as Asriel lifted his hand. "Color me impressed. You are very talented, but we're going to need to work on your skill, your technique, and most importantly, your knowledge."

A month later, under heavy supervision and tightly controlled conditions, with several doctors, a squat, long-armed monkey monster with three legs and a nurse's cap, and his mother there to help (and a thousand med students watching), Asriel pulled the bullet fragment from his tutor's leg, Toriel helping him seal together the skin so that it wouldn't scar. (Asriel had suggested that Charles could cut the bullet fragment to tiny pieces first, but Charles would not use his reality-slashing ability in the body of someone he didn't want to kill. The slashes were too fine, and he didn't have the kind of control Asriel did. He could have given the guy cancer.)

Excited and proud, Asriel talked about how he really wanted to help people with stuff that didn't belong in their bodies all the way home, only stopping when Toriel took the exit ramp from I-5 near Sacramento to I-395 in Virginia. He didn't know what he liked more about portals: the rushing winds carrying the brown leaves or the joyful squealing of young children. Toriel endured her son's exuberance with a patient smile, and Frisk was the happiest and proudest she could ever recall being. Azzy's not just the brother I saved anymore. He's not just my magical goat plushie. He's going to become a great person. He really is growing up. None of that, of course, would ever stop her from petting his soft ears and stroking his smooth little horns. Savior's prerogative.

Actually becoming a licensed chirurgeon would require a lot more education and a lot more time, but that was something the Dreemurrs had plenty of.
The Dreemurr kids had too many friends.

It wasn't that it was a bad problem to have. Frisk would have been amazed at the same time last year that it would be one of her biggest problems in life; the other two could never have imagined that it could be a problem for them at all. But it was, definitely, a problem when all they wanted was a small picnic. Sans wanted to come along, and there was no way the Dreemurrs would say no; Papyrus also found time to come, although Frisk still felt that Papyrus was best taken in small doses (and several judges agreed with her assessment). Victoria was manageable, especially since her father had time for her again, and she'd quickly grown accustomed to everyone in her class being able to do what she did. (Toriel had issued an ultimatum to the parents of the young children in her care: Either make their homes magic-ready or have their kids removed from her school. Having two different classes wasn't acceptable.) The Dreemurrs were outgrowing Kid and Kim, but if Victoria was coming along then there was no sense in not letting them come too. Undyne had somehow invited herself. Jack had finally managed to tamp down his exuberant use of magic, mostly because he'd almost killed himself three times overusing it. Inviting Nicole was extremely tricky because she tended to want to invite her other friends, who would invite their friends, and so on until half the school showed up to a small clearing off the bike path. And then there were all the acquaintances and generally nice people who wanted the Dreemurrs to call them their friends because they were still the royal family on top of everything else, and that was more or less the whole school. Frisk was very, very thankful that all the humans in her school had powers; it let them focus on themselves rather than on Frisk. She still wouldn't tell them the SAVE password to make the memory spell work, though. (Sans, Gaster, and Charles still didn't need it. They were too jammed into the fabric of existence. Of course Asriel didn't.)

There was enough food for all eleven of them, carried in backpacks and plastic lunch pails, most of it made by Toriel or human parents, some of it the kind of sticky, sugary slop that fueled magic users' desires and mildly annoyed Asriel, because even after almost a year, he was still the one cleaning the residue off his siblings' teeth every morning. A total of eleven people made frisbee tough to play, even though they'd brought three discs, and when Papyrus threw a humdinger that sailed over everyone's head, a long, white-furred neck stretched out to catch it. Make that a dozen of us. "WHO'S A GOOD DOGGIE? YES YOU ARE! YES YOU ARE!" Papyrus bubbled as the Lesser Dog, its neck retracting back to normal size with a loud, rubber-band snap, happily trotted the frisbee back, dropping it at Papyrus' feet before realizing that the frisbee-thrower was a large pile of delicious bones. "SANS! HELP! HE'S NOT FOLLOWING LEASH LAWS!" Papyrus yelled as he was unceremoniously dragged away by the tail-wagging Dog and the kids laughed themselves sick.

"I got him," Asriel said, flying over to block the Lesser Dog's path. "No! Bad dog! No biting lawyers!" The Dog whined loudly, making sad puppy-dog eyes with Papyrus' leg still between its jaws. "Well, okay, but not this one." Reluctantly, the Dog dropped a thankful Papyrus and trotted back towards the picnic, where they all petted it until its neck looped around the whole group and it started sniffing its own butt and chasing its own tail in a gigantic circle. Laughing, all the kids stroked the ouroboral Dog's fur, while Papyrus spun around trying to look the Dog in the face.

Frisk held one hand to the Dog and the other to one of Asriel's ears. "Hmm... it's about the same." He smiled faintly, and Charles chuckled. Mid-October had Asriel's winter coat growing in, and Frisk, still just human, had plenty of Dreemurr fur to wear, her light cotton skirt fluttering around her furry leggings and the usual red heart in the middle of her furry hoodie. Even the tops of her soft boots were lined with it.
Kid and Kim leapt onto the Dog's back, struggling to stay balanced as they rode around. "YOU GUYS SHOuld jump on too it's reaLLY FUN!" They did, Asriel's ears fluttering in the wind, but the weight of too many humans (and a tall skeleton) was too much for the Dog, who got tired and fell asleep, the kids reluctantly hopping off.

Frisk flopped down onto the blanket, and her brothers flopped next to her. She smiled, closing her eyes. With the Dog's expanded neck blocking the bite of the wind, it was easy to fall asleep. Her homework was done (including Gaster's and Dr. Home's homework), the blanket was soft on the crunchy leaves, and she could hear the other kids playing and Undyne scarfing down what was left of the food, leaving a few scraps for the Dog. It wasn't that Frisk felt contentment; it was that deep and abiding contentment was a part of Frisk's life. If it wasn't for what might happen to Asriel, she could use Gaster's techniques to regularly give it to the needy. In a way, Frisk missed having real problems of the people-screamy, universe-explodey variety. There hadn't been any more rampaging SOUL-stealers that she'd needed to deal with; although there had been at least three outbreaks, they'd been contained by Frisk's daily LOADs and various police forces. There had been a handful of people Darwinating themselves with their own magic, even on remembered days, but people had the right to make their own stupid decisions and they weren't her problem; she'd already tried to save their lives, as Charles occasionally reminded her. (They'd all received calls from rememberers saying "We found this mess on your floor that used to be you, so whatever you did, don't do it again." Sometimes, the mess was different the second time.) Other than having too many friends, anything that could be called a problem in her life was some brutally tough school-related thing, whether it was Mr. Reed's flatly merciless World History for World Leaders course, Undyne demanding exhausting feats of strength and stamina ("Go on, use magic, you little punks- IT WON'T MAKE IT EASIER!"), or Gaster's increasingly esoteric advanced course. She strongly suspected that Gaster didn't see the difference between middle/high school and college courses, and of course Dr. Home's tutoring really was almost completely college level, and more than once she wanted to scream that she was just eleven years old and couldn't possibly be expected to do any of this by any ordinary standard. But Frisk Dreemurr, Princess of Time and her brothers were not held to ordinary standards; they were expected to solve these things through effort and determination.

And no matter how hard any of it was, it was easy because they had each other, and they would always have each other.

Frisk heard something above her and opened her eyes, looking directly into the face of a grinning skeleton.

"Gaaaah!" she yelled, scuttling back into the Dog's fluffy neck and sitting up. Everyone else, even her brothers, laughed, and she shot a look at a smug Asriel for not warning her. "Sans! It's not Halloween yet!" Woken, the Dog's neck sssshhhshed against the grass and leaves like an overgrown snake as it retracted.

"well, I had to bone up on my skills."

"Go get two hundred and six different dogs to bury you," Frisk muttered. "Are you even getting a costume?"

"for a skeleton? that's sacral-edge." There were some days that Frisk really wished she wasn't taking Dr. Home's tutoring along with her brothers. It gave Sans all too many opportunities for horrible bone puns.

"Mom's making all three of us costumes," Asriel said. "But she's keeping them a secret."

"heh. tori..." Sans sounded vaguely wistful. "she's finally mastered the twenty-first century mom thing, huh. heh. her and king fluffybuns really do deserve each other." Frisk and Asriel had no idea
what he was sad about, but Charles had been in enough minds to grasp the situation.

"Hey, don't worry about it, Sans," Charles said with a smirk. "Somewhere out there's a dead girl who won't resist your advances." He got an odd number of evil eyes. "What?"

"kid, you really are the devil."

"I really am the devil!" Charles shouted, cackling, his siblings' jaws wide in astonishment. It was wrong to laugh about this stuff, wasn't it? The idea that he would actually be wearing a personalized devil costume with full black armor and a seriously threatening visage, because he really was the Devil and had the body count to show for it, that wasn't funny, was it? And yet it was hilarious, and his mother adamantly insisted that he wear it, as she understood the concept of Halloween in a way that modern humanity did not. He had a genuine devil's pitchfork made of solid steel, similar in color to his father's trident, but he didn't look anywhere near as scary as his father that night; Toriel had very carefully and deliberately manipulated Asgore to look like Baphomet, and he waited upstairs, practicing his fierceness in the mirror. What had really scared everyone, though, was Charles simply disappearing for a few remembered afternoons over the past couple of weeks and adamantly refusing to answer questions about where he was and what he'd been doing. He wouldn't even explain why he wanted to do a special extra SAVE with Frisk that morning using his SOUL and a different password; he'd simply smiled and asked his siblings to trust him. "Oh, man. Sans is going to freak when he sees this. Where is he?"

"where you ain't lookin', kid," Sans replied. Toriel had helped him and his brother with their makeup; they looked like they'd stepped straight out of a Mexican Day of the Dead parade, which was exactly where Sans was going to shortcut himself and Papyrus once the Mt. Ebbot Halloween festival was over. The royal family had spared no expense for it. Every last kid from school had been invited to go trick-or-treating in their town, although some of the older ones bowed out. Every house would be offering treats, by royal decree; tricks, on the other hand, were not regulated. At least one of the kids had a Twitch livestream, which was sitting at some fifty thousand viewers and it wasn't even dark yet. Toriel had meticulously turned the school into a haunted house, dragooning twenty people, including her kids, to help. ("As if we don't have enough things we need to do, Mom!" "This is your duty as Dreemurrs, my children.")

"Frisk, Asriel, close your eyes," Toriel told them, and they gave each other a look before doing it. They heard Sans faintly chuckling. Lifting each leg in turn, Frisk felt a warm, furry costume being pulled up her body, a couple of weights next to her head (she knew, immediately, what the costume was) and Asriel grumbled as his ears were stuffed in his own costume, his mother putting his horns through holes in the hood.

"Leatherface would be proud," Charles said, and even Frisk could hear the look their mother gave him.

She finished up adjusting the costumes. "Open your eyes, my children!" she called brightly, clearly pleased with herself. Of course they were each other, Asriel's not-quite-human form shoved into a supple Frisk suit, suede leather serving as human skin (Charles was right, that was kind of creepy) and Frisk's combed-out hair as the actual hair, which masterfully hid his horns. In return, Frisk was wearing two large stuffed bags on the sides of her head as ears, her feet in comfortable Asriel paws and her hands in soft, furry gloves. She felt like she could wear it all day in cooler weather. Their clothes were the same as what they were when they'd first met. The only things left uncovered were their faces; wearing a snootle substitute would have been annoying for Frisk and there was just no way to hide Asriel's snootle without some gigantic head. They looked at each other, grinning.
"Mom, you made her a furry!" Charles shouted, laughing. "You know, there's a place for furries, and guess who's the master of it?" He pointed his thumb towards himself.

"You are being even more unruly than usual," Asgore told him, walking down the stairs. He tried to sound fierce, to match the real flame on top of his head, the detailed plastic wings on his back, and the printer's ink that turned his fur pitch black, but against Charles that wasn't even a joke.

"Don't give me that tonight, Dad," Charles said. "I know you have your traditions, but this night is Devil's night. My night." He thumped the butt of the pitchfork down for emphasis and resolved to keep it after Halloween was over. "I'll be back to normal by the time Sans is on the other side of the wall."

"If it's your night, then perhaps you can tell us what my costume will be?" Toriel asked, rapidly walking upstairs.

"Oooooh... good question." Charles went rifling through people's minds. Thousands of people had been purged since Christmas, with fewer EXP earners added, but there were a few brains that he really liked having access to and whose owners weren't keen on letting go of his evil power. "Okay, if Dad's Baphomet, which he kind of looks like already, and Frisk and Asriel are each other, which kind of makes sense, then this one has to make the same kind of sense. A queen goat, a mother, a..." He snapped his fingers in realization, just before she opened the door. "You're Shub-Niggurath, the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young! Ia! Ia!"

"You are quite correct." Toriel's costume was a carefully crafted mass of tentacles, some of which waved back and forth under magical influence, and she had used the same ink on herself as her husband. The combination made her look terrifying, like something out of a nightmare. If she had looked like that when Frisk fell down, things would have happened much differently.

"The little kids are going to scream like crazy when they see you," Frisk said, suddenly grateful that Papyrus was off at the school-turned-haunted-house, preparing to serve as its guardian, warden, and master of ceremonies. "I think you might have overdone it. That's actually scary." She'd almost asked why Mom hadn't made her and Asriel's costumes just as scary, but she was scary enough as it was.

"There is no overdoing it on a night as important as this one," Toriel said. "Tonight, fear of monsters is a proper thing, and we must make our first modern Halloween a very special event. Come along; we all have our roles to play." Charles smiled widely, clearly willing to play his. They walked out together, Asgore staying home; someone had to hand out the candy, after all, and a Scandinavian chocolate company had created a delicious Asgore-branded confection that the Dreemurrs had ordered in bulk because a certain devil kid had a tendency to eat it that way.

Down the hill, the festival was beginning, pumpkins and orange lights everywhere. It was a clear Halloween night, a few days after a new moon. The festival proper was on the school grounds; Muffet was still doing charity work, with massive kegs of spider cider on hand, and a fat monster with a wobbly tail was clumsily setting up his table to do sketch commissions. A few vendors from major companies were handing out free samples of Halloween-themed swag to any kid who wanted them, which was certain to be almost all of them.

The kids came in a few at a time, being waved through the security checkpoint with their parents, the MPs surreptitiously recording the weight of each car while Undyne stood around and looked menacing in her full armor. If the weight of a car on a remembered day was different than an unremembered day, that was when the real security came out. Charles, watching his mother greet each car (to varying reactions) as it was waved through, felt sort of disappointed that nobody'd ever
tried attacking Mt. Ebbot. There were people who wished the Dreemurrs harm, but most of them were on the other side of the ocean and even they knew it was pointless to try. Charles would have to make his own fun instead.

One little girl in a fire-retardant fairy costume, her car seat made of flameproof neoprene, shrank back and screamed on seeing the terrible gaze of Shub-Toriel through her window, her hands glowing with magic and terror.

"Oh, honey, it's okay, it's only your school principal!" her mother tried to console her.

"EEEEEEEE!"

Laughing and grinning, Charles walked up to the next car, but his grin was matched by Jack in the back seat, who was wearing a robe that made him look like a miniature Asmodeus. Witches and warlocks were in this year, for obvious reasons. Among the kids, there were several Harries Potter and Hermiones Granger, there were at least three Gandalves among the fathers and two Glendas among the mothers, and there was a Maleficent, a fairy godmother, and a lot of similar costumes, some inventive and some derivative from fiction. Superhero costumes were also in (Nicole was dressed as Batgirl), even though the kids wearing them got tired quickly using superpowers. While humans elsewhere dressed up like monsters, that was rare at Mt. Ebbot; what kind of kid would dress up as his friend from class? There were a few highly imaginative monster costumes that corresponded to no known monster and one officially licensed Walt costume (oh, that takes me back, Frisk thought), but the only other recognizable monster costume was worn by Frisk herself. Similarly, Asriel wore the only human suit, and Charles wasn't the only one to reference Ed Gein.

There weren't any speeches, any massive congregations. Toriel was giving the children license to explore and do what they wanted, and quite a number of them made a straight beeline for the Dreemurr family mansion; they'd seen it so many times from school but never got the chance to go there, and His Majesty as the Sabbatic Goat wasn't nearly so scary when surrounded by a lot of brightly colored flowers and conventional jack-o-lanterns, even if Charles had carved them without bothering to use a knife.

Other kids went straight to Frisk and Asriel, and more than a few of the younger pre-teens wanted to touch Frisk's costume ears, cuddling the stuffing underneath. "Now you know how it feels!" Asriel yelled, laughing. "That's what my life's like, Frisk. What you're going through now. Right there." Some of the older ones pretended that they didn't know the costumes were costumes: "You're looking pretty tall today, Frisk!" "Gee, Asriel, did you get a lot shorter?" But it was all in good fun and about a dozen of them, Jack and Nicole included, followed the Dreemurrs from house to house, trick-or-treating in the usual way even though most of them were nominally too old for it. Two older teenagers, dressed up like Fred and Daphne from Scooby-Doo, took a different direction than the others, going off alone into the bushes, and everyone old enough to figure it out pretended not to notice, and Asriel found it impolitic to point out that he could easily hear them even with his ears shoved under the costume.

"Trick or treat- oh crap." Jack said as they reached Asmodeus' house. Of course his daughter was off with a supervised group of young children, including Kid and Kim. Of course he was at home handing out candy, not saying anything, simply dropping handfuls of candy into each kid's bag, even the Dreemurrs', because it was scarier that way. And of course he really was dressed the same as Jack, using his robe as a costume. Even though they all had his powers, he'd somehow managed to stay The Wizard, an inscrutable man of strange and unknowable magicks, and dressing the same as him seemed like an unwise form of mockery. Jack only noticed after he got the door slammed in his face that he did, in fact, receive a few more Tootsie Rolls than the others.
The skeletons' house was mostly dark. The door was ajar, creaking back and forth in the wind. Something was flickering in the back. The other kids started walking right past it, because that was what you did with dark houses on Halloween night, but they didn't know that Toriel had ordered every home open for the holiday. "There's something weird in there," Asriel said. "Sans and Papyrus are in the school, and Gaster's down at the festival, so..." He listened more closely. "It's creepy music and some kind of machine."

"We have got to check it out," Jack said, and while some of the kids were scared, nobody disagreed. Walking into creepy situations was what Halloween was for. Taking point, he pushed open the door, shining a flashlight beam from his hand. Some areas of the house were blocked off by spiderwebs, which Frisk suspected were gifts from Muffet. Only a couple of kids had the presence of mind to notice the "Please Take One" bowl and take pieces of monster candy. The light was coming from the basement, and the basement door was left ajar. Gaster's lab.

"Hey, I recognize this music," Nicole said. "It's from- EEEEEEE!" Her scream was nearly as high in pitch as the little girl on seeing her principal, and Frisk and Asriel also screamed, seeing the lumbering, robotic thing walk up the stairs towards them, its pointed teeth in a terrible grin and its tattered, furry arms stretched out in a hug. A rabbit ear fell in front of its right eye, and the other stuck straight up, its eye shining in the darkness like a twisted, horrific version of Sans.

"I just want to give you a hug!" it yelled in a warbling, electronic voice, but by then half the kids were already out the front door and Asriel had already grabbed Frisk to fly out- it was either that or a nice, fat Chaos Saber right into the thing's head.

"Hey, Frisk, whose house is this?!" Jack demanded, panting. He'd slammed the door shut but of course it wasn't staying closed, and it resumed creaking just as it had before, the robot retreating into the darkness to scare another group of kids.

"Gaster's," Frisk replied. Jack had a great many unkind words for Gaster, and Frisk felt it was a bad time to mention that she was actually about to hug the thing, just to see what would happen, before Asriel had dragged her away. Jack went on to suggest that he might want to stand outside the door and tell people not to go into that house and get scared by the robot, both of which he had even more unkind words for.

"Don't do that," Asriel said. "It's Halloween. If you try to warn people away you're just advertising for him. C'mon." The next house was Undyne's, and Alphys stood in the doorway, looking nervous and handing out packages of pocky and other Japanese sweets that still smelled of a Saitama convenience store.

Frisk, feeling devilish (where'd Charles go, anyway?) decided to introduce her. "Hey, everyone. This is Alphys. She's really good at building robots."

It took exactly half a second for it to sink in, but it was hard for the kids to get mad at the little lizard, who was obviously uncomfortable being introduced that way. "You got me good," Jack said instead. "You got all of us good."

"Hey, what would have happened if I would have actually hugged it?" Frisk asked.

"Um, nothing. It, um, wasn't programmed to do anything other than walk. The arms don't even move."

"Next year, make one that actually gives hugs," Frisk suggested. "But make it scarier. And set it loose around town."
"Why do you want to scare people like that?!" Nicole asked.

"It's Halloween!" everyone answered her.

The next house was the Dreemurr mansion, and Frisk and Asriel stayed back, not wanting to embarrass themselves by trick-or-treating at their own house. "Hey, I hear Charles," Asriel said quietly. "He's... whispering to us. He wants us to follow him." And that actually scared both of them for a moment, even though these were the Dreemurr kids and they had nothing to be afraid of. "Well," Frisk rhetorically asked, "what are we going to do? Not go after him?" That would have been against the spirit of the holiday.

"Beware, for there is devilry afoot!" Asriel exclaimed in a fake deep voice, and as Frisk laughed, Asriel made sure no one was looking at them before he intoned a precise set of syllables and vanished from view, taking Frisk's hand. Frisk pulled out her phone with her other hand, fumbling with her oversized furry gloves, and cast the invisibility spell series on herself. Asriel tugged his sister towards the whispers, trying to keep up. Charles led them away from the houses, away from everything, towards no path, and they dispelled their invisibility because there was nobody to see them. Without a moon in the sky, the mountain was pitch black, and the kids couldn't possibly have kept going without magical flashlights and movement. "Hey, guys, we're chasing our brother," Asriel said to nobody as they magically hopped over the fence. Echolocation was the only reasonable technological means of catching flying invisible people, and Asriel heard the high-frequency sound. For more than a mile, Charles led them over rocks, through forests, past a cliff face, and around to the other side of the mountain. Getting exhausted, Frisk wondered if Asriel was just playing a trick on her, but he seemed just as confused as she was.

"He says it's here," Asriel said abruptly, shining his light around. He spied a devil's face magically carved into the rock, hidden behind a bush. The sculpture was excellent, clearly crafted with magic, with an open mouth just wide enough for Frisk and Asriel to crawl into without much fuss.

"Wow. I guess we know what Charles was doing and why he wanted to do that other SAVE this morning," Frisk said. "I bet you anything it's full of traps."

"Yeah, but it's like you said- what are we going to do, not go in?" Asriel rhetorically asked. Their brother had clearly taken care and pride in making the entrance, at least; it would be exceptionally impolite not to crawl into it.

"Wait," Frisk said, reaching into her Halloween pail. "I think we're going to need this."

Frisk and Asriel gobbled up as much sugary candy as they could, then they magically melted and burned the plastic together and threw it into the mouth. It didn't set anything off.

"I'll go first," Asriel said before Frisk could. They crawled for ten feet before they could stand up again into a small cavern, and once they stood up, old incandescent bulbs, held up by a wire on the ceiling, dimly flickered on and another mechanism started churning. "Yup, traps," Frisk said. Although this wasn't really a trap, per se. Going down the hallway in front of them, a series of spikes came out of the floor, reaching almost all the way to the ceiling. The sequence was a wave, from near to far before the near spikes restarted again.

They could have disabled the mechanism through smashing something important; Asriel could have transformed for half a second and bent just one of the spikes out of place, probably screwing up the whole thing. But that would have been against the unspoken rules. "That's pretty fast," Asriel said. "It's... faster than we can fly, I think."

"We can do it," Frisk said. "It's all about when we start. We have to chase the spikes." They'd done this before, in platformers; she didn't see the problem with doing it for real. "Ready... set... go go
"Go!" She launched herself into the trap as soon as the first spikes came up, putting her sprinting, padded foot down as soon as they retracted, her brother beside her, running as fast as they could. The spikes outpaced them, and even Frisk could hear the sequence restarting behind them, but a few more steps and they were safe. "Okay. Whew, there's- oh, come on!" In front of them, a series of pendulum axe blades started swinging back and forth at irregular intervals.

"Can we slip between them?" Asriel asked. "Just stand, and wait for the next one, and stand..."

"That'd be hard," Frisk said. There didn't seem to be enough room for that. She gauged the timing carefully, and worked out with her brother the best time to go. It was like walking through a crowded room, really, only the crowd was made out of painful death. She and her brother slipped around the final blade just before it would have chopped her in half. "Charles..." She just sighed, and Asriel laughed. "Okay. Next one is... oh come on, enough with the blades, don't you have anything else?!" Frisk shouted to the air, certain that Charles could hear her. This time, a series of buzzsaws came out of the walls, although the hallway seemed wider here, more cylindrical. She studied the blades, trying to get the timing. There were three layers, high, middle, and low, and it reminded her of Muffet's spiders.

"We gotta move now!" Asriel shouted, pointing upwards. Above them, a deep rumbling was audible, and a gigantic flaming boulder came rolling towards them from a hole in the ceiling, promising pulverized bones and a humiliating LOAD.

"Charles, you _dick_!" Frisk yelled, ducking under some buzzsaws and jumping over others, and when a low and a high came at once she dived between them and started flying, first under a middle and a high and above a middle and a low, the boulder still rumbling behind them. A thirty-foot rope bridge swayed in front of them above a pool of water, and the kids took a few desperate steps on it before the boulder came crashing through it with a tremendous splash, and they flew through the air long enough to reach the end, Frisk panting with exhaustion. In front of them was the exit, a crevice hidden from the outside by a tree that they had to wiggle around. Charles was there waiting for them, smiling.

"Well? How'd you like it?" Charles asked, smiling.

"I thought we agreed that if you ever did this, it wouldn't _actually_ kill us!" Frisk shouted.

"Az heard me in there, didn't you Az?" Asriel nodded. "I filled it with cameras. The blades and spikes were me turning a crank. And if the boulder ever got close I would have just busted out of the wall and stopped it. And if it would have gone wrong you could just have LOADed to our special save and very few people would have known. Besides, this was you two. That was _easy_ for you, there was no way you were going to lose to that. You didn't even mess up your costumes!" He sounded disappointed in himself, as if he didn't add enough challenge. "I'm sorry I didn't make it longer, though. Just didn't have time. Hey, gimme some candy." Asriel and Frisk realized that they were still firmly clutching their Halloween pails and held them out to their brother, who started unwrapping candy by wishing the wrappers apart. "Come on, admit it. You enjoyed that."

Frisk reluctantly smiled, realizing how much trouble this must have been for him, how many days it must have taken to set everything up, just so she and Asriel could have a few minutes of high-octane terrifying fun. "Yeah... I did. Did you, Az?"

"Yeah, that was cool."

Frisk smiled wider. "Thanks. You really went far for us."
"Hey, no problem. When you LOAD, I'm going to fill all that back in," Charles explained around a mouthful of Tootsie Rolls and candy corn. "Maybe I'll dig it out in a few years, add some more stuff to it. I had to stick it all way out here, though, didn't want anybody running into it." He led them back around the mountain to where they came, bright lanterns coming from his outstretched hands.

"Uh, guys?" Asriel said as they walked down the hill. "Something's going on at school."

"They didn't miss us, did they?" Frisk asked.

"No, it's something else. I think people are hurting." That was enough to get the three of them flying down the hill, Charles carrying his siblings around the waist. He flung open the door and the three of them were blasted by a wave of stench that smelled like someone had bombed a septic tank with chemical weapons and tried to cover it up with a thousand rotten eggs. Frisk wondered if someone had set something off as a prank before she turned a corner, hearing the groans of agony, and saw the enormous crowds outside the bathrooms.

"There she is!" a kid yelled, pointing. "Frisk, you've gotta LOAD! Please!" His cry was taken up by a sizable majority of people in the hallway. Many of them were clutching their stomachs. Some of them got down on their knees in supplication, hands folded in prayer. A few people made no sounds at all, their arms on their abdomens in wordless agony; others made sounds, but not with their mouths, and there was enough of that in a few seconds to fill three seasons of Beavis and Butthead. A few of the younger kids had telltale brown stains in their pants and were crying and screaming, while everyone else begged Frisk to please just make it stop. Frisk, who had gotten very unused to this sort of thing- especially from people in her school- was shocked in place, and Asriel didn't say anything either; instead, he was touching the stomach of one of the children, trying to figure out what had gone wrong and coming up empty. He wondered if a terrorist had used some kind of biological attack. Charles was quivering with rage, denting his steel pitchfork by gripping it too hard. Someone- or something- had caused terrible harm to his school, his people, and he would make the bastard pay.

"Frisk, please do it now," an somewhat familiar-looking man implored, clutching his stomach while trying to sound reasonable. "If anyone gets mad I'll back you up."

Frisk's paralysis broke. "Woah! Fine! Okay! Just let me warn everybody!" she shouted to answering cheers of relief. She pulled out her phone, and when she pressed the button for a thirty-second warning, the man's phone said something unintelligible. Ah, that was Jack's dad, the rememberer, and his expressions of gratitude were matched by practically everyone else in the hallway. Both her mother and Papyrus were coming down the hall from different directions, Papyrus with a shocked look and Toriel, still in full Lovecraftian costume, looking like she was going to do very painful things to the skeleton. "What the heck happened?!" Frisk asked.

"I'M SO SORRY!" Papyrus blubbered. "I DIDN'T WANT TO GIVE THEM MORE SUGAR BECAUSE THEN THEY'D GET RAMBUNCTIOUS AND MAGICAL! PLEASE FORGIVE ME, YOUR MAJESTY!"

"Just tell me what you fed them," Shub-Toriel demanded.

"HARIBO SUGAR-FREE GUMMI BEARS!"

And the Devil knew the name of his equal.

==LOAD==
"Do I really have to get out of bed today?" Frisk mumbled into the pillow. It should have been a school day, but there wasn't any school. It should have been a workday, but there wasn't any work. There wasn't even any homework, because none of her teachers was going to give anyone any kind of assignment to complete during it. And it wasn't any holiday that Frisk had ever celebrated before.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" Asriel asked playfully. Frisk sighed. She knew she should be a lot happier than she was-things were so much better, for everyone, in every way, since the last time he'd asked her that-but she just wasn't feeling up to it.

"Yeah, I can eat a bag of Haribo gummi bears." Her brothers laughed. "Here, I'll put on my bracelets." She sat up just long enough to snap them on and went right back to the pillow. "You happy?"

"Up and at 'em," Asriel warned, gently placing his hands on her feet, "or I start tickling."

"You wouldn't dahahahahahahahahaha! Az! Staaaahahahahahahahhp! You win, you win! How did you do that?!" He'd simply held onto her feet.

"It's almost like I know where all your nerves are and how to stimulate them," Asriel said smugly as she reluctantly sat up.

"Oh, you are going to enjoy that when you get older," Charles said, and she shot him an angry look as she dragged herself out of bed. "I actually have a reason to hide today. It's probably better if people just forget I exist until tomorrow."

"Maybe you should eat the gummi bears," Frisk suggested, "although that'd probably turn Newer Home into a toxic waste dump." They began their morning ritual, the same one Frisk and Asriel had done for a full year exactly. Their father was still legendarily bad at naming things, so he had simply decided to call it Return Day when asked by the UN, and the name had stuck. The double meaning was inadvertent; monsters and magic had returned to the world, but 'return' could also refer to the one person who could return things back to the way they were at a previous time. And that's what most of the seven-billion-whatever of them are going to be celebrating. Thinking too hard about things like that gave Frisk vertigo, as if she were staring into an abyss or up into space. Thinking about the huge number of people she'd saved every day was nice, when she thought of them as numbers, but when she realized that every single last one of them had individual ideals and dreams, it was hard to contemplate. "I do not want to turn on the news today," she said as Asriel meticulously brushed her hair. "Actually, I don't want to watch anything. Can we play a game, or go bike riding where nobody will see us, or go flying out to the middle of nowhere? Actually, Charles, can you dig us out another cave? Not with traps, but just... a cave. With a chimney, and we can put comfortable seats in it and read or something."

"I don't think that's on the agenda today, sis," he said as he brushed his brother's fur with long, delicate strokes. She was going to ask why it wasn't, but she was busy brushing her teeth, and then Asriel scraped out her mouth as he'd done every morning since she'd saved him. The three kids still lived hand-in-glove with one another most of the time. There were times when they wanted privacy from one another-Charles had a penchant for death metal that the other two didn't like listening to, and there was a system of mostly soundproof barriers that they used from time to time-but they still slept soundly in the same bed, still washed each other, still perpetually had each other's backs.
Toriel knocked on their door as they finished up, holding a gigantic "Mom, seriously?!" dress, two sets of ceremonial robe armor, and matching accessories. Frisk couldn't believe what she was looking at and probably would have guessed it was some kind of blanket if not for the long-sleeved top poking out. Asriel just blinked; even Charles had never seen anything like that from any of his many, many eyes. Toriel had gone full-throttle, weaving together pastel blue and lavender purple with the characteristic Delta Rune and red heart combination, creating countless layers of skirts and festooning it with a large, pink sash ribbon and many other ribbons besides.

"Quite seriously, my daughter," Toriel said, her great smile widening her mouth. "As before, this holiday is the first of its kind. I do not wish to look back and ask if I could have been more thorough in celebrating it properly. Breakfast is ready." Frisk wanted to argue, to ask what possible event could warrant her wearing that thing, but the smell of fresh pancakes was too enticing and her father was waiting for her.

Charles ate a normal-sized breakfast with his siblings and parents. Toriel had learned how to gauge Charles' meal sizes; she had known when he had been expending tremendous amounts of energy in carving out his Halloween dungeon crawl. Butterscotch and cinnamon were the principal flavors of the pancakes—how could she serve her children, particularly her daughter, anything else on a day like this?—but the kids tasted hints of blueberry, strawberry, and vanilla, and the hot cocoa was as thick as ever.

"Frisk, do you still fear public events, after so long?" Asgore asked her when the three of them were almost done.

"It's not that I fear them, Dad," she explained. "It's..." She took another bite of pancakes, thinking. "It's that people fear me, after so long."

"They respect you," Asgore said. "As do we all."

"It's still really awkward. Especially when Mom's putting me in something like that thing."

Toriel smiled as Frisk ate. "I have made those garments specifically for our places in the parade today."

Toriel had wisely timed saying that right after Frisk had finished swallowing her last bite, so as not to cause a spit-take, but Frisk was almost spitting anyway. "My place in a parade, good mother? Truly, this must be a jest. Has your ability to reason been impaired? Is it your desire to emphasize my position of supernatural nobility while elevating me above the general public, thereby demonstrating that I am in a position to be envied? Have you considered the notion that this may fray the friendships I share with my classmates, which by necessity are strained due to this very issue?" was the gist of Frisk's reply, although she actually used entirely different, less cultured words (one notable adjective was used repeatedly, although the word was known to serve many other functions) and an extremely loud voice. Asgore frowned at her but said nothing.

"I understand your concerns, my daughter," Toriel said patiently, "but you are indeed a princess, and your friends are already familiar with who you are and what you can do."

"If aught goes amiss due to my presence in this parade, I shan't repeat the experience after I have reversed time's arrow," Frisk said with different words, including a notable adjective and a notable noun. She stomped upstairs to get changed.

"Mom, do you really want me to show up there?" Charles asked. "I don't think it's a good idea to remind everyone that I... well, Chara, got out at the same time."
"I understand your concerns as well," Toriel told him. "But it is your duty, just as it is your siblings'."

"If this backfires later on, I warned you," Charles replied before going upstairs.

"Asriel, would you like to share any concerns?" Toriel asked, smiling. "Preferably with less profanity than your sister?"

"I don't care that much, but Mom, she really doesn't want to do this," Asriel said. "She didn't even want to get out of bed today. This stuff makes her feel bad inside. It isn't who she is."

Toriel only looked at him with understanding. "We are well aware. Go on. She needs your comfort."

"I think I'm just going to put on a hoodie and go down there anyway," Frisk was telling Charles, glaring at the gigantic dress, her pajamas in a heap on the floor. She wasn't even sure if she was supposed to step into it or pull it over her head; either way looked difficult. "They really want to see me that bad? Fine. Fly us right down into the parade route and we'll just go tell everyone how stupid this all is." Who would stop them?

"If you really want me to, I'll do it," Charles said, putting on his own armor and robe set, "but you know what'd happen if we did? This is dozens of times bigger than the Christmas one. As soon as we'd show up, there'd be people mobbing us. And half of them would be flying."

"You can keep them off," Frisk reminded him.

"Yeah, I can twirl my pitchfork around, people would stay back. Or they'd try to. But everyone else in back would still try to move forward to see us, and it'd actually be a crush of people. It's that kind of crowd. We could get cops to help but then it'd really just be a parade again. That's the whole thing with a parade, that it's organized so everyone gets a chance to see you without having to crowd."

Frisk sighed. "Maybe we should just not show up, then," she said as Asriel walked in. "Or send robots, I'm sure Alphys probably has one of me at least." She started to think a bit more on the implications of that and decided she didn't like them.

"If you didn't show up, people would wonder where you were and why you didn't want to see them," Charles explained as Asriel put on his robe. "They'd think something was wrong, and they shouldn't ever think that about you. And if you sent a robot, what would that change? People would still see you the way you don't want to be seen." Frisk sighed in defeat and reluctantly started putting on the tights. "It's me they don't want to see."

Frisk put on her dressy roller shoes and finally figured the dress out; she'd have to slip into it from the bottom and then Asriel could do up the thin Velcro on the back. She levitated it above the ground, raising up her hands and slowly settling it onto her body. It was comfortable, at least. "Yeah, but it's like you said- erf, this thing- if they didn't see you, they'd wonder what you were doing, and that's a lot worse for you than me," Frisk answered him, popping her head out, and Charles quietly admitted the point. "Next time, Mom shouldn't schedule something like this without asking us. Which means she should just not schedule it."

"It's not her fault, either," Charles said. "She didn't schedule it, she just said 'Yeah, we'll be there' because we have to for at least one of the parades." Frisk sighed in deeper defeat, letting Asriel tie the sash in back, the large, pink ribbon hanging down. Of course there were going to be multiple celebrations the world over, and the idea gave her vertigo again. "People want a savior, especially
when weird stuff starts happening to their lives, and this whole year's only gotten weirder for them. They at least need someone to blame. You have to do something like this sometime." Frisk looked glum. If she was going to sit on some huge parade float, she wanted to spraypaint 'Don't you have anything better to do?' on both sides. "C'mon. Mom's right, this isn't going to ruin your social life. Everybody in school already knows, and you hang out with me every day, remember?"

"I just don't get why I need to wear a dress that I need telekinetic powers just to move around in," Frisk said. If everything wasn't Dreemurr-sized she'd worry about fitting through doors.

"Well, the people expect a princess done up for the parade. If you want, I'm sure we could whip something up that makes you look like a goddess..." Frisk's white, warm gloves fit her perfectly, and she proved it by showing him one extended finger on each hand, just before she reluctantly picked up her tiara and placed it on her head. Here we go again, and after it's done, here we go again again. The real downside to her life, as always, was having to do unpleasant things twice. "You're beautiful. You really are. And the whole world's going to see how beautiful you are again."

"Then I'll buy one of them to give to charity and let that girl get stared at all day," Frisk snapped. "Frisk, we've been through this before, it's not that bad," Asriel said, stooping down a bit to look her eye-to-eye. He was easily six inches taller than she was, and that wasn't even counting his horns. "Nobody ever went 'Oh my God, did you see Frisk at the Christmas party, she looked so silly' last year. If they did, I would have heard them, remember?" She smiled. "They were all too busy talking about how Charles declared war on God." Charles abruptly laughed, and Frisk giggled; some things were indeed more important than others. "Besides, it's not going to be just you up there, remember? It's a parade for the return of monsters. It's us who are going to be stared at today. And Charlie's right. Not everyone gets to be as beautiful as you."

"C'mon, Az," she said, smiling despite herself. "You know I'm still messed up."

"It doesn't matter, and I'll be able to fix that anyway." He held out his fluffy hand, and she reluctantly took it. "We're two princes and a princess, and it's all because of you." Still embarrassed, but smiling all the same, Frisk held her brother's hand and floated down the steps, where her mother and father waited in their royal finery. Asgore's great robe trailed on the ground, and his armor, while still medieval in form, was made of modern materials. Toriel had done herself up as thoroughly as her daughter, her tremendous dress hanging from her huge frame. It was easy to forget she was the Queen of Monsters; kids at school knew her as 'the principal' or, all too often, as 'Frisk's mom'.

"Are you feeling better?" Asgore asked his daughter, smiling and kneeling down. Every time she was close to her father, her foremost thought was always Azzy's going to be this big one day. She didn't mind having another goat plushie twice her height.


"Oh, my dear daughter. Your anger is a terrible thing. If you had used it a year ago in response to my foolishness, we would not be here together now." Frisk bit her lip, not wanting to think about that. She never liked being reminded that her father was nowhere near as tough as he looked and that Charles still had to be careful not to hurt him. "Let us protect ourselves, and we can begin." The Dreemurrs, all five of them, started casting spells from their phones that fundamentally added up to Protection From Lasers, a necessity in a world where a growing number of humans could shoot invisible beams. Asmodeus, even more than Gaster, had been treating the alteration of
humanity like a magical arms race, decoding the language of the universe, occasionally through trial and error on unhappened days. (Frisk had heard second-hand that he'd killed himself thrice so far.) They really ought to be thanking him too, even if he is a jerk. But Asmodeus was so far into wizard-dom that most of the country thought he lived in a tower surrounded by eldritch books and pored over a bubbling cauldron all day, which wasn't terribly far from the truth.

Asgore opened the double doors and strode out, head held high, with his wife next to him and his powerful children following behind. Frisk recoiled, blinking. Mt. Ebbot's residents lined both sides of the walkway from the house. Chilidrake and Snowdrake with his family on one side, Papyrus in a tailored suit and Sans in expensive-looking loungewear on the other, Vulkin, Kid, and Kim using their mechanical arms, even Asmodeus in a black suit (from wizard to mafioso, g'job Asmo!) and Victoria in an expansive pink dress of her own, and nearly every other monster Frisk knew besides, all of them tossing...

Flower petals.

They were decorating the Dreemurrs' path with flower petals.

All three Dreemurr kids looked at each other and clutched their sides laughing, and their mirth spread to all the other monsters, who followed along behind the Dreemurrs as soon as they were passed. "Hey, they coming with us?" Frisk quietly asked, still amused.

"Well, yeah," Asriel said. "It's the monster parade, full of monsters." And he reached out to hug his siblings and the monstrous crowd cheered. The Dreemurrs and Asmodeus got into a limo with Undyne, in full armor without a helmet, doing the driving; the other monsters and Victoria piled into a double-decker, bright-red, plastic-looking bus of a kind that Frisk was sure didn't exist in the United States. The bus's driver was a surly-looking, grizzled beast with a cigar sticking out of its mouth and a checkered cap, and as Frisk craned her head around to get a better look at the driver through the limo's windows, there wasn't any steering wheel and she could have sworn the driver had no legs-

"What- who- is that?" she asked.

"That is Nightbus," Asgore explained. "He formed a couple of months ago in England. He doesn't take any passengers over 60 pounds each, so, as you can imagine, he caused something of a stir."

Frisk wondered what his regular route was and what it was like for the monsters and small children who rode him. Maybe they ride him to school... do they have monster schools over there? Without anything better to do, she pulled out her phone to check. Of course they did. Diners had copied Toriel's recipes; educational authorities had copied Toriel's school, with varying degrees of success.

Undyne drove the Dreemurrs down to the airfield, Nightbus following behind. Four Tsunderplanes were sitting on the tarmac, close (but not too close!) to a series of planes, including a cargo helicopter big enough for Nightbus, and the Dreemurrs were formally led into a plane by silent dress-uniform Marines. The plane was opulent, even swanky, with cushioned leather seats and a stewardess who offered them food and drink even though they'd just got done eating Mom's breakfast. Frisk half-expected a chandelier to be hanging from the ceiling, as little sense as that made. Toriel spent time running her furry fingers through Frisk's hair, curling it in waves.

The plane landed and Frisk floated down the steps with her brothers, giving a deep sigh. "Still nervous?" Asriel asked, smiling. He had several ways of telling, the first of which was just looking at her.

"Let's just get this over with," she said. A large, inconspicuous van took them to the parade staging
ground, a chaotic place full of floats, monsters and several teams of human support. With His Majesty present, the rambunctious monsters quickly fell into line, and Asgore wasted no time in giving out instructions, reminding each monster of its order in the parade. Asriel's eyes were wide open, looking around at the panoply of monsters preparing to participate. Many of them spotted him and waved. A huge, whale-like monster with a ball on its tail and large, flapping wings fidgeted irritably in mid-air; Frisk asked who that was, and Asriel was surprised she'd never seen Glyde from her time in the Underground. Some they knew from the news; the regal-looking chimeric monster was a qilin, and the quadruple-winged birds with stars and stripes decorating their feathers were Freedom Eagles. Others were unfamiliar to both of them: a few strange collections of connected boxes that budded and resorbed themselves constantly, jet-black goblins that were practicing juggling sticks for the parade, a few burly-looking trolls with fur on their bottom halves, and a full-sized dragon with gossamer wings that flitted around like a hummingbird despite its size. "Dad, who's that?" Asriel asked once Asgore had finished giving commands.

"That's Dragonfly," Asgore said. "He and I do not always see eye to eye." As if to prove his point, Dragonfly took one look at Charles and hissed.

"If you're going to start yelling things at each other, warn me first," Frisk said, looking around. Charles could actually do a Fus Ro Dah, although that much moving air tended to do quite a bit more collateral damage than was in the game.

Asriel giggled. "I've never even heard of some of these monsters. I mean, who are these?" Asriel pointed to the connected boxes.

"Those are Cubici," Asgore replied. Frisk wondered whether her father had studied monsterkind or if, as King of Monsters, he had a supernatural ability to know them.

"Hey, Frisk, Charlie, you see any really weird ones?" Charles failed to resist the opportunity and pointed directly at his brother, causing Frisk to lose it and Asriel to slap his hands over his face, wondering how he'd been fool enough to walk right into that.

After she was done laughing, Frisk looked around, trying to figure out where she was. A large, round building stood to the north, and past that was a temporary, decorated fence. Large sheets of Dreemurr-purple cloth, divided down the middle, stood on bridges to the northwest and the northeast. To the south was the freeway, which was blocked from view by an even taller set of temporary poles and decorative cloth. The parade was oriented towards the northwest; they'd make some kind of clockwise circle before the day was done. Frisk clenched her hands slightly, pursing her lips. Once they got started, there was no stopping it, unless something horrible happened or Frisk wanted to do something really drastic that she wasn't going to do, such as snap her fingers and nope out in her singular way. "I don't even know what that building is," she said, expecting Charles to answer. She'd seen it before, she was sure, but if she pulled out her phone she'd get an idea of the size of the parade route, and she really didn't want to know that.

"Jefferson Memorial," Asriel answered before Charles could. After a year, he knew geography cold and was branching out to astronomy. It was still his continent, his planet, his great universe.

"Az, you know this stuff well," Frisk noted. "I'm surprised you've memorized so much."

"I'll explain after this is over," Asriel said. "C'mon. It's ready for us."

What was ready for them was a white-and-gold parade float exactly wide enough to fit on the two-lane bridge and its sidewalks. The Dreemurr king and queen were given lofty, elaborate perches, the Delta Rune in stylized golden filigree above them. Below them were brightly decorated thrones for their children, with a place for Asriel in the center and Charles to his left (Charles found this
hilarious; when Frisk asked why, all he said was "old meaning of 'sinister'") and Frisk to his right. Undyne stood as a figurehead ahead of the children, striking a heroic pose that she planned on holding the whole way. Someone was about to give Frisk a hand up, because climbing on anything in the monstrosity she was wearing was out of the question, but she was already embarrassed enough and simply floated up there instead. Of course, the Dreemurrs got the center position; the goblins would lead the way ahead, marching like majorettes, with Glyde and Dragonfly competing for attention overhead. In front of them, a chilled float held Icedrakes, Frosty the Snowspy, and a tough-looking wolf that Frisk didn't know the name of, and many other unrecognizable snow monsters besides, with the trolls positioned beside it; then a hot metal float featured its own unrecognizable monsters plus Vulkins, Pyropes, and Hotguy Burningman or whatever his name was. (Grillby wasn't there; he was absolutely open for the holiday and was showing parade coverage on every TV in his establishment.) Behind them, Mettaton EX practiced his own poses, and at the back, a combined human and monstrous orchestra started rehearsing a song that Frisk felt she should recognize. Oh, yeah, it sounded kind of like her ringtone, but slower and much richer. (Doh, dee, dah... dah, dee, doh...) Sans and Papyrus weren't there; Frisk thought that maybe Papyrus was in court or something, but that didn't make sense because this was an actual holiday.

Lacking better things to do, she called Sans; he picked up at once. "Hey, Sans, you're not participating?" she asked over the din.

"eh, our holiday was last month. they wanna see dreemurrs, not femurs. glad you decided to come." Of course he knew she didn't want to.

"WE'LL BE CHEERING FOR YOU!" Frisk heard Papyrus shout through Sans' phone.

"Yeah, I know. Just wanted to check." Sighing, she clicked off. It was easy to get bored waiting, but that was what phones were also for. She casually checked the Internet for people talking about her parade; browsing past the extensive corporate sponsorships (MTT was one of the chief sponsors; it wasn't hard to guess who those cameras would be focused on), she swiftly got a livestream showcasing the festive mood. She saw the people lined on both sides of the streets, her stomach churning and her gloved hands trembling, and the first time someone on the stream mentioned her name, she quickly turned her phone off. You knew it was going to be like this! she inwardly cursed herself. Everyone wants to see all the monsters and you, the freaking princess of time! You knew! You knew! "Try to relax, Frisk," Asriel said. "What's the worst thing that could possibly happen here, and what could you do about it?" He had a point.

"All you have to do is smile and wave," Charles reminded her. "Today, you're just here to look pretty. And I still think you're good at it." Biting her lip, her face going red, Frisk took deep breaths to try to control her anxiety. She knew it was silly. She knew she'd been seen by everyone in the world many, many times before this. She knew it was just a big formality, a senseless annual celebration that made companies money just like every other holiday did.

But, still, a parade?

It started later than she expected and sooner than she would have liked. Freedom Eagles, true to their name, wouldn't follow the path of the parade and took off in random directions; the sparklebirds followed the eagles, and the band began playing in earnest. The great curtain parted, and the goblins strutted through first, marching in perfect harmony. Past the bridge, on both sides of the road, people were kept back by a 20-foot-high rope fence onto which magically gifted children held (Frisk recognized a couple of them from school), floating and shouting, as cops with echorolocation goggles constantly scanned the crowd, searching for invisible saboteurs. The curtains were completely parted by the time the heat-related float rolled through, for obvious reasons, and that was when people started seeing the Dreemurrs and the real screaming started. To Frisk's
surprise, some of the people on both sides of the river had their backs turned, but it wasn't hard to
see why: aquatic monsters of every type played both in the Potomac River and the Tidal Basin.
Little kids, some of them magical, whipped their heads back and forth trying to see everything at
once. Frisk did the one thing expected of her: she smiled and waved graciously, not disappointing
everyone who had come out to see her. Her brothers did the same thing, and some teenagers in
black leather pumped their fists after being waved at by Charles. Frisk tried to pretend she was an
actress, just playing a role for the crowds, but they had come to see her as herself and she couldn't
keep that attitude up for long. This isn't really me, she wanted to shout at them, but that would have
made everyone, including the crowds and her parents, upset.

Ten minutes later, they were passing the Lincoln Memorial and her wrists were getting tired. She'd
switched arms both times, but after so long she was no longer doing the enthusiastic wave of a
proud princess but the generic yeah, here's your wave of a very bored rich girl. Her smile wasn't
going anywhere, though; it was a grimace fixed on her face. She really should have asked in
advance how long this was going to go on, she realized, and the uncountable numbers of people
(it's a holiday, the first one of its kind, what else are they going to do) never flagged in the
slightest. If anything, the crowds grew by the time the group reached the National Mall, and more
than once Frisk spied flying cops stopping overenthusiastic kids who were floating above or on the
wrong side of the barrier. The noise was starting to get to her, an endless yelling crowd only
overshadowed by the powerful playing of the band. She glanced up at her parents to see how they
were doing; Toriel was giving a steady, gentle wave, and her husband was looking as stately as he
could, smiling his great smile at the humans. Frisk could only guess at what he was thinking.
Colonial America feared them; corporate America made them a spectacle.

Every single one of the humans watching this was an individual, she tried to remind herself. The
ones calling her name- and there were many- wanted Frisk to wave at them, to see her seeing them,
to catch her on their cameras, to be part of a memorable moment; to deny them that because she
was feeling a bit tired was selfish, even if she would simply undo it all with a thought, only to do it
again. She heard a vaguely familiar voice calling her name, and she saw three very ugly people
standing in the back of the crowd: one older teenager that looked like she'd been eating butter-
flavored ice cream with sides of butter for three meals a day, a mother who looked like she'd eaten
the same thing for five meals a day (they looked almost like grotesque cartoon versions of her not-
sister and not-mother, Frisk realized, putting the image out of her head), and one nearly skeletal
Asian-ish man who looked almost like her not-father, only with grayer hair and a look of
resignation permanently welded to his face. She gave them the same generic wave she gave
everyone else, trying not to show how disturbed she was. I hope I don't see that next time. I need
more sleep and less anxiety.

On Constitution Avenue, a block from the White House, a large podium featured the Presidential
family; Sans and Papyrus were there with them, cheering as promised, as were Asmodeus and his
daughter, and Frisk found the strength to give enthusiastic waves to her friends. Victoria rocketed
up from her seat in her pink dress and flew to the rope barrier, waving her hand through it and
creating a memorable picture. Only almost nobody's going to remember it. Her father carried her
down, pretending to be angry, which he was very good at.

The parade turned south, towards the Washington Monument, and by the time they got to that great
erection, Frisk's wrists were getting pins and needles every time she switched arms to wave. She
drew strength from watching Undyne in her rigid pose, as she'd done so many times before in gym
class; monsters were weaker than humans, and if Undyne could perform a feat of endurance, she
could too. Still, by the time the curtain appeared in view, making Frisk sigh in relief, her arms felt
like dead weights and she seriously wondered if her bracelets were going yellow under the sleeves.
Her left arm fell clunkily to her side after they passed through. "Finally," she said.
"You did not need to keep waving the whole time," Toriel pointed out.

"Everyone wanted a wave," Frisk said. "So that's what I did." With her arms hanging limply at her sides, she felt like she had some idea what Monster Kid had to go through before technology had given him his own pair. As the Dreemurrs offered their goodbyes, she gave one final, painful wave to the monsters who'd shown up to participate (Glyde and Dragonfly seemed disappointed that it was over, even after having done tricks for more than an hour), and then she sat heavily in the van, just wanting to go home.

"That one part couldn't have been fun," Asriel said, sidling in beside her, the two scooting over to make room for Charles.

"What part? Oh, you must have noticed. I saw some people who looked almost like my not-family, but they were really messed up."

Asriel's long jaw dropped in amazement. Charles' eyes lit up, and he started chuckling heartedly. "Brutal! That is savage! Frisk, you really shouldn't, though. I can be like that. You shouldn't be."

"Yeah, that's pretty harsh," Asriel agreed, giggling boisterously. "I know you hate them, but I didn't think you were that annoyed by all this."

"Wait, what... that was actually them?" Her brothers busted out laughing, Charles with tears in his eyes and Asriel's hands covering his ears, which in turn were covering his face. "No, seriously! I saw they kind of looked like them, but..." Her brothers were still hysterically, riotously cracking up, Charles holding his brother as if for support.

"I don't know if that was the best or the worst thing I've ever heard you say," Charles said. "Mom, Dad, what do you think, best or worst?"

"I think," Toriel said primly, "that forgetting about bad and unimportant things" Charles' lips pursed in an O of amazement. His mom was even more brutal! "is a sensible way to go through life."

"I concur," Asgore added. "There is little sense in worrying about that which does not matter." This time, it was Asriel who pursed his lips.

"I should have been recording this conversation," Charles said. "Not that it'll last after a LOAD, I just wanted to send it to them. Just to see what happens."

"My whole family's mean," Asriel said, laughing. "The only way I could fit in is if I took off my bracelets and jumped out of a plane."

"I'd say I'd jump out after you, but you'd fall a lot faster than I would," Frisk said, gesturing to her parachute-like dress.

"You sounded like you enjoyed yourselves after all," Toriel said kindly, a satisfied smile on her face.

"It was all right, nothing I worried about happened, so there's that," Charles said, shrugging. Frisk and Asriel weren't sure they wanted to know what he had been worried about.

"Mom, it was great, but... I think it would have been better to watch the parade instead of being in it," Asriel said, smiling.

"What he said," Frisk added, nodding her head. He'd found the right words. She would have loved
to have attended invisibly or in disguise, although someone with goggles would have seen through the invisibility and disguising Asriel would have been nearly impossible. Asgore and his wife got to talking about the people they recognized while on parade, and Frisk wanted to while away the time on her phone, but her hands were effectively giving her the finger and she just closed her eyes instead. Once they arrived home, Toriel immediately got started on lunch and Frisk reluctantly let her brother help take off the dress after he'd tossed off his robe and armor; it felt very appropriate to wear, as she didn't want to move and it didn't either. Her bracelets were still, surprisingly, bright green.

"Hey, Frisk, you asked before how I can remember so much stuff so easily," Asriel said after she put on a much lighter, much cozier housedress and her brothers had gone back to shirt and pants. "It's magic. No, seriously, that's the explanation. You know how I can use your human strength to do stuff?" Frisk nodded. "It's the same for thinking. I don't actually have a brain, remember? It's just a magical pattern, it's what I am. It's what all monsters are. I just get to do things with my pattern that other monsters can't." He hugged her abruptly, his snootle behind her shoulder and his growing, fluffy arms around her back. "I still don't have a SOUL, Frisk. All I have is you." Seeing the two of them like that, Charles couldn't help but join in, his outstretched arms ever-so-gently hugging both of them.

"Haven't we been awkward enough for one day?" Frisk asked into Asriel's fur, with a smile on her face and in her voice. "There is one more thing I was wondering," she continued, grinning into his chest and her fingers wiggling behind his back. "Az, are you ticklish?"

"Frisk! CHARLIE!"

He was.
Reconciliation

The agonized groan woke Frisk immediately.

Charles was tossing around in bed, his hands clenched into deformed claws, his teeth gritted nearly to the point of cracking, his eyes clenched shut, and his heels kicking against the bed with a constant staccato beat. "Charlie!" Frisk yelled, crawling across the bed to touch his soft skin- which was wrong, she knew it was wrong- and sneezing at the dust that had gotten up her nose. Asriel had shed heavily last night, she could feel his fur all over the bed, but he'd gone somewhere without her, but that was really wrong and, confused, her head darted around the room, which was distorted and menacing in the pre-dawn gloom. "This isn't funny, Azzy!" Frisk yelled, throwing open first the door to her closet and then her brothers', but he wasn't there and he wasn't in the bathroom either, and in her panic she ran out the door to her room and started screaming for her parents.

But nobody came.

Terrified to stay and terrified to go and risk Asriel turning back, wherever he was, she ran back inside and grabbed her phone, and first she called Sans (no answer, not on five rings) and then Gaster (the phone didn't even ring), and she suddenly remembered that she could shine flashlights with her magic, but that simply wouldn't respond. Then she saw in the center of the blankets, surrounded by dust and fur, a single, lifeless flower squashed by her weight, but it didn't matter because there wasn't anything in there anymore, she knew there wasn't, there couldn't be, the portal to the Underground had closed up and that was the end of it all, Gaster had even told them it would happen-

Her phone started ringing, a loud beep-beep-beep, and it was Alice on the phone asking her to LOAD, but even that power was gone, but yet it wasn't really gone, and she could use it but somehow, she knew she shouldn't use it, but the reasons didn't make sense-

Frisk screamed herself awake clutching her soft, ever-present goat brother, who was bleating in terror and had to borrow some power just to keep from being crushed. The loud beeping continued, and she reached out with one hand, ensorcelled her phone into her hand, and turned off her alarm.

"Nightmare?" Charles asked.

"Really bad one," Asriel replied, clearly shaken up. He'd shared it and felt himself dying as Flowey as all magic ended.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for not waking you up, you were twitching for a little while." Charles was still never really asleep.

"Next time, you should. Frisk almost LOADed for real. Almost squashed me in half, too." Embarrassed, Frisk didn't reply. "I don't know if it's the spicy stuff or the cheese, but Frisk, no more pepperoni and jalapeno pizza before bed." Both Dreemurr parents had been invited to some geopolitical shindig that their children didn't care about, and without Mom around to make food for them, the kids had made use of the Pizza Hut, which was doing ever-brisker business as more monsters moved into the town.

"Whatever you say, Dr. Az," Frisk said, more seriously than she usually used that title. It'd only been half a year since they'd started learning anatomy, cell types and layers, and other medical basics that didn't really require a foundation in college chemistry, while taking regular classes that
were almost college level already. Dr. Home was still tutoring all three of them together (Charles was still basically along for the ride, although he took the work seriously and completed it expertly), and that would probably continue for another year, but it wouldn't be long before their studies diverged. Even though the alteration had affected every neuron in her system—she'd even taken a second dose, and Asriel had felt it flow through her—she could never have the kind of precision to do what her brother did, and every human to hold the title 'chirurgeon' had to back it up with conventional surgical practice, which wasn't her end goal. She and her brothers would still be in the same regular classes for some time, and she had to keep up with the all-knowing Devil and the goat brother whose superhuman intellect she was powering, and that particular thought filled her with enough DETERMINATION to do the SAVE she'd set her alarm for. "This didn't happen the first time we ate it," she grumbled, trying to go back to sleep, but after a nightmare like that sleep would not come easy.

"I turned twelve years old last week, and I'm still having nightmares like I'm six," Frisk thought. (Whether she was 'really' thirteen due to repeating everything was a can of worms she hated opening.) The Dreemurr kids' birthday party had been another elegant affair, with Frisk spending the repeated Sunday being the precious princess her mother wanted, chatting with Nicole's friends (they'd quietly asked rather personal questions about Asriel; Frisk's response was that he could hear them) and playing magical jump rope, which was basically a combination of 'How long can you keep afloat before getting tired?' and 'How fast can your friends spin the rope around you?' For Frisk, the answers were 'longer than most girls my age' (she was shorter than most of them, though) and 'very, very fast', although after Charles had blurred the rope around her like an engine while Asriel simply kept his end afloat, the group had universally declared demonic involvement to be cheating. Socializing with large groups of humans was still rare for Frisk, what with 'I can't let you know how many times we've had this conversation' hanging over everything, but she'd managed to feign surprise when a few drops of rain started to fall the second time. Tarps on poles had gone up with alacrity, and nobody had argued that Charles' evil power was cheating then.

The people really enjoying Charles' power were, of course, Frisk and Asriel, who had endured the real birthday party that night, the one that Papyrus and Charles had concocted together. This time, the two not-always-devilish Dreemurrs brought their individually crafted carbon fiber bicycles to the subterranean death rally, where the ground itself crumbled behind them and flaming spikes loomed ahead, because a birthday party without those wasn't fun at all.

Christmas had been different. Last Yuletide, Frisk had accepted the fact that she was far richer than everyone else in her school put together (except maybe Barry and a few others) and seized that metaphorical Gyftrot by the antlers, making a list (and checking it twice!) of what her many friends would actually appreciate and use wisely, and in total she spent a full six figures because a few kids in her classes had drivers' licenses and were sick of taking the bus. (Her personal spending allowance was still eight figures, although it was getting to be a high eight.) The only gifts that she and her brothers really cared about were lightweight, foldable wings from one of Charles' mechanical engineers; they weren't enough to keep a human aloft by themselves and weren't as efficient as a bigger glider, but they were the sort of thing to wear all the time and pop out at need.

It was shortly after Victoria's sixth birthday party (cake, ice cream, pink decorations, ornate dresses, magical games, all her friends young and old, and a panoply of plastic toys) that Gaster had, in fact, informed everyone that the Underground was going to shrink and disappear. Most monsters would not miss it; it was, after all, a prison, and any monsters who liked their privacy down there could certainly find it in an ordinary cave or a fortified bunker. Frisk would not lose her powers, nor Charles his, and monsters would be perfectly safe.

"Just a bad dream," Frisk told herself, comfortably pressing her face into her adult-sized goat plushie, who faintly bleated in response. "Just a nightmare. You've had them before. But, as she
gradually drifted off for another couple hours of rest, she couldn't shake the feeling that those horrible things had happened to a Frisk that wasn't her.

Frisk got up slowly, checking the time. They'd slept in later than usual, and Frisk briefly wondered why her mother hadn't awakened them for breakfast. Oh, right, the meeting was an all-day affair in China; Mom and Dad would portal home later that day. She'd forgotten in her dream. She petted and nudged the sleepy goat awake, and they did their morning usual. "What are we eating this morning?" Frisk asked, brushing her brother's fur, having to reach to get the top of his head. Normally, she would have suggested leftovers given the amount of pizza they'd ordered last night, but with Charles around, the concept of leftovers was a distant memory. The stuff that Frisk had regularly eaten before she was a Dreemurr, Pop-Tarts, ordinary cereal, and the like, were things that Toriel simply didn't buy. Frisk had never wanted them again. The fewer reminders she had of that life, the better.

"I bet Charlie can cook something," Asriel said, lifting his arm so Frisk could get under it. "There's got to be a monster killer who knows how to cook."

"Yeah, I've got a bunch. There's this one really good Spanish chef who does not like monsters in his kitchen," Charles explained, combing Asriel's fur out of Frisk's hair. "He actually serves bigger, intelligent monsters no problem, but the little ones, the moldsmals and the unrats?" Unrats were little guys that reminded Frisk of the diminutive Walt. "He squashes 'em. I keep telling him to stop, that they're not going to hurt anything, but I think he'd have to be LV 5 before I could make him listen. On the other hand, he knows everything about cooking. Want some French toast?"

"French toast from a Spanish chef?" Asriel noticed.

"Yup! You'll like it." They finished up and hopped down the stairs in their pajamas. "C'mon, help me out." Charles' siblings, who had helped their mother in the kitchen a great many times, did not hesitate, and before long he was singing a Spanish song in a rich Andalusian accent as he worked.

"Singing as you cook together?" Frisk asked.

"Yeah, only he's making lunch," Charles replied between verses. Toriel's pantry was, as always, exceptionally well organized and well stocked, and it didn't take long at all for the three of them to send the toast to the massive griddle, where Charles tickled it with magical fire as it cooked on the electric stove. "This is how he does it now," he said as the song ended, Asriel setting the table and Frisk setting out cups of microwaved hot chocolate and orange juice. "He thinks magic's a gift from God, and, well, Frisk, he thinks you're God," he said, levitating it off the griddle and onto the plates. Frisk and Asriel ate conventionally; Charles had eschewed silverware for some time, as levitation served better than a fork and he never needed a knife, despite still carrying one a lot of the time.

The first bite lit Frisk and Asriel up, her mouth puckering at the richness and his ears standing straight up in the air. Toriel's cooking was a gentle, classical tune; Charles', and perhaps his influenced chef's, was heavy metal. Mom's cooking used just the right amount of delicately placed flavors to remind her family that they were there; this stuff used just the right amount of thoroughly embedded flavors to start mosh pits in their mouths. The three of them rapidly agreed that it was a "head to the hangout" sort of day, the kind of wonderful Sunday they'd missed in the colder months, sunny enough for Frisk to cast Protection from Ultraviolet on herself before heading out the door with her brothers on bikes. They did stop at Asmodeus' house first; the Dreemurrs had something they needed to ask him, and might need a detailed explanation in person.

"Hiii Frisk, Asriel, Charles!" Victoria greeted them shortly after they knocked. "Dad's coming!"
"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Asmodeus asked, shirtless. Even his boxer shorts were black, Frisk noted. He also looked like he'd been working out, doing everything he could to avoid early death and leaving his daughter behind. Helping save so many thousands of lives had given him an appreciation for his own.

"Hey, quick question," Asriel said. "It's not possible for anyone to create a new pocket universe with anything now, is it?"

Asmodeus started laughing, a fatherly chuckle that made him seem older than he was. "No! Oh, no, that would be- I said it's like giving everyone a gun, not like giving everyone a nuclear weapon. Worse, actually, much worse. There are some spells not even the two of you can cast," he said, gesturing to Charles and Frisk with each hand, "without, I guess you'd call it outside help. But the artifact they used to cast it was the one that gave us all our powers to begin with. Long gone now; it was destroyed in the process." His brow furrowed, his mind going places he didn't want it to.

"That's what the book said, but that doesn't make a lot of sense- then again, this is a deific artifact we're talking about. If it had gone to the Underground, it would have certainly turned up by now," he continued, nervously laughing.

"Was it a small, red orb?" Charles asked. Asmodeus didn't look like he'd swallowed a bug; he looked like he'd chugged an entire ant colony, queen and all. "Dad showed that to us once, remember, Az?" Asmodeus looked like he was trying to say something, but a lip reader would have interpreted the quivering lips as "buruplfufufurfuhhhh..."

"Oh, that thing," Asriel replied. "Yeah, I didn't know what the heck that was. I don't think even Dad knew what it was. He stashed it somewhere, I don't think I ever found it... back then."

"I saw it," Frisk said. Asmodeus stared at her intently. "It was weird, though. He put it behind a musical puzzle. I was going to get it, because it looked interesting, but... okay, this is going to sound a lot weirder than it did back then, and I know it doesn't make sense. I was making sure I had room in my pocket, but there was a dog in there. So I pulled out the dog, and it jumped onto it, ran off through a wall, and left some weird residue behind. And the stuff it left behind multiplied itself and turned into salad once in a while. It was pretty gross."

Asmodeus' shock and fear had turned to mirth. "You're right, it doesn't make sense to us. It appeared from nowhere, one violation, ran off through a wall with that thing inside it, violation two, and then left behind infinitely self-replicating material, which is number three. Frisk, what'd you do with that residue?"

"Got rid of it, it just kind of faded away," Frisk said.

Asmodeus smiled. "And of course it was a dog. A small, harmless, playful, furry animal. That's about right." His smile grew. "I think we've all figured out who that represented, haven't we?"

They had. It was Charles' turn to look like he'd swallowed bugs, although instead of an ant colony he looked like he'd gobbled down a nest's worth of hornets capable of breaking his skin. "Frisk, if you had so much as touched that artifact, this would have all gone much differently, and if you had touched it," he said, looking at Charles, "we wouldn't be here talking about it."

"So where'd it go?" Asriel asked.

"Away," Asmodeus replied. "Back to where it came from. Or perhaps just destroyed, in a way that you shouldn't be able to destroy things. Which reminds me, the shrinking Underground? I'm not sure how far your physics knowledge has advanced, but to expand space-time allows you to have more mass-energy than you did previously. To contract space-time requires mass-energy and destroys it. I suspect the trucks full of nuclear waste and other irredeemable trash will be arriving
"Alphys better get moving with her stuff, then," Charles said.

"Quite, and the frantic mining has already begun," Asmodeus said.

"Thaaaat's what those trucks were!" Asriel realized.

"Seriously? I had no idea! I mean, I knew there were people there, but I didn't think they were doing something that big," Frisk said.

Asmodeus' eyebrows rose. "Not annoying you is a major priority," he said. Frisk nodded, having figured that out long ago. "At any rate, the way I understand it, your father stands to make quite a bit more money. We could transmute anything to any element we wanted if we could make pocket universes, but the three of you know very well why it's good we can't." Reality was broken enough as it was. "If that's all, there's something I want to finish before I take my daughter to a matinee."

"Barbie and the Sorcery Academy!" Victoria squealed in delight.

"Your dad's letting you watch movies about magic?" Charles asked, smirking. Giving real sorcerous children the wrong ideas about their powers was a very bad idea.

"Uh-huh!"

"This time, they brought me on as a consultant with a veto," Asmodeus said. "And believe me, I made good use of that veto."

Laughing, the Dreemurrs bid their goodbyes and cycled down the path and down a hill towards their secret lair. The flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and on days like those- "Frisk, stop," Asriel said, and she did abruptly, using both brakes and magic as her brothers pulled beside her. "You are not going to like who we're about to meet." Frisk looked around, and Asriel gestured down the path. Frisk girded herself for an unpleasant encounter, but couldn't think of anyone she could possibly encounter on a bike path. Nobody from school and no monster she could think of fit the bill- if it was a SOUL stealer, Asriel would have been a lot less calm- the only people in the world who they knew that she didn't like were her not-family, but what were the odds of...

"Aww, no," Frisk said quietly, watching her not-sister strenuously heave herself up the hill on a battered pink bike two sizes too small for her, gears squeaking. That's not even her bike, Frisk thought. Frisk recognized her by her hair, although without Asriel's warning she probably wouldn't have; it looked almost like Frisk's, but covered with coloring and leave-in conditioner that made it almost look like plastic. She was much slimmer than she was before, and her bike occasionally seemed to jump forward in starts without any effort on her part. She was staring at the ground as she pedaled, and when she looked up, the face was that of an old woman, skin hanging where it shouldn't. They all knew why: she'd cast a spell series freely available online, causing her magic to prioritize fat for energy instead of blood sugar, and this saggy skin was a well-known result. Her over-large shirt hung over her like a tarp (Frisk did not want to know what was under it; Asriel was curious but didn't ask), her very baggy pants held up only by a tight cord, the fabric ripped at the right ankle where the bike gears had caught it.

She gasped when she saw the Dreemurrs up the hill, straddling their sleek bikes and looking at her with mixed dispassion, displeasure, and contempt. Undeterred, she let the too-small bike clatter to the ground and ran/floated up to the three of them, gasping for breath. Asriel wondered whether the rapid weight loss had caused some sort of blood poisoning, but she looked wary of him and he ruled out touching her. She looked like she was about to try to hug Frisk, but Charles took a single,
quick step and she rethought that, remembering who he was. It was very easy to forget that he was the mastermind behind the Shoelas' kidnappings so long ago, and after so long listening to her mother screech about demons, Rebecca had forgotten that he actually was one. Charles glanced back at his sister with a devilish smirk: *Come on. Tell me to paste her. I'll only do it if you ask, but you know you want to.*

"Frisk, ohmigod, you're here! I'm so glad I didn't have to go all the way up to your house, you know?" *No, you'd have been stopped at the gate. And I could tell the guard to shoot you on sight and he would actually do it.*

"Well, I have powers now, and..."

"I noticed." Frisk said nothing more. If Rebecca had been looking more carefully, she would have seen the tightness of Frisk's small mouth and the balled-up fists at her sides.

"Mom and Dad threw me out for getting them! Dad said I was cheating or something and Mom said I was a pawn of the Devil!" Charles just shook his head. "I have nowhere to go!"

Frisk laughed in her face, a forced, unfunny laugh of pure derision. Rebecca looked at her pleadingly, and Frisk just laughed all the harder.

"Frisk, you've become all... haughty!" She was surprised Rebecca knew what that word even meant. *No I haven't.* But Frisk couldn't speak those words aloud. What Rebecca took for haughtiness was barely controlled fury. *Don't you see that my life is just about perfect now, without you in it?* Frisk could have screamed. *What gives you the right to slither here and mess it up? What will it take to make you just go away forever?* But if Frisk started screaming, there would be a lot more screaming, and Frisk wouldn't sully her dignity by letting that happen. *That* was haughtiness.

"Go home, Rebecca," Frisk said very carefully instead. "Turn around, give that bike back to whatever child you stole it from, and go home."

"I didn't steal it, I borrowed it!" Frisk caught Asriel's disbelieving not-smirk out of the corner of her eye, and she wouldn't have believed that anyway. *Almost a year and a half, and she's still telling stupid, infantile lies.* Frisk fought for self-control, which was surprisingly hard to come by since she so seldom needed it. Asriel looked at his sister with growing concern.

"Whatever. Turn around and go home, or he'll kill you right now." Frisk almost added to that, with something like *and your ashes will blow away on the wind or he'll rip you in half lengthwise and it'll be logged as a suicide* thrown in for good measure, but she tried to keep her thoughts away from such things lest they become reality.

"I don't have a home! They kicked me out!"

"They can't. That's illegal. Go home. They have to take you. If they don't, call the cops."

"Fine! I'll go back to my white trash hellhole while you live it up in your mansion! They all think you're nice, Frisk *Dreemurr*, but we know better, don't we?!" She spun on her heel, causing whatever tragedy was beneath her shirt to shift, and stomped back, picking the stolen bike up and clattering away.

"I wouldn't have killed her if you didn't say to," Charles said as Frisk slowly exhaled, trying to relax.

"Wasn't talking about you," Frisk replied, glancing at her goat brother, lowering her eyes in silent
apology. She hated being able to overpower his mind, hated that her brain could do terrible things
to his well-being. Asriel's calmness, his lightheartedness, his clarity and his smarts, all of the nice
things she loved so much about her bleating brother could be suspended by her hatred or
annihilated by her depression. And the only way out of that, assuming it worked, would kill their
parents.

"Oh, yeah, that. You told me about that, I forgot," Charles said. Asriel hadn't forgotten about it;
Frisk's emotions leaked through their link on a regular basis. Normally, they were pleasant, like
freshly baked bread; occasionally, they could be tart, like sour candy, spicy, like cinnamon or hot
peppers, or simply intense, like Charles' French toast. That meeting had made them taste awful,
like a dumpster full of rotting fish, and Gaster had agreed that involuntary emesis and involuntary
transformation had things in common. "Come on. I know she's ugly and distasteful and brings back
bad memories, but don't her ruin your day. If I let bad things ruin my day, I wouldn't have days,"
Charles reminded them.

"Just go slow," Frisk said. "We don't want to catch up to her. Az, you go ahead." She let him set a
slow pace, and she was surprised when he pulled out his phone, looking something up while
somehow still paying attention to the path in front of him.

He pressed a few buttons and waited a bit. "Hey, this is Asriel Dreemurr. No, not
a prank, don't
you know my voice? How do you
think I got this number? Listen, there's a girl who got kicked out
of her house this morning, so can you make it not happen? Rebecca Sholeas, do I need to spell it?
Yeah. Yeah, that is why. Thank you. I'll tell her. Bye." He clicked off his phone and stuffed it back
into his pocket, smiling. "He appreciates everything you do, he wanted me to say."

Frisk smiled. "And I appreciate everything you do, especially calling that rememberer." You stole
that kid's bike, Rebecca, so we're stealing your experience of talking to me again. A panoply of
foul names leapt to mind, but what was the point in name calling when you were the princess of
time and the person you hated was still stuck with an awful family? Frisk realized that she could
have said something both chastising and encouraging, like 'even if you wind up in a foster home,
you have actual magic powers now', but even something like that was out of reach in the depths of
her fury. It didn't matter. That encounter was to be unhappened; it would never happen. The kids'
English teacher had broken out 1984 at the beginning of the second semester, and even the
monsters had glanced at Frisk on a few choice lines about rewriting history.

Eventually, Rebecca kept going down the paved path when they went off it, taking grassy trails
that had Frisk checking for ticks every time she used them. The singletrack went past a solid rock
wall with a small indentation behind several shrubs; the Dreemurrs floated up to it, carrying their
bikes. Frisk turned a small slab of rock that looked nothing like a handle, and pulled the secret door
aside, her brothers coming in after her. Touching down gracefully, she flicked the light switch with
a wave of her hand, and several LEDs, carefully embedded into the ceiling, lit up their little cavern.
They always kept the fireplace fresh, full of fat logs, thick branches, and loose, dry tinder. To
conceal the smoke, Charles had meticulously carved multiple chimneys from a single flue,
crawling through tunnels he'd made and then mostly sealing them behind himself so that nothing
bigger than a rat (or an unrat) could crawl through any of them, angling them to keep the rain out.
Occasionally, the wind blowing over the holes sounded like relaxing, deep, and eerie tones that had
inadvertently attracted a fourth party to the secret. Napstablook hadn't known that the cave
belonged to the Dreemurrs; it could be trusted to keep the secret because it still didn't have any real
friends and considered itself too old for school. Like Alphys, it had hung out in the Underground a
lot and didn't like being forced out. Sorry, Blooky. That's not us, that's the universe healing a hole
in itself. Frisk had convinced it not to run away simply by reminding it that if it stuck around, the
Dreemurrs wouldn't just have a secret cave, they'd have a secret haunted cave. Blooky was lying
Frisk sat down heavily on the cushioned stone seat. It was moderately chilly in the cave— it always was, regardless of what the weather was like outside— but Frisk didn't feel like tossing a fireball in to get things started. Instead, she put an arm around Asriel while Charles fed the ordinary battery with supernaturally generated electricity. "Just look on the bright side, Frisk," Asriel said, resting his snootle on top of her head. "We'll do whatever we want all day, and we'll go back home, and then we'll do it all over again without her in it, and then we'll do the rest of forever without her because we're probably never going to see her again."

They were early as usual on April Fool's Day, talking about homework with the Icedrakes (Chilldrake was still serious about joining a financial firm; he wanted to get into high-frequency dark pool trading and cause some real havoc) when Asriel abruptly whispered, "Frisk, you are not going to like who's in school with us today." Frisk giggled and broke out laughing. As a rule, Asriel and Frisk didn't play April Fool's jokes on each other— it really wouldn't be fair, what with Asriel hearing everything Frisk was going to do— but he obviously had a brilliant sense of comedic timing. Even Charles cracked up. It was ridiculous on its face, of course. The idea that Toriel would knowingly let Frisk's not-sister within a thousand feet of the monster school was amusing. "Okay, don't believe me." Frisk looked at him and giggled again, knowing very well that he was listening to her breathing if not outright reading her emotions and that at the end of the day he'd tell her how much she was actually worried about it. And, of course, nothing happened in first period English, nor second period chemistry, and when third period math rolled around, Frisk had almost completely forgotten about Asriel's little joke. Trigonometry was getting tough, as Mr. Cavers was much less forgiving than Ms. Nguyen was, beginning to talk about calculus-related topics and demanding actual understanding, and when Mr. Cavers introduced a new student to the class, Frisk looked up from her laptop to see oh you have got to be kidding me right now.

Frisk's emotions looped from flat wake-me-up disbelief, extreme anger, ironic amusement, outright shock that her mother hadn't extensively warned her, more disbelief (this had to be a dream, right?), finally settling to a point halfway between extreme anger and ironic amusement.

"Az, who's got the hidden camera?" Frisk very quietly whispered, wanting amusement to win. Asriel magically waved some graphite off his pencil, instantly scrawling 'Nobody, this is legit' on a blank sheet of paper. She turned to him, looking very serious, anger winning out. Az, this really isn't funny, if this is your joke on me, my joke on you will be to turn you back into a flower. She would never speak those words aloud and felt deep shame for even thinking them. He just shrugged in reply; if this was someone's idea of an April Fool's joke, it was on him too.

Toriel had clearly, wisely instructed the teacher not to use Frisk's name when introducing her class's newest member; the teacher, on seeing a look on Frisk's face that she'd never seen there before, wisely followed that instruction. Rebecca gave Frisk a short glance and took a seat in the back, far from her. And now everyone in the class is playing the let's pretend we don't know who that is' game. Frisk and her brothers eagerly played along, trying to focus on the work, and nobody paid attention to the elephant in the room. Well, she's not fat anymore but her skin's still kind of wrinkly. Third period ended for study hall and lunch, and the Dreemurrs rolled out of the classroom first, hoping to avoid a confrontation; no such luck, as Rebecca approached them in the library. At least they were relatively alone, although it wasn't apparent whether the kids sitting in the other cubicles really didn't care about the drama or were only pretending not to.

"Fri-"

"Did Mom put you up to this for April Fool's Day?" Frisk asked before Rebecca could finish
saying her name.

"What? No! You know Mom wouldn't ever want to send me here!"

"I didn't mean your mom, I meant my mom," Frisk said. Pursing his lips, Charles created a bit of fire above a bit of solid ice in symbolism.

"Frisk, I- here's what happened. I went to a clinic and got magic powers, so they were going to throw me out on Sunday morning last week, but the police were, like, right there and I got sent to a foster home. I'm just here because their son goes to school here! You think I want- I mean, I've got the powers, but-" She abruptly looked at Asriel and shut up.

"Who's the son?"

"His name's Jimmy, he's like, eight," Rebecca said. Frisk relaxed a bit; she'd probably seen him before, but he wasn't anyone she knew. That would have been really awkward. "Anyway, I'm not trying to-" She stopped, shaking her head. "I don't understand the work in any of these classes. They said you're ahead of me in the other two. You're the only person I know in this whole school. Can you give me some help?" Even Asriel stared at her with you have got to be the most clueless person on the planet plain as day on his face.

Frisk took a deep, slow breath, slamming her emotions under a tightly sealed lid. "Rebecca, don't talk to me. Don't even look at me. I don't know why you thought it was a good idea to come here, but it wasn't. If you can't understand the work, read a book for once in your life. But just get out of my face." One unfriendly glance from Charles later, she did. "Let's just not even talk about this right now," Frisk suggested. "We can finish trig and have time for lunch." Frisk buried herself so thoroughly in her work that Asriel had to tap her on the shoulder to get her to go to lunch.

Toriel's school was a very nice place, Frisk reflected. Nobody went up to her and asked questions about Rebecca or even implied that anything was wrong. Nicole, Jack, a few of Charles' semi-serious devil worshippers, Snowdrake, and some other come-and-go friends sat with the Dreemurrs as usual, and they talked about school work and the April Fool's jokes various games and websites were playing (one site had "Underground disappearing, monsters and magic to disappear with it" on its front page). It was a school day like any other, and after Advanced Chem, World History for World Leaders, and Undyne screaming things at them about more jumping and less squealing, the Dreemurrs packed up their backpacks and took the short walk home, with nothing but each other and their thoughts for company. Frisk would rather have taken Undyne screaming at her for another couple of hours; even being dressed up in a parade was better than this.

"Frisk, you can't keep going like this," Asriel told her. "I've been drinking your spoiled milk all day. Either get her out somehow or show mercy."

"Think there might be a little too much hate there for that, Az," Charles said, smirking. "This is the kind of thing that makes people see the world my way." Frisk found herself agreeing with him. She didn't have to go full Charles- her sister wasn't a terrorist- but there had to be a way to get her out of the school without causing collateral damage.

"Isn't it only real mercy when you're showing it to the people you hate?" Asriel asked. Charles shrugged and Frisk looked away, acknowledging the point. "Okay, I mean she's bad, she hates and fears monsters, but I still don't understand why she still deserves this. You saw what she's like now. You got your revenge."

"The way I'm treating her right now is the way she treated me when I was little," Frisk replied.
"Worse, actually. I haven't taken anything from her. And she didn't have to come here. She could have said 'Uh, Frisk Dreemurr hates me and I don't think I should go to her school', anything would have done it. And she's not going to change, Az. There's not going to be some big reunion, where she goes 'Oh, I'm so sorry, Frisk'- not that I'd accept her apology anyway- and she promises to be a better person or something like that. If she says something like that, she's lying." Frisk suddenly snapped her fingers, and Asriel briefly feared that she would do an unexpected LOAD. "That's it, that's why she didn't say that in school! Because she knows you can hear lies!" The alternative was that she simply didn't think to apologize...

Asriel shrugged. "You might be right, but what are you going to do?" The question seemed somehow off-kilter, and Frisk was wondering if she was detecting Asriel's emotions.

"Tell Mom that she really doesn't belong there," Frisk answered. "She'll listen." Charles was faintly smiling. "No, nothing else, Charlie. Quit tempting me." It would be so very, very easy. She'd ask nicely and her not-sister would be history: permanently in the past, never to bother her again.

"You might not have to," Asriel said in a tone of voice Frisk associated with Sans on a bad day. "She might kill herself. Probably not today, but later, especially if her parents get her back. She's already played around with something on her neck. I mean, if that's what you want, this problem's going to solve itself."

Frisk's face screwed up, and she clenched her fist. "Oh, come on- that dumb bi- she's my morality test now?!

"Pretty sure anything that can get you this riled up counts as one of those," Charles said, opening the door for her. "It's not pass/fail. You're above consequences here. Nobody's going to come down on you for choosing no-mercy, and since she did that stuff to you of all people, she has it coming. Azzy, I always thought it'd be you having another morality test up here. Some really mean monster would be tougher than Dad and challenge him, and you'd have to either step in and kill it yourself or Dad wouldn't really be King of the Monsters anymore. That is still how it works, right?"

"Technically, but not really. Dad'd just call in the artillery. I mean actual artillery." The three shared a laugh and started on their homework. Almost all of it was of the 'difficult, but relatively short' variety; the teachers generally respected the fact that all the other teachers were also giving difficult homework. They had just finished another section when Asriel said, "Frisk, as for your not-family, you can do whatever you want. I mean, I do kind of care, but I'm way more worried about you freaking out again. It's like you can effortlessly deal with anything else in the world but this."

"I know!" Frisk agreed. "So why do I keep having to deal with this?! There's a whole bunch of people who pretend to protect me. I don't need their protection, I can just snap my fingers. There's three people, just three people I never, ever want to see again, and now one of them goes to my school. This is such industrial-grade bull-" Toriel opened the front door then, a patient smile on her face. Frisk leapt up out of her chair, sizzling with fury, levitating three feet off the ground to look her mother in the face.

"My daughter," she said very calmly and kindly, "I believe we must have words."

"Yeah, we need to have words, I've got a lot of words, why didn't you warn me?!" Frisk didn't say the other words, which was just as well because her mother would not have appreciated them.

"It would not have helped," Toriel said. "Tell me, my daughter, Rebecca treated you poorly because that is the way your former family taught her to treat you, is it not?"
"Yeah, it was, at least they were okay with it."

"And is that the way I have taught you to treat other people?" Completely not expecting that, Frisk briefly envisioned an alternate past in which she'd never had any mother but Toriel. Her stiffness and fury relaxed in a rush, she fell to the floor, and Toriel kneeled down to hug her, pressing Frisk's face into her robe, getting it wet with tears. What- I'm crying?! Frisk had even more words for herself that her mother would not appreciate, but she said none of them.

"Mom, there's just three people in this world I don't want to see, I can't see one of them, any of them, without remembering what that was like, and now I've got all this power, and I just want to murder them and it would be so freaking easy..."

"And one of those three people is a poorly taught, ill-behaved glutton with a penchant for disassembly," Toriel said. "And yet, I have allowed her in my school because I believe she can be redeemed." She raised an eyebrow at her daughter. "Certainly, there is nothing wrong with her genetically..."

"Mom, you even told me they don't matter!"

"That is because I did not wish them to matter to you in this way. But Rebecca is not with her parents any more."

"I'm so glad you haven't talked to them," Frisk said. "What would you even do if you really met them?"

"I would deal with them, after my own fashion," Toriel said, knowing very well that her children were far more likely to do the dealing in the end, if such a thing were to happen. Frisk almost wanted her not-parents to try to hurt her mother; successful or not, LOAD or no LOAD, Charles would shred both of them to bite-size pieces whether Frisk asked him to or not, thereby making their grisly and well-deserved deaths not her fault. A LOAD after that? Naw, can't save 'em all...

"I'd get the marshmallows," Charles said. Or that could happen, too; Toriel simply roasting them like chickens would be the best outcome Frisk could think of.

"But that is not how you should deal with her," Toriel said. "It has been some time, and she has taken a step in self-improvement regardless of her birth parents' wishes. Therefore, she deserves a second chance. She had asked for your help." Frisk blinked- who'd told her that? "Go to her, because she needs it. Here is her address; her new home is only a couple of miles away. Bring your school work."

Frisk looked at the ground. "Yes, Mom." She started putting her homework back into her backpack, and her brothers followed suit. She could have said and done an infinity of other things, she knew, as she quietly put her roller shoes on and dragged her customized, super-expensive bike from its resting place. "I think I should apologize," she said in a low voice.

"Wait, you apologize? For what?" Asriel asked, confused.

"Not to her! I owe you an apology, Az. I owe you a massive apology for letting my feelings drag you down and for getting you involved in my personal problems again. I even owe you an apology, Charles. Az is stuck to me, but you don't have to come."

"I can't abandon my sister when she needs support, and you can't possibly waste my time, remember?" Charles reminded her. "This kind of stupid drama does bore me, but I'm still doing a million other things. And you know your problems are nothing like those."
"Frisk, this is the one real problem you have," Asriel reminded her. "You're still sustaining my existence. Let's go solve your problem, or at least make it not this."

It was an excellent afternoon for a bike ride. It had rained yesterday, but the puddles on the mountainside weren't nearly big enough to splash on any of their shoes. The sparklebirds (and ordinary birds) were singing in the trees, the frogs (and Froggits) were croaking in the valleys, lots of flowers were in bloom, and the downhill wind whipped Asriel's ears and Frisk's hair around. The address in question was, in fact, easy to get to; the Dreemurr kids cast invisibility on themselves once they left the path and took to the roads and sidewalks, as they'd rather not cause collisions from some rubbernecker, although there were definitely people who didn't know why their dogs were barking. The house at which they arrived was unassuming, but neatly tended, and the Dreemurrs left their expensive bikes right on the lawn; Asriel would hear anyone stealing them, and then Charles would get to briefly enjoy himself. Decloaking, Frisk knocked on the door, and Jimmy's mother peered through the peephole before pulling the door wide in surprise. Their house smelled like macaroni and cheese, and Asriel had been listening to Jimmy play a video game, occasionally shouting at the screen.

Frisk had no idea what to say, and the woman seemed stuck between using their names and some variant of 'Your Highness', so Charles took the lead. "Oh, hey, is Rebecca in?" the Devil casually asked, and the woman remembered just who she had opened the door for. "My sister needs to talk to her."

"Ah, she's in her room. Rebecca! Your sister's here!" Frisk shook her head, but that wasn't the kind of thing you corrected a stranger on.

A young boy came running around the corner, socks sliding on the carpet, and a brief jolt of static electricity came when he touched the wall. Or maybe that was magic? "Oh wow, it's you!" Jimmy shouted, floating to look Asriel in the face. "Do your transformation thing! The big one!"

"It's not a party trick," Asriel answered, smiling wide. He'd gone God of Hyperdeath to do New Year's fireworks, and everyone had caught it on camera, and children had been asking to see it again ever since.

"Jimmy, get back down on the floor! That is not how we greet our guests. I do apologize, I'm Amanda, this is Jimmy, and Rebecca's, ah, there she is." Rebecca stood at the top of the stairs with her arms folded, and in a rush Frisk knew exactly what she wanted to say to her. Amanda lowered her voice. "I know you have a poor history with her, but please. She's rather shaken up." Charles, who could give a whole new meaning to that phrase while giving little Jimmy nightmares he'd never forget, simply smiled graciously at the nice lady for inviting him into her home. Respecting the house's custom, the three Dreemurrs left their shoes at the door before hopping up the stairs.

"Oh, so the gracious princess steps down from her throne, reluctantly dealing with the common sort," Rebecca said as Asriel closed the door to her room behind him. He saw the shoelace on the ground and did not say that he'd heard Rebecca untie it from the doorknob. "What made you come down from your throne to speak to me?"

Frisk kept her voice at minimum volume, because it would not do to have the princess of time be known for such things, but she managed to scream quietly. "That's what you think this is about? That's why you think I don't want to talk to you, because you think I'm being haughty?" Rebecca recoiled; how had Frisk known the exact word she was thinking? "Holy crap, it really is! It's like you don't even remember me having a closet for a room or a not-sister who never cared! Were you just not paying attention that hard? Do you remember three of my birthdays ago- do you even remember when my birthday is, I bet you do now- how about three Christmases ago, you
remember that? Remember all that care and affection oh yeah there wasn't any. They didn't even want to see my face and neither did you. It was so bad I ran away, remember, I ran away and fell down a hole! Were you even worried about me before I came back? That little thing Frisk was out of your hair and you didn't care at all. If I didn't have all this money and power over reality- and better grades, too- you wouldn't even want to talk to me! You wouldn't! Admit it!"

"We were the Dursleys..." Rebecca said. She's always known, of course she's always known, Frisk realized. She just never wanted to admit that she'd done anything wrong.

"Yeah. That. And Mom, my mom, told me that the reason you're like this is because your parents never taught you to give a crap about anyone but yourself." Frisk wanted to rub it in more, to say something like 'if you had treated me like a person instead of a freak of nature, I might have bought you a car like I did for my friends', or maybe mention what would have happened had Rebecca and not Frisk reached the Underground, but instead she unslung her backpack from her shoulder.

"What...?"

"My mom did teach me to give a crap about people," Frisk said. "And there's no way your old school prepared you for hers, especially jumping in near the end of the year."

"She sees the potential in you," Asriel added. "She thinks that even after treating Frisk badly, you can become a good person. Live a good life. That's why she let you in her school. Because you have hope."

"She knew the same things about me," Charles said, "and you saw me do way worse things than you have."

"So, come on," Frisk said. "What do you need help with?"

Of course it was a lot, and the sun was setting by the time the Dreemurrs started pedaling home, but, with a belly full of Toriel's snail pasta, Frisk and her siblings slept soundly that night.
Of Goats and Girls

It was a windy day, which made the expensive ball useless.

The Wizarding of Humanity (as one popular author had put it) had drastically changed both amateur and professional sports, necessitating massive rule changes when it was clear that Olympians and pro athletes alike were nearly universally receiving 'thaumaturgic doping', as the IOC had originally called it. Most of the basic games were still played generally the same way; variants had sprung up, some more lasting than others, and there was a notable version of rugby in which touching the ball with anything physical was against the rules. (Touching the opponents, on the other hand, was still just as common.) While magically augmented hits and even flying were within the most widely accepted rules of volleyball, maneuvering it in mid-air was considered a lift, and one enterprising sports company had started selling balls with accelerometers, gyroscopes, and computers in them, as direct magical detection was impossible for soulless things.

But they couldn't tell the difference between wind and magic, so Frisk had to turn hers off to make it stop beeping when she was just bumping it around with her family, friends, acquaintances, and someone who counted as none of the above.

Toriel had offhandedly suggested that Frisk should do something nice for Rebecca, so Frisk had, in an unusual display of kindness, asked her where she wanted to go for her seventeenth birthday. ("This is usual for you," Asriel had corrected Frisk, "it's just not usual for you to show it to her.") Rebecca, surprised, had said the first thing that came to mind and asked for a trip to the beach, as she hadn't gone to one since she was nine and Frisk was four. Frisk could barely remember it, but it was mostly a sweet memory as her then-parents had largely left her alone to play. She'd spent the time unsupervised, running around the beach, playing with imaginary friends in the surf, and she'd gotten well and truly sunburned. It wasn't until later that she realized that she could have drowned on the unguarded beach, and it took even longer to realize that maybe her then-parents were okay with that happening. There would be no more such drownings, not to her nor anyone she knew, because swimming for someone with the cheat code was far easier than flying.

It was a wonderful day for it. Frisk wouldn't have wanted Rebecca's birthday of July 12, as her school friends were doing other things for the summer, but it meant that the birthday party was guaranteed to be warm. The humans all had Protection from Sunburn on, but the day was mostly cloudy, light occasionally shining to be replaced by more clouds coming off the endless ocean, the sand comfortable instead of sizzling on bare feet. Rebecca wore a flirty bikini, but the only guys she would attract at Frisk's favorite beach had merman tails and winked a lot. She'd gradually warmed to the idea of hanging out with monsters after being in a school with them, and she found herself considering things that she most definitely would not tell a twelve year old about, especially not with Frisk's ten-foot goatfather around. She'd only seen Asgore in person on the other side of a courtroom; being up close to someone who could dunk a basketball with his mouth disturbed her.

Frisk's other friends also still weirded her out, much to Frisk's amusement. The older girl understood that Frisk and Undyne had a history together, and of course bringing the fish lady to the beach was the nice thing to do, but her gym teacher, really? And a scientist lizard-thing girl? And the hands guy, Rebecca didn't even have W.D. Gaster as her magic teacher and was happy she didn't. He just didn't look right, and she had no idea how to describe him without using the word 'sometimes'. Sometimes he was blobby, sometimes he was sticks, and sometimes he had a lot of hands and sometimes he didn't. At least his swimming trunks were constant, even though his body rippled over them half the time. His kids were skeletons, and the tall one, oh right, the lawyer was wearing bright blue kids' floaties on his upper arm-bones, flippers on his foot-bones, and an
inflatable pool toy between his pelvic bone and his ribs, and the short one... well, the short one seemed like kind of a cool guy.

He was in an argument with Charles, though. They'd been discussing volleyball teams; Frisk and Asriel did not like being on opposite sides, and Charles had politely bowed out because of his overwhelming power, which was when Sans said that he didn't really feel like beating everyone either, and that was when Charles had gotten somewhat arrogant and Sans had said "i'm not kidding, I aikido, kiddo", and Charles had thrown down the gauntlet.

They quickly agreed on rules: only two hits in a row were allowed, teleporting was heavily encouraged (Charles had boasted of being faster than the ball, and no one had disputed it), the game would end at a single point, and at Frisk's insistence, if the ball exploded, whoever did it was the loser. They'd brought a full-size regulation volleyball net and poles, which Charles pounded into the sand with hammer fists.

They set up their folding chairs to watch. Rebecca's foster parents and brother sat with their backs to the water next to Papyrus and most of the other monsters, Jimmy leaning forward on his chair with a childish grin that suggested he really wanted to see the ball or something else explode. Rebecca herself was next to Frisk, who had Asriel and her parents to the other side of her, Asriel and Frisk sitting on the same couch-like chair as usual. After so long just helping with homework and school stuff, Frisk was actually going to have to talk to her, although she would rather play hours' worth of IRL Dark Souls than do it.

Charles served, throwing the ball high into the air, levitating with it, and smashing it towards Sans' side of the net. Sans teleported into the air to intercept the ball, and he reversed its angle, sending it down to the other side of the net at the same speed it had attacked him at. Changing the vector, Frisk remembered from physics class, although she couldn't tell if he was even touching it. Charles outpaced his own redirected smash- his claim about being faster than the ball was no idle boast.

"You have a good Independence Day?" Frisk tentatively asked as she watched them duel. Making small talk, talking to her at all, brought bad memories forth, but Frisk was determined to get through them.

"Yeah, it was pretty nice, they bought some fireworks and let Jimmy set them off. Where were you guys on the Fourth?" Rebecca replied, just as uncertain.

"Out of the country," Frisk said. "Az hates fireworks."

"Really?" Rebecca asked. "I've seen you do your thing, and that's bright."

"It's not the brightness, it's the noise," Asriel explained, lifting up an ear. "Imagine putting all those fireworks right next to your eardrum. That's how it feels for me." Charles' loud smacking of the ball was at the edge of his comfort zone.

"Az is really sensitive," Frisk explained, smiling. It was easier here to talk about her brother than herself. "That's why he's going to be the best chirurgeon in the world."

"Frisk, you know I still can't even-"


"I heard about that," Rebecca said, "but that takes time to learn, right?" The Dreemurrs didn't say anything. "Everyone says you do regular stuff on the weekends and your homework's always done." Frisk's eyebrows rose, giving her a wider-eyed look than usual, which was still narrower
than her genetic sister's. "Seriously, when do you **find time** to do this?" Frisk's lips curled up in mirth. Asriel put his hand over his growing snootle to hide his expression. Toriel, looking past her children, gave Rebecca her usual patient smile. "What?"

"Ask that again!" Frisk shouted, laughing. She'd suspected that Charles heard it, too, although he clearly didn't have time to laugh.

"When do you find time?" Frisk laughed harder. "Stop the teasing, okay? What's the joke?" Frisk looked into Rebecca's confused face and sat up on the folding chair, clenching her guts. The only unfunny part was Rebecca's continued obliviousness, but even that was funny in its own way. Asriel put an arm around his sister, smiling.

"I just... I can't even explain... this is so..." Frisk was rarely at a loss for words, but the absurdity was getting to her, draining away the last of her residual anger. "You know the reason I've been mad at you, right?"

"For not paying attention to you. For not finding time for you, is that what you mean?"

Frisk shook her head. "You're still not. Even now, you're not **thinking** about me."

"Frisk, I- I'm paying attention to you right now! Talk to me!" She really was, at that moment, Frisk realized; she wasn't even keeping an eye on Charles' and Sans' accelerating volleyball battle. Sans had started teleporting himself with the ball, sending it towards places no normal human could have gotten to in time. Charles kept bumping the ball up and smashing it just over the net, trying to send it hard and fast enough that Sans couldn't reply, making the skeleton redirect into the air and then the ground instead of just the ground, although it was clear Charles was getting frustrated.

"What's the one thing you know I can do?" Frisk asked her biological sister. "The one thing I do regularly, and I'm not telling you how regularly." Rebecca's face lightened in realization. "I don't find time, I **make** it. No, I'm not going to tell you if we've done this before, I did do it during the trial, and I'm not going to tell you if I just guessed you were wondering about that."

"During the trial- you were-"

"Yeah, that was before I told everybody. We couldn't have lost, I **can't lose** when it's important, but I should have just told everybody to start with, then there wouldn't have even been a trial. I wouldn't have had to watch you take the wrong side. Why did you **do** that?" Rebecca couldn't answer her, and they watched more Dragon Volleyball Z. Charles had given up on desperate spikes and was casually bumping the ball into the air on Sans' side of the court, making him either bump it back or do the spiking himself, both of which Charles could readily answer with more casual bumps. "Because your parents told you to. You know you could have told them to go choke, but, oh no, my parents are freaky goat monsters and you couldn't take their side."

Rebecca sniffed a bit. "That was what Mom kept screaming about," she said, looking over the kids towards Toriel and her husband. "She actually called you devil goats, and Dad doesn't usually go along with it, but he did that time." Asgore simply chuckled, and Toriel kept right on smiling.

"That's actually why we look like this," Asriel explained. "Dad's the King of the Monsters, the great Baphomet, the master of demons and spirits and eeeevil," he said, waggling his fluffy fingers for emphasis and prompting more chuckling from his parents. "And Mom's what humans thought his wife looked like and what orphans wanted to be their mom. If humans had thought of devil horses, or deer, or elk, that's what we'd be instead." Frisk laughed, imagining him with antlers instead of his gradually widening horns, and she suddenly had a brilliant idea for his next Halloween costume.
Rebecca smiled a bit and looked over at Frisk. To Frisk, it seemed like the first time the older girl was actually looking at her, directly, and not down at her as insignificant or up at her as some unassailable entity. "So when Mom's saying that you're the Antichrist, she's actually kinda right?"

Frisk laughed. "I'm pretty sure he's got that title locked up," he said, gesturing to Charles, who was basically bouncing the ball back and forth with Sans, the skeleton occasionally teleporting to the side and Charles outpacing Sans' spikes easily.

"Why does he listen to you, anyway?" Rebecca asked.

Asriel leaned over towards her, smiling, his right floppy ear waggling in Frisk's face, and she lazily bathed it from side to side like a cat. "She let us be with each other again," Asriel explained. "If it weren't for Frisk, we'd never have played together again. We wouldn't be growing up right now. So all this time we've had together, and we're going to have? She gave that to us. She's giving it to me now." He waved with his bright green bracelet. "It's so easy to do things to people that save, or hurt, or kill forever. One action, one wrong move, one bad decision, and it's the rest of someone's life. Especially to a little kid. I wish more humans understood that." Asriel stopped, finding himself giving a lecture that he felt was only Frisk's to give, as she was the only one who could ever unmake wrong moves. "Besides, he trusts her. Trusts her with literally everything there is."

"But, he's like the..." Something clicked, and a faint smile crept up on the older girl's face. "Frisk, does he have a crush on you?" Sans nearly got in a teleporting smash, but Charles dug in to bat the ball up into the air and gently smacked it to Sans' side of the court.

"Sort of, but he's the only human in the world I could ever have an equal relationship with," Frisk explained, causing Rebecca to smile further. Frisk had never really thought of him or anyone romantically at all, except as a poorly defined but nearly certain future because who else was there who had anything like her power? The topic itself made her anxious and she hoped she wasn't blushing. "I just turned twelve, okay? And his body isn't even... I think it's the same?" Charles had been growing as well, but his main body's general physique had always been burly, and his armpits and chest were still hairless, and she didn't mind being between his still boyish but supernaturally strong arms, and she did not want to think about that in front of Rebecca because then she really would start blushing.

"And he's your brother," Rebecca said, giggling.

"Yeah, but not really."

"Not the way I'm really your sister. Is there any way I can get you to call me that? Because it's, like, I know you're still mad, and I was being so stupid, but..."

"There is a way," Frisk replied. "Get time-reversing powers better than I have, then go back and tell a crying five-year-old thing that its parents are actually the ones with the problem." Abruptly, Charles responded to Sans' casual bump by spiking it directly at his head.

"heh," Sans said, teleporting with it over to the side, "did ya really think-" But Charles, lightning fast, bashed it again the moment it crossed his side of the net, and it hit the sand with a thump.

"whale, looks like i got beached," Sans said, as everyone in the crowd clapped, especially Rebecca, who was glad for the distraction. "welp, i'm going swimming. papyrus, you ready?"

Frisk realized that she'd gotten her hit in. Was that what she wanted? The real reason she'd brought her out here was to cram her past sins in her face? "Rebecca, is that what you really want?" Frisk asked kindly. "To have my freaky devil goats as your parents? Because you have your own parents
now who aren't crazy, and a little brother, and I hope you're not treating him like you did me."

"I'm not. And I wish I didn't have any parents, I'm seventeen now, I can take care of myself. Well, I could if I had money."

"There's a law for that," Charles replied, walking back triumphantly, spinning the battered ball on his finger Globetrotters style, setting it down, picking up a double handful of sand, and sitting on the same folding couch next to his brother, his siblings scooting over to make room. He hadn't made the ball explode, but the sensors and circuitry inside it rattled around, smashed to pieces. And on a final day, too. The first time around, they'd done other things and Frisk had managed to avoid a conversation she could only bear having once. "You could be an emancipated minor." Rebecca's expression perked up, and at once Frisk knew what to do.

"If that's what you want, I'll give it to you," Frisk said. Az is right- it's easy to make snap decisions that permanently affect people's lives. "You remember our lawyer, you can borrow him." Said lawyer was yelling loudly about sharks as his brother made accelerating dun-DAH, dun-DAH, dunDAHdunDAHdunDAH noises while grabbing his bones from beneath, his floaties popping him right back up to the surface. "And you need money to live on and a house to live in, right? Okay, I'll get you one. Same neighborhood you're in now." Property values near Mt. Ebbot had soared (location, location, location!), but they still weren't high enough to make Frisk care. A vague burning smell reached her nostrils and she wondered if someone was failing to grill something.

"Just like that?" Rebecca asked.

"Just like that." Frisk didn't know if this was an adult or a childish way to end this, but she wanted it ended.

"Before I even... I'm sorry, I really am, for all the taking your stuff, and helping them hurt you, and I guess I should be really be apologizing for not calling somebody, and not treating you like a sibling at all..." While she was apologizing, Charles whispered something at Asriel, handing him a small object.

Just screw this grudge entirely, Frisk abruptly decided. It was too nice of a day to hold it, and Frisk was way, way too powerful to be holding one against someone who never knew any better. It didn't feel like forgiveness; it was more like giving up on festering anger. There just wasn't any point anymore, especially not when the older girl was so completely at Frisk's mercy that it was embarrassing to think about. "It all ended up like this, so I forgive you... sister." Leaning over her chair, Rebecca gave her sister a hug, and Frisk hugged her back, feeling skin that wasn't fluffy like fur or solid like steel. She could not remember the last time she'd hugged an ordinary human being and wondered if that was her very first.

"Well," Rebecca said, "I guess it's going to be really awkward when our, I guess they're both our not-parents get here." Frisk stared at her. "Yeah, I invited them a little bit ago, you weren't paying attention?" Completely confused and worried, Frisk twisted her head around to look at her brothers, and both were clearly trying not to laugh. Asriel was holding something in his fluffy hands that he didn't want to show.

"Don't do that!" Frisk shouted, causing her siblings to erupt in laughter. "You realize, there's one, two, three, I guess four, he'd probably, so five, oh yeah, six, at least six people here who'd want to do bad things to them? Not counting me?"

"Oh come on, I thought you would laugh," Rebecca said. "They won't even use portals. I think they want to go join the Amish or something but I don't think the Amish would take them." They shared
a chuckle. "Frisk, thank you. I mean that. Even if I have a hard time dealing with this world you've brought out." A lot of people still did, including the Amish, who forbade magic in their communities and excluded monsters without killing them.

"That's all right," Frisk replied. "I had a hard time dealing with the world the way it was." They sat together for a bit, feeling the ocean wind, watching the skeletons and the fish push the reluctant lizard around on a surfboard. Water made Gaster even weirder; when he went blobby, he floated, and his sticks sank, and he looked like a jellyfish as he swam.

Asriel showed the thing in his hands to Charles, who approved; reaching over Frisk, he handed it to Rebecca. "Happy birthday," he said, a wide smile across his face.

It was a pair of figurines facing each other and holding both hands, made from swirled, dark glass and carefully detailed with magic. Rebecca looked at them in wonder, Frisk craning her head.

"They're goat people," Rebecca noticed first, the horns and the ears unmistakable, but that was before she saw their forms, the heart in relief on the smaller figure's chest. "Oh my God. Frisk, look, they're us. Did you just make this?" she asked the growing goat.

"Charles did the big stuff," Asriel said. Charles had turned the beach sand to glass and made its rough form, the impurities coloring the sculpture, and then Asriel had done precision detailing to it, carving Toriel-like horns on the taller figure's head and floppy ears on both of them.

"Oh wow. That's amazing. Baaaaaa, I'm a goat now," Rebecca said playfully.

"That's not what the bleating sounds like," Frisk told her. "Az, show her."

"I'm not gonna just bleat on command!" Asriel replied.

"Fine. It's like this!" Frisk abruptly shouted, grinning widely and grabbing for Asriel's ears, but he shrank back in time. "Gonna getcha, Az!"

"You know you can't!" Asriel shouted, and the chase was on, Frisk's bare feet leaving furrows in the soft sand behind Asriel's nearly invisible footprints.

"Get him, Charles! Tickle him!" Charles rushed at his brother fast, but Asriel, with his light weight and borrowed human power, was not as easy to catch as that. The two of them darted back and forth in the air like dogfighters, Asriel jumping off his brother more than once.


"Yeah, I know he's probably going to win re-election, like every other house here has a 'Keep America Great' sign on it, yeah, I know it's probably because of me, but we don't make endorsements for any candidate and neither do our mom and dad," Frisk said, annoyed.

"I have an official position," Charles stated firmly, loud enough to get everyone's attention. "My position involves the microphones shoved in my sister's face and your dropped pants, would you like me to- yeah, that's what I thought."

The matching elk costumes with antlers ("I don't care if you're a girl, if I'm wearing these things, you are too!") were the talk of the town that Halloween, although Frisk and Asriel took them off to go surfboarding down Charles' rockslide, which was somehow less scary than Alphys' magic-
resistant hug-robots. ("Of doom", Alphys insisted. "You have to say 'of doom', it's part of the name.")

"...forecast to be re-elected with more than four hundred electoral votes. Some precincts have reported the 'Your Dropped Pants' write-in campaign getting more than ten percent of...

"Mom! This dress is even bigger than last year's!"

"If it's too much, I can-"

"No, it's fine, let's go. I know, they expect it. And I won't hurt my arm waving this time."

"WHY ARE WE STILL SINGING 'A PENNY'? SHOULDN'T IT BE 'A DOLLAR'? OR 'A TWENTY'? THIS OLD MAN GETS MORE SHORTCHANGED EVERY YEAR!"

"goose still needs to go on a diet, though."

"This is the first time I've had actual goose. It's delicious. Toriel, you really are a good cook."

"Why thank you, Rebecca dear."

"Happy thirteenth birthday, Frisk," Asriel woke his sister up with. "I've got a present for you, and I think you know what it is."
"Large fans that blow air when we glide over them?" Frisk suggested, making her goat brother laugh.

"Put where?" Asriel asked, grinning.

"All the places we usually go," Frisk said. "The mall, Grillby's, on the bike path so we don't have to bike uphill to get home," Asriel laughed again. "I know, that'd be ridiculous. Is it a guided tour through Reunification National Park?" The former DMZ between North and South Korea had been cleaned up and thoroughly de-mined, mostly by highly paid intelligent monsters too light to set mines off. The Dreemurr kids still hadn't gotten around to visiting it- Frisk really didn't want the reactions she'd get- although their father had been there.

"That isn't it, Frisk," Asriel said gently, placing his hand on her hair, his fluffy palm starting to cover her head the way Dad's did. He'd only grown larger over the past year; he was already taller than nearly everyone else in the school, even Barry and almost all the teachers. Only a handful of the kids could still see the upper part of his snootle standing face-to-face, and he'd outpace them in a year or two. His horns came up to Mom's chin. He still usually dressed the same, and nearly all of it had to be custom-made, just as it was for his growing human brother. Unless they were lying down or otherwise cuddling, Frisk never even looked at either of her brothers when talking anymore.

"Is it an adventure through a long coal tunnel?" Frisk asked playfully.

"Hey, how'd you know?!" Charles asked, surprised.

"Wait, seriously? That's it?" Frisk asked, surprised right back.

"That's my present, we can go when you want," Charles said.

"C'mon, Frisk, you know what my present is," Asriel said. Frisk just nodded. Dr. Home had been talking about the procedure with her and Asriel for more than a week, discussing how to change this to that and moving those nerves from here to there and how much material would actually be taken away, and he'd be present to supervise. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Asriel reminded her. "You can put it off for a year, or ten, or fifty, or forever. Nobody's making you. It's just a form, Frisk. Technology and I can change those, they don't really mean as much for you as they do us. Your pattern's almost all up here." He patted her head with his large, fluffy hand, and Frisk almost wished he'd just keep doing that all day instead. She knew almost as much about what Asriel was going to do as he did. She'd approved every step, and she knew she had no rational reason to be afraid, but it still took determination to go through with it.

"Yeah," she said, sighing, "but this form is wrong. When's he coming?"

"Half an hour," Asriel replied. "We want to give you a lot of time to see if you actually want it or not." Sighing again, she snapped on her bracelets (Gaster had made them new pairs a month ago), got out of bed with her brothers to do morning stuff, changed into a comfortable housedress (her size had changed only slightly), and ate a wonderful breakfast of onion- and green pepper-laden omelets with her parents, who sensed her nervousness and decided not to talk about it. She and her family sat on the couch together, watching the news ("TODAY, ON FRISK DREAMMURR'S BIRTHDAY" - thanks a lot, Mettaton) which was boring as usual, until the knock on the door
came right on time, making Frisk's heart jump in her chest. Dr. Home wheeled in a folding table, almost like a stretcher, and after a few pleasantries and confirmations, laid it out right in the middle of the Dreemurrs' living room, a place where Frisk felt comfortable. She took off her dress, laying down and counting her blessings. She trusted him beyond measure. There were no surgical tools because Asriel didn't need them for this. There was no need for a sterile environment because he wouldn't break her skin. There was no anaesthetic because it simply wouldn't hurt. He was so skilled at his craft that, despite his limited education, he'd already helped with three delicate chirurgeries over the past two months that humans didn't feel comfortable doing themselves, and of course she was there to watch him do them. And if anything went wrong, if she didn't like it for whatever reason, she could decide not to actually get it because she was still Frisk Dreemurr, Princess of Time.

"Do you wish us to stay or leave?" Asgore asked kindly. Frisk would have probably asked them to leave if they were human, but they were hundreds of years old and an entirely different species and her loving, trustworthy parents, so she wanted them to be there for her. Charles, too, stayed to watch; she trusted him with her SOUL, so what did she care about him watching her flesh change? Azzy's right. It's just a form.

Asriel and Dr. Home got to work, the doctor walking the goat through every step, both of them pausing to occasionally ask Frisk questions about how it felt and if anything pinched. It didn't, at all; she was worried that it would feel some other way, but it didn't feel like that either. There was just pressure and movement, and while her parents waited patiently, looking down from their lofty heights, Charles was staring into space and Frisk had to struggle not to laugh.

"Something wrong?" Asriel asked immediately.

"Nah, it's just Charlie's not even watching," she replied. "Keep going." Charles smiled a bit and kept doing what he was doing, off in some other country.

It took an hour and a half, as Asriel was taking his time, double-checking everything as he went. As he declared the job finished, his family clapped, fluffy hands going floof-floof while Charles' iron palms snapped loudly, and Frisk joined in on the clapping, sitting up and giving her brother a heartfelt hug, her small mouth in the widest of smiles. Frisk was indistinguishable from any other girl her age; the only difference was the organs she didn't have at all. She wasn't entirely fine with that, but the other girls occasionally talked about periods and she was very glad she wouldn't have those. It was only when they were done agreeing on a gentle, directed hormonal regimen, sitting on the couch together, that Frisk realized Az actually did it, I'm not a weird, messed-up thing anymore, and she did not look forward to doing her daily LOAD because then she'd go right back to being it again.

"Hey, Dr. Home? Can you start driving here as soon as I LOAD? Because I don't want to go to school messed up again," Frisk requested. She'd done her SAVE earlier than usual.

"Are you that certain already?" the doctor asked, in his usual, pedantic tone. That was what Frisk and Asriel appreciated about him: he knew very well that he was teaching medicine to children, and so, even after almost two school years, he never assumed that they knew anything and was more than willing to explain everything. Okay, well, not a child anymore. I'm a teenager. Even though she felt more normal than she ever had, the concept was somehow absurd: Frisk, a teenager?! Frisk, a real girl, at least mostly? Magic was ordinary; that was ludicrous.

"Yeah, absolutely," she said, suddenly wanting to get out of there and go do something normal. They'd already agreed to take the day off from medical instruction; she'd supposedly need time to get used to it, and after all, it was her birthday.
"Well, tell me if anything changes. Have a wonderful birthday today, Princess Dreemurr," he said, bowing and making his exit. He seldom called her that.

"Okay, wait, before we do anything else, it's still not just my birthday, it's you guys', too," she reminded her brothers. "Mom, Dad, brrrrrrrring out the shirts," she said, vibrating her lips because she couldn't roll her R's. The shirts that their parents happily brought out were crafted of silk and magic and were mostly black, with tasteful stripes of green and yellow on the shoulders and the Delta Rune in the center. Frisk had thought about putting hearts on them, the same as she still wore, but decided against it; it'd look wrong on Charles and only remind Asriel what he didn't have.

"This is nice," Asriel said, smiling and changing into it, his brother doing the same. The necks of his shirts were always a little bit stretchy; they wouldn't go over his horns, one at a time, otherwise. "Thanks for making these, Mom." Of course he'd overheard Frisk talking to their mother about them.

"And, I've got you an actual surprise." Asriel raised his eyebrows. Frisk surprising him was nearly impossible. "Charles, I'm sorry, this would probably just bounce off you." Charles nodded in understanding as Frisk reached into her pocket and pulled out a small ampoule full of something that wasn't entirely matter. "I had to write what I wanted on Gaster's homework so you wouldn't hear. He drew it out of me when you weren't looking. Don't worry, I have a lot of this stuff." Smiling, she reached up with it—she actually had to reach—and touched it to his forehead.

Love, caring, and concern slammed into him like a speeding freight train. He stood stock-still, too surprised even to bleat.

You're my best friend.

I am **not** losing you, ever, I don't care **what** I have to do.

I want to see you grow up.

I need to make sure you're having fun too.

If anything ever happens to you, I'll change the past so it didn't.

I'll love you even past the end of the universe.

He knew what these feelings were, they'd trickled in through their link, but he had never been hit with so much of them at once and they threatened to overwhelm his mind.

Frisk gasped, almost collapsing from the drain. Of course she was being drained, she should have known, he needed her to even feel those things, without her DETERMINATION he was nothing but a—and the drain, as if turned off by a faucet, suddenly stopped. Asriel's body tensed up, and Frisk saw red out of the corner of her vision, red on her wrists where she should only ever see green. Something else, something small, was gone, but she barely noticed in her surprise. "No way," Charles said, whatever had been distracting him forgotten. Asgore and Toriel drew in tremendous breaths, holding them. The King, wide-eyed, took a step forward, his hand reaching out but not quite touching, as if afraid that his son would turn to dust on the slightest brush. The Queen put her hands to her face in shock.

Frisk's first thought was that she'd killed him, literally killed him with kindness, but he was looking down at her, blinking, just as surprised as she was.

Her second thought was that she'd broken the bracelets with too much DETERMINATION at once, and she was just about to say that when Asriel started coughing profusely, and something green,
yellow, and black flew over her head. She turned, looking at the flower covered in rancid gunk, and turned back to her goat brother, who was staring down at her with an expression just as shocked as his mother's.

"No, no, it couldn't have been that easy!" Frisk shouted, looking back at the flower again, expecting it to start moving and talking. It was quite dead, the gunk melting it and sizzling into the carpet. She knew, then, what was gone: her connection to her brother.

"You finished dreaming me," Asriel said from behind her, his arms wrapping around her and holding her close, and at once she understood. Humans couldn't intentionally dream up monsters under normal circumstances. The people who tried either got nothing for their efforts or found their dreams coalescing into something different. But Asriel, whose pattern already existed, had just needed a last bit, a last bit that Frisk had been trickling into him for years. Humans around the world dreamed of him, their visions and ideals pouring in. One solidifying burst of love and life had been enough to finish it, to make him complete. Numbly, Frisk fumbled with her useless bracelets and let them fall to the floor. Asriel tossed his aside to land on a chair. And then Frisk was smothered in Dreemurr fur, her parents surrounding and hugging her and her brother, Her Majesty wordlessly crying and His Majesty saying something barely comprehensible in seventeenth-century English that sounded like a prayer of thanks.

"Wow, Frisk, that's got to be a record," Charles said.

"What's that?" Asriel asked as Frisk jostled for room in the middle of her huge goat family.

"She's been a real girl for fifteen minutes and she's already a mother."

There was silence for a moment. "Charlie!" Frisk yelled from inside her cocoon of fur, and Charles cackled devilishly while his parents glared at him and Asriel snickered. Frisk wanted to call him Chuck and rhyme his name, but ruining tender moments was his business, not hers.

"Seriously, though, I thought we'd have to go on a quest for that," Charles said. "I thought maybe there's another artifact somewhere in the universe. That's the first thing I was going to use it for. I didn't think it'd just be... that." But no one had known, not Gaster, not Asmodeus, not Asriel himself. How could they have? Asriel was a minority of one. There were theories and plausible ideas, but there wasn't anyone in the world to compare his situation to.

"All that power just for one monster?" Asriel asked, his snootle (it's all his snootle, now) wrinkled up in a smile.

"Just the first thing," Charles replied. "The second would be a lot bigger." He didn't explain what it was, because he didn't quite know.

"It is very seldom that such quests accomplish anything in this world," Asgore told his children. "Destruction can come at an instant. Creation is more difficult and time consuming. That is the normal way of life." He looked at his natural son. "Your SOUL was not born instantly the first time, either."

"It most definitely was not!" Toriel added. "Oh, my dear, dear son. When I first heard your cries, you were our only light, there in the darkness. When you and your brother died, I..." She hung her head and Charles looked away. She turned to Frisk, her eyes wide, her smile great and appreciative. "And now you have come and not only brought him back; you have made him whole." Toriel's gentle touch was like a felt cloth against Frisk's skin.

"I didn't even know that was going to happen!" Frisk protested. "I just thought, well, I'll give him
something he'll like, okay, but we've got everything else, so I'll give him my emotions because we can actually do that. Oh my God, Az. I gave you a new SOUL by accident."

"Perhaps," Toriel said, "but your love is no accident."

"It's part of me," Asriel said. "It's a big piece. Your DETERMINATION, your hopes, your friendship... it's me, now." Frisk took a good look at her goat brother. His form hadn't changed. His horns and ears and snootle were all normal for him. His shirt (I guess it does need a white heart now) sat on his fluffy body; his furry, inhuman paws poked out of his pant legs as usual. A very bad thought hit her and she checked her own mind; her DETERMINATION was topped off and ready to be used, her thoughts, dreams, and ideals all present and rock-solid. Some things don't decrease when you share them.

"I know I've said this before, but thank you so much, Frisk." His smile widened even more. "C'mon. Let's have fun with Charlie's present." They raced upstairs to get ready, fluffy feet next to human feet, but of course Charles won the race handily, opening the door for them.

"I'm really kind of surprised you want to do this right after something like that, Azzy," Charles said, and the goat looked unsure how to reply.

"Well, yeah," Frisk said. "He just got his SOUL, of course he wants to use it."

"You just got something new too, do you want to use it?" Charles asked in an innocent tone.

Frisk blushed as hard as she possibly could. Asriel's snootle made a large O. "Charles- you- I swear, sometimes I wish there was such a thing as holy water that actually worked," she said, going into the closet to change. She put on her trademark shirt, a large red heart in the center of blue and pink stripes, and put on new underwear that Toriel had wisely bought, then a loose skirt over a pair of leggings. Socks, roller shoes, backpack with glider wings, then downstairs to grab plenty of candy for the road and jump into her parents' arms, giving them tremendous hugs before heading out.

"Hey, Az, this isn't going to stop you from doing your thing, is it?" Frisk asked as they got on their bikes.

"I can't transform anymore, but I can still do all this." Lifting his hand into the sky, he fired a beautiful pattern of rainbow swirls that dissipated into the air. "Oh, you mean the chirurgery? If I need human power for that, I'm doing something really wrong," he continued, laughing. "I'm still a Boss Monster. Maybe the most powerful one there is. Well, who isn't Sans or Gaster, anyway." Fighting Sans would be like rolling dice against a guy whose dice were loaded. Fighting Gaster would be like rolling dice in a blackjack game.

"Is that so?" Asgore rumbled from behind him, the smallest bit of threat in his voice. Toriel clutched his arm, looking nervous.

"I think it might be, Dad," Asriel said, nodding and stepping off the bike he'd just got on, knowing where this was going. "Armor, no armor?"

"As we are," the King said, pulling his spear from the ether. "Here and now."

"Dear. You need not do this so soon after," Toriel said, tugging at her husband's arm.

"Relax, Mom," Asriel said, drawing a pair of Chaos Sabers out of nowhere, twirling them around as if they were actually made of metal. "We're not going to really hurt each other. You know this
isn't going to happen anyway." Rough-housing, Frisk understood. A father playing with his son, monster style. He never could have done this before, not fairly. Toriel stepped aside, still nervous, as the two of them squared off, there in the center of the path, surrounded by multicolored flowers.

Asriel reminded himself that his father was born in a time when people were expected to fight to prove their worth, that fighting was just something people did. And Asgore knew exactly how to use his weapon; unless Asriel was possessed by Frisk's rage (and am I ever glad that can't happen again), he had only ever attacked one person in his life.

The humans were expecting them to start blasting each other with lasers or fireballs- Charles, in the line of fire, would barely even notice it- but instead Asgore began swinging his trident, and Asriel blocked the two-handed swing with the flat of one sword, but Asgore spun it incredibly quickly and Asriel blocked it with the other. He is stronger, a lot stronger, Frisk immediately realized. The King began stabbing rapidly, poking in and out, but Asriel batted some away and jumped back from others. "You fight like a human," Asgore said. It wasn't clear whether that was a compliment or not.

Smiling widely, Asriel lunged forwards, but his father's eyes started flashing orange and blue, and then the spear immediately widened, covering the whole path in front of them as his father swung it; but Asriel knew how that worked, what magics targeted things that were moving and things that weren't, and he froze in mid-air for just the right amount of time before slashing at his father with his blades, one after the other. Asgore jumped back very quickly from the first swing, startling his wife, and, with a wide, fatherly grin, expertly raised his trident in the perfect blocking position, to catch the second swipe between its prongs and fling the sword away-

And Asriel's blade cut right through it, severing the prong and cleaving straight through the haft in one swoop, and the sheer force made Asgore stumble backwards, falling on his large, fluffy buns into his garden. Asriel could have done something theatrical like put his sword to his father's throat or some other silly thing, but instead he dispelled his swords and reached out with his fluffy hand. "You squashed your flowers, Dad," he said, smiling.

"Then it is well," Asgore said, grudgingly accepting the hand up, his broken spear fading away, "that your sister shall un-squash them."

"If you're going to try to make me the King for that, I don't want it," Asriel said, chuckling along with his father. "Did you just want to know how strong I am?"

"No," Asgore replied, shaking his head. "I wanted you to know your own measure. Go on. Play with your siblings. We will always, always be here for you." And great Asgore kneeled down and planted a single kiss on the top of his son's head.

"I didn't think it'd be like that," Asriel said quietly as he rode along with his siblings down the hill and to the bike path. "I'm a lot more powerful than I thought I'd be."

"Yeah, Azzy, it's almost as if your SOUL was made out of Frisk's DETERMINATION or something," Charles said. "You're like Undyne's super-killer undying form." Undyne transformed? The concept was hilarious, and his siblings started to crack up.

"Undyne on steroids, I can just see it now," Frisk said, laughing so hard she had to magically keep her bike upright. "RAAARGH, I AM THE GREAT UNDYNE THE UNDYING, I AM HERE TO BRING PAINFUL AND SWIFT JUSTICE, NOW GIVE ME FIFTY PUSH-UPS, RARRGH!"

"No, she wouldn't be like that," Charles said. "She'd be 'Human, I will stop your rampage. I, Undyne, will strike you down.' If you had done what... what Chara wanted, that actually might
have happened. I never want to see it. By the way, Az, is this stable? You know what happened when monsters got injected with DETERMINATION."

"Yeah, because it wasn't really theirs," Asriel said. "They couldn't deal with it, it went bad. This is all mine, it really is part of me."

"I'm just... so relieved," Frisk said. "It finally happened and now we don't have to worry anymore."

There was only one thing that Frisk was still worried about; she knew that as soon as she LOADed, she'd be fumbling for her emotion ampoule as fast as possible.

"Because when we're apart, I won't hear everything you do?" Asriel asked, giggling. Frisk still couldn't process 'when we're apart' very well. They could be apart, but they would be together.

"Because now I can feel angry, or sad, or depressed without having to worry about you turning into a killer or back into that thing you spat out," she reminded him. "Hey, Charlie, how far's this coal mine?"

"About twenty miles," he replied.

Frisk groaned, her legs already complaining in advance. "See? Feelings like that. But they'd all remembered their backpack glider wings, and she was quite used to feats of endurance, even if she didn't sit on her seat quite the way she was used to, and she felt more energetic than usual. Well, yeah, I'm finally fixed and Azzy has his own SOUL now so he's not draining me anymore, and I'm the happiest I've ever been. Could happiness make her more capable, more willing to work hard for her goals? She was determined to find out.

"I'm still going to do everything I can to stop you from getting depressed," Asriel said. "I still know your emotions. I hear your body, I see your cells. And I'm still going to do everything I can to make sure you don't die. It's not for me, Frisk, and it doesn't have to do with your power. It's for you."

Smiling, she matched speeds with him down the hill, flipped on her backpack's glider, gave him a one-armed hug, and easily carried his lightweight body and bicycle on a current of air and magic, their brother laughing beside them.

It was a long ride out to the middle of nowhere, up and down singletrack paths, and Charles' 20-mile estimate had been as the crow flies rather than how far they actually went, and they'd even had to stop at a fairly remote gas station because they forgot to bring water. None of them had brought their wallets, so they traded autographs for soda; Frisk felt mildly guilty about giving the amazed cashier something he wouldn't remember getting, but Charles picked up on it and told her that she was going to unhappen local ecological devastation, which was another way of promising that their adventure would be a lot of fun.

Charles had dragged boulders in front of it, and shattered them to let his siblings in. "Dare you enter my magical realm?" he asked smugly, handing Frisk a conventional particulate air filter with goggles and Asriel an altered one to fit over his eyes and snootle. He told them to bring their bikes and let them light up the dark cave themselves, but they had to use direct light and not fire as the smell of gasoline was overwhelming. Large pallets of crushed aluminum cans lined the walls, as did large piles of coal excavated from deeper in the mine.

"So, what, this is bike down before you suffocate? Or will the fireball get us first?" Asriel asked.

"You won't suffocate, and the fire won't reach you," Charles said firmly. "Do you know how a rocket stove works?"

"Never heard of it," Frisk said.
"Oh, well, you're going to learn in ten seconds. Unless you want to chicken out? Dad's right, quests
don't usually accomplish anything." Of course they didn't chicken out, and they were there to have
fun and not to accomplish things, so as Charles loudly counted down behind them, Asriel rapidly
led his sister down the coal mine's spiral, pedaling hard. There was a tremendous fireball behind
them, and suddenly they felt a terrific wind in front of them, hard enough to make Asriel waver,
and they'd paid enough attention in physics class to figure out what was going on. The fire was
drawing air up through the mineshaft. The spiral was blocked by a thick grating of steel bars,
locked electronically; a large sign, screwed into the wall, said 'The keycard is within ten meters of
this sign.' Crates and boxes of all kinds littered the walls, and the two of them tore them apart
looking and finding nothing.

"I think we'll just have to bust it, we don't have time, it's coming," Asriel yelled over the wind,
unsure if he or Frisk could bust it easily. It would fail closed, and that steel was thick. Maybe if
they used enough energy burrowed through the rock...

"What's coming?" Frisk asked quickly.

"That," Asriel replied, shining his light backwards, revealing a slow, steady stream of molten
aluminum.

"Okay, it's official, Charles is a dick, where would a complete dick hide a..." Suddenly Frisk knew,
and kicked herself for not figuring it out earlier. She magically unscrewed the sign itself, and of
course the keycard was trapped behind it. They biked down another full circle before running into
another electronic lock, this time with a keypad and room for four digits. Another sign on the wall
said 'The thing you need most.'

Abruptly, Asriel started laughing vigorously, reaching for it at once, thinking for a bit. Four beeps
and the door opened. "Outdated, Charlie, but you couldn't have known when you made it!"

"But it's numbers?!" Frisk asked as they rode together, confused.

"Oh, I guess you're too young. There's old phone keypads that have letters on them." Frisk instantly
figured it out. "Alphys played with that stuff when it first came out." A solid, airtight brick wall
blocked their path, and two sledgehammers were lain beside it. "Now this is just insulting. And
really loud."

"Yeah, because the wind's coming from over there," Frisk said, pointing to a narrow section of rock
where air whistled through. A few hammer blows and a bit of magic blew it open to reveal a
smooth not-quite-vertical drop.

"He's raising the difficulty on us," Asriel said. "He melted all of it at once and it's coming down
now. C'mon. Bike. Fast." They biked, fast. Charles had created long jumps, and parts where they
were expected to bike at a very sharp angle to the wall, and there was even a genuine upside-down
loop in the middle of it that could only be accomplished with magic, but they were used to it all.
Then the downhill started again, and they could see bright daylight, but they were going way too
fast to brake quickly and they flew out into empty air, tall pine trees below them. Kicking in their
glider backpacks, the two of them flew along to a large, grassy clearing, where Charles was
clapping. Peeling off her mask, Frisk almost collapsed from exhaustion, and laid on her back,
panting.

"I keep on worrying that it's going to be too hard, and it's always too easy," Charles lamented.

Asriel popped off his mask in one motion. "The sign was good, and you couldn't have known the
second one would be easy, but a really, obviously fake brick wall?" Somehow, as his own Boss
Monster, his voice seemed more compelling, more forceful. "We knew we had to follow the wind. Get real," the goat monster told the Devil.

"Okay, yeah. Was the fast part good?" Charles asked. "For both of you?"

"Charlie, we've been through so much of your fast stuff that it's always easy mode," Frisk said from her prone position. "We have magic. Give us some credit." She sat up and pulled off her backpack, grabbing for the squashed fudge and candies. "More technical stuff that requires less energy. I know you don't actually want to hurt us, but you're putting so much effort into these awesome adventures, there's got to be challenge- oh my God. I just realized. I'm the dungeon master's girlfriend." If either of her brothers had been drinking something, they would have spit it out laughing.

Charles smiled, kneeling down beside her. "So do I get a kiss for all this hard work, then?"

Frisk laughed. "Okay," she said, leaning forward and planting a single, loving kiss on his lips. She was still so very young, so that day, there in the long grass, that was all he got.
"Hey, Frisk, I gotta ask you something."

Oh, boy. Frisk still wasn't fond of Rebecca in general. Just hearing her voice still dredged up bad feelings; Asriel had confirmed that there were seldom-used circuits in Frisk's brain that fired whenever Rebecca was around. Presumably, they would also fire when her not-parents were around, but a lot more than brain circuits would wind up firing then. It didn't help that Rebecca hadn't asked any questions the first time around, although perhaps that was because after biking all day, Frisk had looked like death warmed over, even meticulously cleaned up and in her finest rainbow-striped dress, with pink at her shoulders and lavender at her ankles.

"What?" Frisk asked after swallowing a mouthful of birthday cake, her roller dress shoes going back and forth in the grass. It's going to be something awkward and stupid involving my chirurgery, I just know it. All of the awkward and stupid questions involving Asriel and their lack of bracelets had already been asked in school that day. Gaster had even taken a break from normal magical instruction to discuss it. Normally inscrutable, he had seemed so enthused by the implications that Asriel had flat-out asked him if he planned on creating artificial monsters, and the scientist had sheepishly said that the topic would require more research before he even considered such a thing. Asriel had told his dad, who had pointed out that if Gaster didn't do it, some human eventually would.

"I found a new spell on the Internet, but I have no idea what this symbol is," Rebecca said, holding out a piece of crumpled paper. "It's not on the keyboard." Magic users, especially students, often relied on special keyboards to type up their spells, reciting their computers' text-to-speech; the magic-speaking Vocaloid had been released many months ago. The hundred-odd base symbols—one of which was specific to Frisk, and one of which only Charles could use—were written with characters vaguely reminiscent of what they sounded like in human languages. Asmodeus was personally responsible for the relevant chunk of Unicode.

"Oh, that's the new gravity one," Frisk said, glancing at Rebecca's sketch. "Hey, Asmodeus! Tell her how to use your new symbol!"

"There are no new symbols, just newly discovered ones," Asmodeus reminded her from fifty feet away. Rebecca walked and flew over to him, not used to her own long dress, and the wizard explained the symbol and its pronunciation while keeping an eye on his daughter, who was clearly using it, her pigtails flopping around as she hopped. Victoria had started casting simple verbal spells shortly after her seventh birthday, and keeping Reduce Gravity up and doing moon-jumps was easier and a great deal safer than flying. She was playing something silly with Kid and Kim, who couldn't keep that kind of spell up for long, but their electrically boosted arm-harnesses almost made up for it. The two little monsters didn't go to school anymore, as they had been 'fully instructed', in Toriel's words, right before the Christmas holiday; their permanently childish minds had been filled with as much education as they could reasonably hold. Vulkins would reach the seventh or eighth grade, Aarons seemed to start capping out midway through Toriel's rigorous idea of high school, Icedrakes would mature to a human adult level (Chilldrake was still working towards his hedge fund goal), and Frisk worried that Asriel's limit was so superhuman that one day he'd be even more unrecognizable and unrelatable than Gaster.

But that wasn't the kind of thing to worry about on a birthday like this, and neither was schoolwork. The cake (a tremendous, tiered confection; Frisk had to use magical wind to blow out the thirteen candles) was delicious, the light breeze was nice, and the flowers were in bloom. Frisk was finally
comfortable enough with crowds to let one appear at her party, and her brothers, parents, friends, and friends' friends were all around her. Jimmy listened in while Jack was talking about his paintball exploits with some of his friends, including a symbol-using Madjick, while Nicole's gossipy friends were outmatched by Bratty and Catty, who were so deeply into sitcoms and pop culture references that Frisk couldn't even follow half of what they were talking about. Undyne was out in the grass, throwing a frisbee with 01 and 02, who were showing their bodies off in the sunlight. (It was their faces that Frisk found most interesting. 01 looked like a rabbit; 02 had a large, draconic face, and Frisk thought it'd be rude to ask him if he could breathe fire.)

It was just plain nice to relax. Nothing was expected of her. She'd gotten her homework done already. She didn't have to do anything, although she most certainly would. She would sip lemonade in the sun and watch the butterflies, leaning onto the fluffy goat next to her. She would exchange jokes and puns and talk about games and things that amused them. She would play magical games and enjoy everyone's company. Tomorrow was another school day, but that was tomorrow. Her father's phone rang, but he was a King; things were always expected of him. She belatedly realized that it hadn't rang the first time around, right when Asriel's body stiffened and she immediately knew that it wasn't going to be a relaxing day after all.

Sighing, His Majesty pointed his phone towards his family, so that the humans could hear what Papyrus was babbling about. "AND THEY BROUGHT A WHOLE BUNCH OF FRIENDS WITH LOTS OF GUNS AND THEN THEY WERE GOING TO DO A BIG BAD VIOLENCE AND THEY KNEW THAT IT WAS A REPEATED TIME AND THEY DON'T YET KNOW HOW THEY KNOW THAT AND THEY KNOW WHERE FRISK HAS HER BIRTHDAY PARTY AND THEY THINK SHE CAN ONLY LOAD ONCE PER TIME BUT THE FBI FOUND OUT A WHILE AGO SO THEY ALMOST LET THEM DO IT SO THEY'D HAVE A BETTER CASE AND THEN THEY ARRESTED THEM TODAY SO THEY NEVER ACTUALLY DID WHAT THEY WERE GOING TO DO BUT YOU KNOW THAT BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T AND THEY CALLED ME ON THE PHONE AND TOLD ME ABOUT IT BECAUSE I'M YOUR LAWYER AND NOW I'M CALLING YOU ON THE PHONE AND TELLING YOU!"

Frisk shook her head, trying to parse all that, as her father told Papyrus that he understood. "Who?" she asked, as Charles looked regretful, shaking his head.

"Your not-parents," Asriel said. Frisk exhaled loudly, looking up at the sky with her eyes rolling back. It had been so nice to just relax.

"They should have just let them do it," Charles said ruefully. "That would have been the best birthday present ever." Frisk immediately knew what he meant. Asriel would have heard them coming from far off. Charles would have flown over and enjoyed himself. There would have been some faint popping sounds and some high-pitched shrieks carried over on the wind, Charles would have come back with some holes in his new shirt and the world's biggest grin on his face, the party would have gone on, and the county coroner would have gotten paid overtime cataloging creative and messy suicides.

"Yeah, well, they didn't, so they can just lock them up and throw them away the key," Frisk snapped. "In federal prison, you know which kind I mean." An older kid at school had recommended Office Space, which had made Frisk glad that her future did not involve a corporate office.

"Hey, uh, Frisk, I don't really want to get into this, but you don't seem all that surprised," Jack said. Everyone nearby was starting to stare at the Dreemurrs, which had rippled through the rest of the group.
"I'm kind of surprised that they managed to get that far, but... yeah, I'm really not surprised that they tried to do it," Frisk said, shrugging. "I know. They're that bad."

"Papyrus has informed me that we may speak with them, if we wish," Asgore said, slowly rising and calling more attention that Frisk didn't want.

"Why would we want to do that?" Frisk asked. "Especially today?"

"Yeah, Dad, it's our birthday," Asriel said. "And today is a special birthday, for Frisk and me. Why let them ruin it?"

"Children, when someone attempts to kill you, it is wise to know why as soon as possible," Asgore replied. "Futile as the attempt may be."

"Oh, fine," Frisk replied, rolling her eyes again and getting up. "Hey, Sans! Make sure the party keeps on going without me!" Ruining her fun was a casualty of life, but ruining everyone else's fun was a war crime.

"I'll keep ribbing your guests, princess."

"Woah, what's going on?" Rebecca asked, rushing over.

"Our not-parents just tried to send a hit squad to kill me," Frisk said. "You want to come talk to them, you can, you don't have to."

That somewhat freaked Rebecca out, and she wondered why Frisk sounded bored and annoyed rather than freaked out and terrified, and then she remembered and that freaked her out in a different way. Reluctantly, she agreed, and they piled into the Dreemurr van, Toriel driving and her husband in the passenger seat. Mom was silent, Frisk noticed, silent and worried.

"Mom? C'mon, it'll be okay," Frisk said. Asriel shook his head at her. Toriel was communicating things that her daughter couldn't hear, things that she didn't want to talk about.

"Oh, my dear, sweet daughter. I know I cannot protect you, but this place, where we live, was supposed to be free of this kind of evil," Toriel said. "I had thought that the fear and hatred towards you had evaporated long ago. And, for the woman who gave birth to you to attempt such a thing..."

"Mom, it's really okay," Frisk insisted. "Your precious princess can't be killed, remember? Besides, they got caught, and even if they didn't..." She shook her head. Frisk felt compassion and love towards many, many people, but she couldn't bring herself to care about the lives of humans intent on her death, not when they all knew who and what she was. She'd just let Charles do his thing and then it would be over. "It's a big country, Mom, I'm surprised nobody tried before."

Asgore turned his head from the passenger seat, his horns brushing against the roof. He looked at his children with a solemn, understanding expression. "I wish," he said slowly, "that the surface world was a different place."

"I wish the same thing," Charles said. "I deal with this every day, remember? It's getting better, though. It's getting better because we've wiped out so many evils that there's room to do good things. Fewer kids are being born to moms who can't take care of them. There's places with running water now that didn't have it before, and you should feel so glad you're not human because you can't go through dysentery." He had, many times, in many bodies. "There's a big charity that goes around giving magic to poor people. Robots are doing repetitive stuff instead of people."

"Would things have gotten better if this didn't happen?" Rebecca asked quietly. Frisk had thought
"They could have gotten better at any time," Charles snapped. "They could have gotten better if people realized that what's wrong with each other is inside themselves and abandoned all the lies they tell each other. Some people just aren't smart enough. Some people believe stupid things. Some people think that compassion itself is a magical cure and it's really not, not for us. We have powers, and there's magic, and all that stuff helps, but they could have done this without us. Dad, you said it before, and you were right. Humans are what's wrong with humans. And now we're going somewhere that the humans are very bad indeed."

The drive was longer than any of them would have liked, but they didn't want to be living next to it, and Frisk only knew they'd arrived once she realized they were in a parking lot. "I can't go in there," Asriel said after he stepped out of the car. To Frisk's eyes it didn't look like a prison; just a building, really, even if had the words "Detention Center" as part of its name, but Asriel heard things he did not want to hear. "I can't. I just can't, okay? Mom, Dad, you know what I'm talking about. You can hear some of it." He looked down at his sister, smiling. "Frisk, I'll be right here waiting for you. Promise."

"She doesn't want to go in there without you next to her, you know that, right?" Rebecca asked. "I'm sure you can hear the misery or whatever, and sure, she's got her parents, but these are our not-parents who just tried to kill her and she needs you right now." Frisk gave her sister an outraged look, but inwardly thanked her for saying it so she didn't have to.

Asriel could not abandon his sister. "Fine. Look on the bright side, now I can have my own nightmares." He kept his fluffy arm around Frisk all the way to the entrance, not so much for her comfort but his own. Other visitors stepped out of their way, amazed that the Dreemurrs would be in a place like that. Frisk thought it looked like hell. She'd played games involving prisons, but the lighting of this place was buzzing fluorescents, the walls were wrong, the ceiling was wrong. There were smells she couldn't place and didn't want to smell again. The paint was peeling a bit. The various cautionary signs were faded. Frisk had played Monopoly before- played it with her new family, in fact- but never before had she considered the real difference between "In Jail" and "Just Visiting".

The guards looked like they were going to say something, maybe about Frisk still being in her dress or roller shoes not being allowed in the jail, but messing with America's Only Royal Family was well above their pay grade, they knew exactly what the Dreemurrs were doing there, and it wasn't long before they gave them a booth to wait in. Asgore constantly looked around him, as if he expected to be attacked from behind. Toriel kept quiet and still. "It's what I can't hear that gets me," Asriel said slowly.

"Can't hear what?" Frisk asked.

"You know how you lock up a magic user? You put him in a box so thick that he'd burn himself out trying to get through it."

A female guard approached slowly, saying something that it was her job to say. "Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Dreemurr? Just so you know, if your children need any kind of counseling, we do offer referrals for-"

Charles broke up laughing. The Dreemurr parents just looked at their children. Asriel managed a smirk. Rebecca's face screwed up in a you cannot be serious expression. "Have you seen my family?" Frisk asked, relishing the opportunity to laugh. "Do you know who he is, do you know who he is, do you know who I am?! Do you think there's any counselor in the world, anywhere,
who could counsel me? I don't even know if I should let this happen," she continued, lifting her fingers in the ready-to-snap position, "but I probably will because my personal problems aren't worth annoying the whole world with." A couple of the visitors looked like they wanted to ask her to do it, because something they didn't want to happen had happened, but none of them dared ask. They're terrified of me. Here, more than anywhere. They think I put their family members in jail, and I kind of did. Then again, nearly all of them had been caught red-handed hurting people, stealing from people, and selling people drugs. "Can you please just get them out here so we can talk and then we can go home and they can go back in their cells where they belong, forever?"

"They'll be here in just a few minutes. Per regulations, please exclusively use the phone to talk, and not hand signals, writing, or any other form of communication." Asriel just raised an eyebrow; Frisk got the idea that he could already hear them.

"I don't think Frisk wants you to give them embolisms or infarctions," Asriel whispered in Charles' ear as Frisk's not-parents approached from different directions, each with a guard and a lawyer, and her not-mother's gait suggested that she couldn't feel her left foot. Two different lawyers, I bet they're having fun with that. There was loud arguing between the lawyers and their clients, one of the lawyers theatrically threw up his hands, and then they asked the guards, and both of Frisk's not-parents crowded into one small booth together. They looked like they hadn't been taking care of themselves; her not-father looked skeletal, his eyes sunken and darting around. His nails had been chewed to the quick. Her not-mother was bloated and pale like a slug. More monstrous than monsters. I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight.

Frisk's not-father reached for the phone, and Rebecca slowly reached for the one on her side because Frisk didn't want it.

"Phone," Toriel demanded, and Rebecca, surprised, handed it to her immediately. "Why?" she asked him.

"We weren't actually going to try to hurt her," he explained. "We just needed those people-

"Do not lie to me," Toriel interrupted, enraged. She was angrier than Frisk had ever seen her, angrier than she had ever been at her husband. "If you lie to me one more time, I will tell my adopted son that he may do as he likes, and whatever consequences may come of that, you will not be here to see them. I ask again. Why?" Everyone on her side of the window, guards and visitors, shrank back, some of them taking a few steps towards the exits. They knew very well what Charles was, everyone in the country knew what Charles was, and none of them were getting paid enough to get in his way. Frisk looked around to make sure that nobody was recording any of this on a cellphone, but nobody had one pointed at them and she doubted they had the presence of mind to stuff one into a pocket. The phone itself was surely recording, but nobody in government was going to go after the Queen of Monsters for being protective of her child.

Grelod snatched the phone out of her husband's hand. "We're not here to talk to you, monster. We're here to talk to our child!"

Rebecca could hear that even through the glass. "You don't have any children now," she said into the phone. "You have jail cells now, those are your children."

"Wrecked! Hey, Frisk, I'm starting to like her," Charles stage-whispered.

"You will talk to me," Toriel said. "Otherwise my family and I will simply leave, and I am certain that the prosecutor and judge will take no convincing to lock you away indefinitely. I ask a third time: Why? I will not ask a fourth."

Frisk had never heard anyone swear directly at her mother before, but the answer involved
swearing, 'goat' as an insult, and disbelief that she didn't already know. "You took everything from us! Our child. Our humanity. Then our daughter. You took God's laws of existence away from us! You've sown witchcraft among us, parted parent and child, and you have the gall to ask us why?"

"And all of that justifies you attempting to murder her?"

Richard was trying to tell his wife not to answer, but she outweighed him by hundreds of pounds and pushed him aside easily. "She would have been better off that way. Then we could have gone to face judgment together."

_Yup, it's official, she's gone totally insane,_ Frisk thought, tapping her mother on the arm, gesturing for the phone. Toriel reluctantly gave it over, and Frisk sat down on the plastic chair, smoothing the elegant dress that really did not belong in a place like that. "So, what was even your plan?"

"All her plan. I had nothing to do with it," Richard yelled, and Toriel gave a long glance at Charles.

"Well, technically he didn't lie to _you_," Charles pointed out as Grelod started ranting.

"You think we don't know your flaw, you mutant thing? Oh, yes. How you remake the world every so often but can only do it once at a time? We know. And we can tell when you're preventing things, when the bomb doesn't go off. It came to me in a dream, you see, a dream sent by God. We found our men, they were easy to find, you haven't conquered everyone's soul. It won't be us, the evil of this system stopped us. But someone, some day, will."

"Your dream was a lie," Frisk said. "I can LOAD as many times as I want, I just _don't_ because it doesn't help," Frisk said. "That isn't a secret. And you don't know the first thing about SOULs, either. You're insane. Both of you are insane. Maybe they'll put you in a criminal nuthouse or whatever, give you time off, but I don't _care_. My life is weird enough as it is without wasting it talking to crazy people. Rebecca, you want to say something?"

"Not really," Rebecca said. Her questions had been already answered.

Grelod was saying something but Frisk didn't care. "Guess what, though. You can't call me a thing anymore because I'm actually fixed now. And you want to know what fixed me? Az and _magic_ and _all the stuff you hate._" Frisk slammed down the oft-slammed phone and broke the no-hand-signals rule with a single, magically manicured finger on each hand.

Toriel reached for the phone, but Frisk stopped her. "Mom, don't bother. Sometimes, you just have to cut your losses and let go. There's no point. Come on. Let's go home." Frisk almost wanted to go back to the party but there would be no more party for her that day.

"That was wise," Asgore said as they exited. Toriel looked upset, her fists clenched, tears in her eyes. "Do not worry, dear. Our daughter has this issue well in hand. As unsettling as it is."

"I just... find it so hard to believe that..." Toriel said. "How does one birth a child without loving the child?"

"You have no idea, Mom," Charles said. "And I'm not even going to tell you."

"I wonder if there was something I could have done," Frisk said. "I mean, yeah, I hate them, but... how did I let them end up like that? And don't tell me I couldn't have done something. We can do _anything._"

Charles rolled his eyes. "Really, Frisk? You're really saying that a ten- to thirteen-year-old is
responsible for people who were supposed to raise her and failed?"

"This is **me**, Charles," she reminded him. "I'm never **not** responsible."

"It doesn't matter if it's you. You're not their freaking kindergarten teacher."

"Burden of power, huh?" Rebecca asked as they sat in the van together. Frisk nodded. She didn't care, after so many years living with a loving family she didn't care at all, so why did she feel like she wanted to go home, huddle under the covers, and just cry herself to sleep? *This isn't fair. I'm wedged into the fabric of reality. I'm supposed to be completely invincible now.* She started shivering and abruptly hugged Asriel close, his floppy ear covering her head, and he understood what was going on with her emotions better than she did.

Asriel started singing a wordless lullaby that Toriel had once sang to him, his voice deep and rich, his vocal range beyond any human's. The melody was a version of the song the orchestra played at their parades, and as he sang, he used his skills to relax tense muscles, overriding nerves and reducing her blood pressure. The anxiety drained from Frisk in a rush and she briefly sneezed, a girlish p-shew that just missed her dress. "Feeling better?" he asked, smiling, and Frisk had no answer but to keep hugging him.

"Whatever that was, can you do that to me? Because I totally need it," Rebecca said.

"Oh, fine, I'll let you borrow my goat," Frisk said playfully. She and Asriel swapped seats, and Asriel's song was just as relaxing the second time. Frisk wished her sister had come over to her side before. There would always be bad memories, and they would probably never really be on the same wavelength, but after seeing the horrors that their not-parents had become, Frisk felt deep empathy and real forgiveness when seeing her sister's gentle, satisfied smile. If only... "Um... I don't even know how to ask this," she sputtered after her brother finished. "Azzy, can... can you fix my not-parents? If they were strapped to chairs, could you get whatever's wrong with them out?"

"Frisk, what you're really asking me is if I can chirurgically mind control people," Asriel said, and Frisk reluctantly nodded. "If I really learned about it, and took my time, and affected their SOULs and their brains with magic... yeah, I probably could. But then they wouldn't be them anymore, they'd be different people. And you already **got** new parents. You were right before. They're not your problem anymore."

"This is a dumb question, but can you make me smarter?" Rebecca asked.

"There's technology I need to do it, it's not that easy," Asriel replied. "I really want that technology to be out before Frisk starts getting old, but the good thing is, so does everyone else." He smiled. "You'll be okay. We're all going to make it." Rebecca reluctantly, slowly hugged him, and Frisk magicked her phone into her hand and snapped a picture before anyone realized what was going on. Charles started laughing. Even Asgore chuckled.

"If that gets around at school, there's going to be hell to pay," Rebecca said, shocked.

"It won't! I'm not **that** evil. Toriel was pulling onto Rebecca's block, and Frisk looked at the house she'd bought her. It was like any other, well maintained and clean; Rebecca had been calling people to do yard work and maintenance because she had no idea how to do it herself. "Rebecca... Becky. Please don't ever end up like them."

"I won't." She turned to Asriel. "You take good care of her." With keys jingling, she walked up her path and into her house.
"Mom, Dad, I don't care if there's a trial or something, I don't want to be there for it. Okay? I never, ever want to hear about this again. Please," Frisk begged her parents, and of course they were more than happy to comfort her and tell her that she never would.

And she didn't. Not that day, when she had no nightmares but a peaceful, easy sleep; not the next, when no one asked her anything about it at school despite it being all over the news; not the next week, nor the next month. The trial came and went later that spring, and they were sentenced to some long stay in a criminal mental facility, and nothing else happened.

That was the last of Frisk's real problems, as the Dreemurrs all agreed. Without being tied to Frisk anymore, Asriel was often out and about, flying from hospital to hospital, always under a doctor's watchful eye because he still wasn't allowed to do chirurgery by himself, although the doctors needed to involve themselves less and less every time. Frisk tested the limits of her power; she could not create SAVEs in completely different timelines, as LOADing meant that she had never made any SAVEs after that point. Occasionally, Charles left to do something he would not explain, and one summer day when her parents were out of the house and her brothers were off doing their things, she realized that she was actually alone for the first time in a very, very long while, and that disturbed her so much that she stayed over at Sans' place. But of course Asriel was home for supper, and she hugged her fluffy goat all night long despite the warmth of the night.

The years passed, but never uneventfully. Every day, for every one of the Dreemurrs, in fall, winter, spring, or summer, was a repeated day of learning, fun, duty, exploration, or a combination of the above. Some salacious rumors started at school about what else the Dreemurr kids did in their spare time, and many of them were true. Frisk, with Charles' guidance, tried her hand at philanthropy, and while she had her personal allowance to draw upon, she found it too effective to suggest to the public that this or that cause should be funded. ('I gotta say, your foundation is doing a lot better than my first opponent's," The Donald had joked at one of her events.) She needed someone to handle the money, and Rebecca had chosen business school after graduating from Toriel's school, which made for a nice bit of nepotism.

The Underground eventually fell in on itself, as Gaster had predicted, but enough precious metals and rare earths had been mined out to lower prices on world market and turn the Dreemurr family's bank account into a thing of legend. There was a tiny crack of matter-turned-energy and a small indentation in the ground, and that was the end of the monsters' former prison. It was missed by none of them.

Asriel grew up, of course, very much up; Frisk heard believable rumors that new hospitals were being renovated with him specifically in mind. As it was, he learned the art of stooping from his father, and while he never grew nearly as wide as his father, he did grow ever-so-slightly taller. His intellect really was superhuman, as Frisk learned quickly. He breezed through the chirurgic test like it was nothing and scored perfectly on the medical one; occasionally, he was called 'Doogie Asriel' because Frisk had turned eighteen shortly before he got his license to practice, and The Donald, then known as the President's father, was there to congratulate him.

Frisk and Charles grew up as well, and Charles looked like a Greek god while Frisk filled out into a slender, well-proportioned beauty; as Asriel had a hand in her growth every day, there was no question that she would ever be anything else.

They went to Stanford together, the three of them sharing a spacious, custom-built house near the campus, although they visited their mother regularly. The effects of Frisk's DETERMINATION had been well and truly explored by the time she was old enough to make research strides in it, and the spells she could cast with it were very limited, so she focused on thaumaturgic neuroscience instead, connecting brain cells to emotions and building upon Gaster's more esoteric research.
Asriel was actively practicing at the research hospital (with high ceilings!), doing things that were totally impossible before, combining medicine and magic to heal conditions previously unassailable. Charles was nominally a thaumaturgic student, often practicing his own research projects with his reality-dividing power, although he frequently met with government officials to do things that he wouldn't talk about.

Asriel's intelligence didn't separate them at all, as Frisk had worried. Rather than being separated from humans, he had become expert in them, occasionally knowing Frisk's thoughts before she did. He was so large, so smart, and yet he would always be her goat plushie, the same friend and brother she'd saved from torment all those years ago, and she regularly petted his ears the same way she did when she was ten. With ever-fewer minds demanding his attention, Charles had become more focused, more personable, and when he and Frisk were together, his touch was always loving and warm, his attention always on her.

There was one last thing Frisk wanted with her life, and Asriel, alongside a top-tier team of regenerative medicine experts, had been working on that.
Frisk gave a nervous sigh at the breakfast table.

"Calm down," Charles said, smiling. "It's just our wedding, that's all." Frisk sighed again, and Asriel smiled at her. Their mother had been adamant: What the three of them had been doing regularly (including the previous night) was of no consequence, but children should not be conceived, let alone born, out of wedlock. Marrying someone she'd been calling her brother wasn't the weird part, as she was beyond social reproach, although the word 'Targaryen' had been thrown around on the internet. The weird and worrisome part was the news coverage and media focus, despite the fact that it would be a very private event, with only her friends allowed to show up. Which, of course, meant almost everybody she could name from Mt. Ebbot and quite a few people from college. Weirder still was that her father would be performing the ceremony; he claimed the right as King and had done it before. (Gaster's wife had, in her moment of annihilation, given all of herself to her children; Gaster himself would never talk about it and the Dreemurrs would never ask.) Even weirder were the vows; 'until death do us part' didn't apply to people who wouldn't do that as long as they had a universe to live in, and Charles still had it in for God.

But her life was weird, even as an adult. To anyone who didn't know who she was, she was an average, fairly good-looking young woman. Other than the last few uncontacted tribes, there wasn't anyone left on the planet who didn't know who she was. Even most seven-year-olds, who had never lived in a world without magic and time reversals, knew Frisk on sight. She could even check out books written about her by people who hadn't even talked to her, and those were always fun to read, whether she picked them out of '920 - Biography' or '504.98 - Magic - DETERMINATION'. (Only three people had ever had the guts to ask Charles questions before writing books in 504.99.)

Her house was weird, but that wasn't because of her. While the Dreemurrs had more modern tastes in furniture than their mother, everything was still Dreemurr sized, with some accommodations made for her five-foot-six height. Even Charles, at over seven feet of supernaturally infused muscle, was nowhere near Asriel's ten and a half. She'd hopped down the extra-large stairs, stood on special ledges to help make the huge breakfast (even Asriel could never make his mother's omelets, but the three of them working together came close), and sat on what was effectively a highchair, just as she had when she was living with her parents. Clothing companies and electronics manufacturers lined up to make things specifically for the tall goat with the ears longer than Frisk's legs, and someone from Tesla had outright given him a unique, priceless car in exchange for saving his father's life on the operating table.

Her college was weird, and that was because of her. Of course Frisk didn't have the same classes on remembered days as unremembered ones, and neither did anyone else in her classes or labs, human or monster. To even be on the 'Frisk track', as some students had taken to calling it, required getting access to the ever-changing memory password, which took a background check and an interview that Frisk herself wasn't sure if she would have passed. Letting people know the password was Serious Business. Similarly, giving any kind of hint that a day was an unremembered one was officially Against The Rules, with implied threats involving burly men in dark glasses, and any different interactions would basically ruin the protective part for 'muggles' (the term was a misnomer; there were barely any non-mages left in the United States, and they were either felons or Luddites). Therefore, rememberers generally kept themselves apart from non-rememberers, creating accusations of elitism and discrimination and other annoying things that Frisk had personally addressed more than once, trying not to let her frustration show. ("It's basically like the CIA," Charles had explained once. "If you don't need to know, you don't need to know.") The
situation was compounded by assorted researchers and engineers being allowed to remember why their mice died or their rockets exploded.

Ever since she started studying emotional magic and neuroscience, she'd begun to understand the kind of fear and reverence people felt when they thought about her. She'd even transferred those emotions into herself more than once, managing to scare herself even more every time. It had faded back into the background radiation of her life.

"You don't want to be worried on a day like this," Charles added. "Just give it to me." Taking negative emotions out of herself and throwing them away would have been a very bad idea, because they wouldn't stay thrown away if she kept doing it. Somebody had inadvertently created a SOUL stealer doing that, and Charles had had to smash the thing himself. On the other hand, trying to intentionally create a friendly monster with positive emotions was still likely to create something unstable, disturbing, non-viable, or all three, as Gaster had found out to his horror. (Frisk had only seen the look on his mask, not the thing that had created it. Since it had horrified Gaster, she was rather glad she didn't.) The only safe way for Frisk to temporarily get rid of emotions she didn't want was another human, and that still only directly affected the SOUL's experience, not the relevant connections in the brain. Most humans really didn't like eating other people's emotions, but Charles, in a thousand bodies, was still effectively immune, and he always understood what Frisk was feeling.

"It's all right," Frisk insisted. "I shouldn't use that to run away. We're going to be doing something relaxing today anyway." Asriel would have to break her skin to implant the lab-grown uterus, so she was scheduled to be in a sterile operating room in two hours, where she'd comfortably rest while Asriel did his magic. It was a Friday; Sunday would be the wedding; Monday would be the insemination of a meticulously gene-edited and carefully examined embryo made from her DNA, Charles', and a few things that everyone agreed were generally good ideas. Like any expectant mother, she worried what her child would be like, but Asriel was in charge of the procedure, and Asriel had become very good at making things not go wrong.

"You're the only one of my patients who's never worried about what I do," Asriel said in his deep bass, his large fork covered in omelet. His voice wasn't quite the same as his father's; he sounded exactly like the chirpy little goat he'd once been, only four octaves lower. "But you're not the only one who worries more about social events than medical procedures." He took the bite, savoring the taste.

"You sound worried," Frisk replied. "Isn't it bad for a doctor to let his patient know he's worried?" Frisk took a sip of hot chocolate with a large dollop of whipped cream on top. That, at least, was just the way her mother made it. Asriel had made his father's favorite tea the previous day, and made himself drink it despite the bad memories. He was determined to get over that; that part of his life was done and gone.

"You know I'm worried," Asriel answered back. "Entirely new organ, entirely new procedure. And that's just for the first part."

"Az, there's a whole playlist on Youtube of you sealing together people's coronary arteries of their brand new hearts!" Of course the important organs had been grown first: lungs, hearts, kidneys, entire digestive tracts. The only organ Asriel still wasn't ready to deeply modify was the brain, and neither was anyone else. Frisk strove daily to learn what she could and advance the field. "Half the usual female reproductive system. The procedure's spelled out by the numbers. There's no way that's going to be difficult for you." Frisk would never need ovaries.

His posture relaxed, and he smiled a bit. "You got me. I'm worried because I'll be working on you,
Frisk." Charles started chuckling.

"I'm not worried because it's you, and you're worried because it's me," Frisk said, and her brothers-lovers?- started nodding.

"Come on, Az," Charles said, his trollish smile on his lips, "it's not like you don't know what you're getting into." His sister- or was that fiance?- and brother chuckled in spite of themselves.

"Yes, waiter, I'll have some double entendre with my omelet today, please," Frisk said, lifting her fork for another bite.

"And where would madam like her double entendre?" Charles asked in a snooty French voice, and Frisk almost spat out her food laughing.

"Depends on the sauce, doesn't it?" Asriel asked, and Frisk had to use magic not to choke.

"You-" Frisk swallowed the bite that had almost gone down the wrong way. "You guys. I swear. If we're still here in a billion years and you two are still telling ribald jokes...

"They will be more ribald than your puny human mind can possibly comprehend right now," Asriel said, and Frisk flicked a piece of omelet at his face. Froglike, his goat tongue lashed it out of the air. He could do a lot of things with that tongue, as Frisk and half the other girls he'd had classes with well knew. (Frisk couldn't blame him. He was, after all, a goat.)

"At least they keep your mind off being worried," Charles said, and Frisk nodded at him. "It's nothing to worry about. Az has the chirurgery lined up, but Mom's done the same thing with the wedding. Trust her with it. All we have to do is go down an aisle and say a few words to each other. We've done more important things than that together." Frisk kept nodding. Their real bond had been settled a decade ago, when they reached back in time to stop Chara from needing to get nuked. Books had been written about that, too.

They finished eating breakfast and still had plenty of time to kill, so Frisk plopped down on the large couch and started watching TV, Asriel and Charles to her sides, the humans' arms around each other and Asriel's long, fluffy arm around both of them. *click* "the wedding between" "Hahahaha!" "Nooope, we're not watching this." *click* "your very own book of functional spells that can be found nowhere else, guaranteed! Act now and" *click* "TO THE METTATON AND MILO SHOW, WHERE YOUR FABULOUS HOSTS" *click* "the no-stoplight system would require outlawing human and monster drivers on public roads in downtown-" "Yeah, they'll never pass that. People like driving too much." *click* "is due to the actions of Chilldreke, an intern at Goldman Sachs. He admits no wrongdoing in the" *click* "think we should consider lessening border restrictions. The cartels are pretty much gone now, and there really aren't a lot of reasons for illegal immigration anymore. A lot of things have changed since" *click* "Are Frisk and Charles Dreemurr getting hitched? More after the-" "I don't know who needs a life more, the people making this stuff or the people watching it." *click* "still has the world's highest birth rate at 3.1, but conditions are improving and it is forecast to reduce further over the next" *click* "Watch if you want, but it's a re-run," Charles said, as the former President handed a sledgehammer to each armored human contestant on his show. The producers had tried different team sizes over the last couple of years; two teams of three humans and one Pyrope each seemed to work best for what they were doing. "You can guess who's going to win." One of the contestants was somewhat muscular and rather fat, and Frisk knew that the guy had cast the spell to burn it instead of sugar.

"GOOD LUCK! YOU'LL NEED IT!" The Donald yelled, and the contestants took their sledgehammers and magic to the old cars in front of them. Each team had a minute to smash their car as thoroughly as possible, and they worked on it with aplomb. Fireballs weren't allowed; the
normally accepted strategy was to bust the half-empty gas tank as fast as possible and let the Pyrope jump in. As Frisk guessed, the fat guy blew open the tank with three magically augmented hits, and his team's Pyrope started setting the car ablaze as the humans smashed the body. The other team had flipped their car over and were taking their sledgehammers to the underbelly, the Pyrope wiggling through cracks to burn everything it could find. Every human on the set wore an air filter for a reason.

"Nobody ever kills the Pyrope doing that, do they?" Frisk asked.

"Ever see even a flimsy rope get snapped with a sledgehammer?" Charles asked in reply, and Frisk shrugged. "Hasn't happened yet."

"BIG MONEY! BIG PRIZES! I LOVE IT!" The Donald shouted as the timer ran out. The fat guy's team had thoroughly smashed and burned the body and almost completely pulverized everything under the hood, and his team was almost immediately declared the winner. "We love all ya guys, and the flip was great, but it's time to go home," the former President told the losing team. "Thank you for appearing on-"

"SMASH TV!" the crowd yelled.

"He really has the heart for this stuff now," Charles joked, and his brother smiled at him. Of course Asriel had been the chirurgeon that gave The Donald a new one, and that was the most-watched video on the playlist. Frisk made the screen display the Mt. Ebbot weather, making sure that her outdoor wedding wasn't going to get rained out. Nope, the forecast was still partly cloudy.

"Small quake coming," Asriel said. His siblings didn't get off the couch; when Asriel said that an earthquake was small, they could barely feel it. To him, the entire Bay Area wasn't just a hub of human activity; the ground itself was constantly in motion, causing intermittent subsonic rumbling that humans didn't notice- sure enough, a minute later, the couch rocked very slightly and was still. They still hadn't felt anything close to the 7.2 that had hit the area some years ago; Frisk's power had saved at least two classmates' family members from that one. In fact, there was almost nobody left in the civilized world who didn't personally know somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody saved from death, injury, or crime by Frisk's power. It was more often one or two degrees of separation, and Frisk still never felt comfortable talking to people who had, themselves, been saved from something by a call from a rememberer.

They relaxed for a while before it was time to go. Frisk checked her email. She had an address that she gave to students, faculty, and no one else; any time it got leaked, it got flooded, but even without that, there were regular requests for support. This time, it was a thaumaturgic biophysics professor again, submitting another budget for his students' projects. Nobody was dumb enough to try to scam her- Charles had outright used the words "join the missing persons list" in one faculty-wide meeting- but she went over it anyway. As usual, she signed off on it, and the kids' bank account was down another six figures. A rounding error, but Rebecca couldn't handle this stuff.

They got ready to go, Frisk putting on a red-hearted striped shirt and dark pants over her feminine form. Just like it had been at home, it was easier to bicycle to the school than drive there, and many other students waved, some of them offering good-luck wishes. They knew what was going on; it didn't take a lot of imagination to put 'new uterine procedure' and 'Frisk goes to school here' together. Charles' phone blipped with some fresh email, and he went to help a student with questions about his reality-dividing power; the kid was apparently interested in developing an interstellar drive with it, although almost everyone else was convinced that teleportation would take them to the stars first.

Frisk rolled down the hall with magic and grace. She helped Asriel decontaminate himself (he no
longer had a shedding problem; he had to lose his excess fur every time he saw a patient), disrobed, and laid down on the bed as Asriel snapped on his thin surgical gloves. The room was very quiet, and Asriel and Frisk were alone, minimizing distractions. He usually had assistance for the more in-depth work, and everything was being recorded for the people who had grown the organ and helped develop the procedure, but this was a one-goat job.

It was, as Frisk had known, entirely easy. Frisk quietly laid back and felt very little, daydreaming of the children she would have and how she would treat them (she would spoil them rotten), as Asriel decided that her nerves shouldn't be telling her that her flesh was being cut. For a goat that hears everything, silence is golden, and Asriel didn't bother asking her silly questions like how well she was doing. When he finished sealing everything back together that he'd had to scalp apart, Frisk felt no pain but a strange fullness in her abdomen. I can have children now. Well, implanted embryos, anyway. "Told you, Az," she said, sitting up off the bed.

"You're going to want to take it easy until the wedding," he told her. "Everything's in there fine, but just to be safe, don't put any stress there for a couple of days. This means not eating things that'll make it hard to poop." Frisk giggled. Asriel was being serious, but hearing him talk about poop was still funny. "And no hard laughing, either." Frisk wanted to laugh hard at that.

"Did you do anything that you'll do differently the second time?" Frisk whispered as she put her clothes back on, and Asriel very slightly shook his head. Frisk smiled, nodding. He seldom did.

"Bus is here," Asriel said, and Frisk left him to his work. About fifty old people were bussed in regularly from a local hospice, some more often than others. Some of them were incurable by the methods of the day; some of them were waiting for new organs. One of Asriel's jobs was to go through them chirurgically, staving off the Alzheimer's varieties that hadn't been cured yet, cleaning out arterial plaque, and generally holding off as much terminal damage as he could. His Hug Count, which was when one of his regular patients hugged him after being fixed of some horrific ailment, was at fifty-nine, and he figured it'd go to sixty-five or so in a month, depending on who hugged and who didn't. Each one of them was a person; each one had a story and a history, and each one of them could maybe, possibly, live for a lot longer if he could just stop them from keeling over right there and then, wishing that there was more than one of himself to help. He worked tirelessly at his job; he would keep it up until he was no longer needed. He found it difficult to express how much he loved humanity, and found it very difficult to express just how much he loved Charles and Frisk. Her total Count was stratospheric, world-bending, and Charles... Charles sometimes did the necessary things that nobody wanted to talk about.

But, as Charles and Asriel worked on their projects, Frisk was alone, walking around the open spaces on campus, her backpack on her back and a faint smile on her lips. Her neuroscience class didn't start for another hour, and of course she was more than ready for it. Her money was funding so much of the university, and she worried that no professor would dare give her a low grade on anything because of that (and because of, well, everything else), so she felt that she absolutely had to get a legitimate summa cum laude degree lest she get an illegitimate one.

She never stayed alone for long, not there. Someone, always, had something to talk to her about. "Hey, Frisk!" Nicole, this time. She'd followed Frisk to university. Everyone at Toriel's school tended to get into the secondary school of their choice; Frisk, herself, had been fought over, each outrageous offer topping the last, but Asriel being able to walk upright everywhere at a research university had clinched it. "How'd it go?"

"Perfectly," Frisk replied, as they sat on a bench together. "He always questions himself, thinks he's going to mess up something big. Maybe that's why he never does."
"I wish I had his precision," Nicole lamented. She was going to become a veterinarian. Some housepets and monsters didn't get along.

"You and everyone else," Frisk replied, smiling. "I worry about him sometimes. He's here seven days a week. I mean, I don't want to say he overworks, but he's the only person who can do certain things, and his power... it's not like mine. He can't affect everything at once."

"Have you talked to him? Well, we might be talking to him now..."

"Yeah, first rule of Az, always assume he can hear you, especially if you think he can't," Frisk said, and the two of them shared a giggle. "We're probably too far away. I think. But, yeah, I can't really tell him to slow down. There's people's lives at stake, people I can't save. And when I told him that he's doing a lot, not even suggesting that he slow down... he said that he should enjoy it because one day, he won't be needed anymore. At least not for people, maybe animals."

"He thinks there won't be a need for doctors?"

"He makes predictions like that," Frisk said. "Charles, too, sometimes. They have a vision of a perfect world, and it's not that I think they're wrong, and I do what I can, but... maybe it's because I'm the woman who makes things not happen."

"You are more than just a finger on a button," Nicole said firmly. "And we'll know if it's a perfect world when we get there." She's grown up, too. "I have to get to class."

"Good luck," Frisk said, waving. She continued her school day to do school things.

Sunday.

Everyone else was at the wedding already. By tradition, the bride always arrived last, and Frisk stood in her old room, the place where she still occasionally slept when visiting her parents, her formally robed mother bringing out a massive white garment. Frisk had worried about the expense- even with Croesian money, there were surely more worthy things than a wedding to spend it on- but Toriel had done much of the work herself, and it showed. Almost no human in modern times would have made a dress like that, and Frisk broke out laughing. The bodice was conservative and perfectly sized with a single red heart in a sea of white, the skirts reached the floor, the sleeves were long, and there was a twenty-foot-long train.

"How am I even going to walk up the aisle without dragging this on the ground?" Frisk asked, chuckling. She'd gotten used to this sort of thing- she still participated in the annual parade- but it was still just as silly.

"Two Migosps and four Loox shall aid you," Toriel replied matter-of-factly, and Frisk laughed again.

Frisk lifted her hands over her head and Toriel helped her into the dress, sealing shut the back, and a question that had been bubbling in her subconscious leapt to mind. "Mom, how did you and Dad get married?"

"Oh, my, dear. The ceremony was nothing like this," Toriel said wistfully, still working on the back. "We were in a forest glade, and there were only a few of us. There was a local priest, a human, he was so scared. I think your father might have done a little bit of 'convincing' to get him to marry us. My children were there..." Frisk heard the smile in her voice but thought she might have been crying. "And now here I am, going to become a grandmother." She approached Frisk's
front, looking carefully at her. "Or, perhaps through one of those children so long ago, I see a distant descendant now. Be good to your children, my dear daughter." Toriel kissed Frisk on the top of her head before lowering the bridal veil, which fell to the sides of her face.

The drive was very short, but Toriel drove her daughter up the hill, where everyone waited, sitting on dozens of white chairs. Ribbons and the Delta Rune adorned the archway that Frisk would pass through. The altar itself was placed exactly at the spot where the barrier used to be, sunlight shining down upon it. Her friends, all of them, humans and monsters, cheered. A tremendous wedding cake graced the center of a long table full of flowers, and she instantly knew that Toriel had baked it. She could smell the tea- her father had a hand in the catering as well. The music started playing- 'Here Comes the Bride' with notes of the Dreemurr family theme- and Frisk could have died laughing. Is this really me right now? Am I literally going down the aisle to get married? She was gliding on wheels down the carpet, of course, using magic to keep her approach perfectly steady, the small monsters lifting the great train behind her just as her mother had promised. From the looks on her friends' faces, her blush must have been visible through her veil. Do they all think I'm the blushing bride, or do they know I'm just trying not to laugh my head off? Despite knowing exactly what she was feeling, Frisk wasn't sure if she kept the smirk off her face, but she still did everything important twice and next time would be better. She hopped up the steps on the altar next to her husband-to-be. Charles stood solemn in his black tuxedo, and their father wore all white save for his purple royal robe flowing behind him. Over ten years ago this huge goat had killed me twice, now he's celebrating my wedding.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today..." Asgore intoned in the traditional fashion, going through the traditional litany. Everyone held their peace. "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

"I do," Asriel said. Normally, Asgore would have played the role, but Toriel decided that Asriel was the right person for it. I gave him a SOUL, and now he gives me to be married.

"Charles Dreemurr, do you take this woman, Frisk Dreemurr," There's some more words I never thought I'd hear "to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in every timeline, for better or for worse, in glory or in agony, to love, honor, and cherish, until this universe ceases to be?"

"I do," he said, and Frisk loved his confidence, his surety that everything was going to be happy ever after.

"Frisk Dreemurr, do you..." Asgore went through the same vows, Frisk looking back and forth between him and her new husband.

"I do," Frisk said when he was finished, barely believing it. I just said 'I do' I JUST FREAKING SAID 'I DO'

The ring-giving commenced. Kid was Charles' ringbearer, and Kim was Frisk's, the two little monsters performing their duties with solemn dignity. Frisk was surprised at the large diamonds, but then she looked at the stones a bit more closely, and realized that Charles had made them out of carbon and raw power. Another priceless artifact. He gently slipped the ring on her finger. "With this ring, I thee wed," he said, the archaic word flowing from his mouth naturally.

She did the same with his ring, the gold shining on his hand. "With this ring, I thee wed." I just said 'I do', and I just said that.

"I now pronounced you husband and wife," great Asgore said. I am now officially the devil's wife. I am a married woman. I'm going to have children. "You may now kiss the bride." They embraced
in a deep, loving kiss that was uploaded everywhere in seconds as the audience clapped. Papyrus cried and blew his nose, which was particularly impressive because he didn't have one. There was a clack-clack-clack among the clapping, and it was Sans, his eyes closed and his grin wide. Undyne's armored hands were clanging together, and Alphys' soft claps were next to inaudible. Even Gaster's hands- all of them- were clapping. But the clapping that meant the most to Frisk was the barely audible floof-floof coming from her mother and brother.

Frisk threw the bouquet high into the air towards the flower girls, and Victoria flew into the air with magical speed and snagged it. She was still only fifteen years old, and Frisk wondered who her boyfriend was and how badly she'd fallen for him. Then again, her father was Asmodeus; if her boyfriend upset her, he was likely to have a very bad time.

Frisk had only a few slices of wedding cake- she didn't really want to hang around when she had twenty feet of loose cloth behind her, and the little monsters who had been carrying it were at the table eating cake too. Clanging and stomping came from Frisk's left, and she turned her head to see Undyne with a huge grin on her face. She hadn't changed, of course; her expression was still the same, the eyepatch was still on her head, she terrified a fresh batch of kids in gym class every year, and she was still just as clangy and stompy in her armor. "Frisk! I wish you..." Alphys had told her the three things to wish her, but in the heat of the moment, she couldn't remember them right away. "a happy marriage, many beautiful children, and... good fortune for the rest of your days!" She turned to Charles, scowling. "And you..."

"Are you going to forgive me for what I was now, Undyne?" Charles asked with a thin smile.

Undyne scowled further. "You've forced me into it. Very well. Charles, for all your misdeeds involving humans and monsters, I, Undyne, officially..." Her voice choked up a bit, and she forced the last two words out. "...forgive you." Still scowling, she sat down next to Asriel and began shoveling wedding cake into her face.

Alphys approached meekly, her hands clutched in front of her, her oddly sized flower girl's dress gathering around her knees. "So, um, I hope you two have, um... a good time together? And everything Undyne said. If, um, you need help with, um..."

Asriel did not let her finish that sentence. "Alphys, don't worry about it. Come on, have some cake." The little lizard did. "I'm going to be 'Uncle Azzy'," He shook his head, laughing. "It's been more than a decade, and there's still some things I find so amazing. Charlie, I'm here at your and Frisk's wedding right now. I'm putting wedding cake in my mouth." He did so, a large slice fit for his Asgore-sized jaw.

"You're telling me," Charles said, sipping Dreemurr tea. "I mean, I know how it goes. I've been to a lot of weddings, sometimes the groom, sometimes the bride." One LV 3 woman had a husband from a violent family and didn't want to give up Charles' power. "But me, just me getting married, and you're here, and... Frisk, I don't want to sound like this was a bad idea, because it's a very, very good idea, but..."

"No, I feel the same way!" Frisk shouted, laughing. "This whole time, I was like 'what am I doing here', 'I'm actually getting married', 'look at me, everybody, I'm here to become a wife..." The three of them shared a laugh. "Az, do you think you'll ever...?"

"Yes, one day, there will be a nanny goat for me," Asriel said with absolute certainty, and his siblings- husband and wife- laughed. "Kids, too. Don't worry. When we're done figuring out how it all works, I won't have to drain myself to have them." Another Azzy prediction.
"hey." Sans was there, between Asriel and Frisk, where he hadn't been an instant ago, holding a cup of Asgore's tea. "here's to a merry marriage." They drank together. "eternal wedded bliss, eh? think you're ready for something like that?"

"Sans, it's not even Dad who married us, really," Frisk said. "Our broken reality kind of did that."

"We have to love each other," Charles added. "This is just a way of life that works for that." He smiled, taking another sip of tea. "And now I'm going to become a father. I already know what it's like, I've experienced it plenty of times, just not me. And not our kids."

"They're going to have such wonderful lives," Frisk said. "They'll have everything we didn't as kids, things that weren't even possible. Mommy knows when they're going to get hurt before they do, Daddy can take them flying for a long time without even needing wings... How do we spoil them without actually spoiling them?"

Charles looked alarmed. "Wait, you don't have a plan for that? I definitely don't!" He could read the minds of a hundred influenced fathers and only get bad, contradictory, useless, or irrelevant advice.

"You think I know how to raise little kids?! Charlie, you've seen my not-parents!" The married couple looked at each other and laughed.

"Then it is fortunate," Toriel said, approaching them, "that I do. I wish we lived more closely. Perhaps, Sans, if you would:-"

"Mom, don't," Frisk interrupted. "I know you want to, and I'll listen to your advice, but I have to be the mom this time. I can't just say 'Oh, this is too much, I have to go send them over to Granny Goat because I can't deal with them.' You have a whole school full. You could adopt again. There's kids who've fallen down somewhere else." Charles nodded grimly at that.

"There are," Toriel agreed, "and none of them are anything like the three of you." She reached out her arms, and all three of her children came together for a hug.
"Arial Dreemurr, **what** have I told you about dancing on the ceiling?"

"But Mom, I cast the gravity spell!"

Frisk talked to her oldest daughter in the same patient tone she'd learned from her own mother. "And it's still wearing you out. Your mother can tell. You've done the routine three times already. It's time to take a break."

"Oh, **fine.**" The little girl, in her dark blue ballet slippers and leotard, flipped off the ceiling and into her mother's arms, pouting and feeling a lot more tired than she wanted to feel. It wasn't **fair.** Dad could stay on the ceiling for hours, but Dad was special because of all the bad things he'd done. And that **really** wasn't fair. At seven and a half, she knew very well that people were supposed to be punished for doing bad things, not rewarded, and even Dad himself had told her that. Mom was special too, but Arial couldn't see Mom's specialness the way she could Dad's. "Did **your** mom tell you not to dance on the ceiling?"

Frisk broke out laughing, cradling her daughter. "When I was your age, nobody could dance on the ceiling- did I really just say 'When I was your age'?"

"Yeah, Mom, are those bad words when you say them like that?"

Frisk laughed again. "They kind of are, but you're old enough to hear them. Back then, nobody could cast spells. A lot more people got hurt. People couldn't fly, not even for a little bit."

Arial's eyes grew wide. "And Jimmy couldn't shoot his laser?" James was her younger brother by slightly over nine months. He wanted to be the hero, shoot bad guys, protect people, the usual kid stuff. He was an absolute deadeye with his yellow beam and usually wore clothes to match.

"Not from his finger," Frisk replied. "People got magic a little while after your uncle broke the barrier and set the monsters free."

"That's Shelly's favorite story," Arial replied. Frisk nodded. Michelle Dreemurr would be celebrating her sixth birthday soon and regularly read books more suited to middle schoolers, although she sometimes forgot to take her Muffet-spun purple ribbons out of her hair before falling asleep. Charles regularly helped her with foreign languages, and she knew all the magic symbols by heart. "But if that was when you met Grandma and Grandpa, who were your mom and dad before?"

Arial thought that maybe she'd said something wrong, because Mom looked a little upset. Maybe she would make it not happen. But then Mom smiled a bit and said, "You are **not** old enough to hear about **them**" and hugged her deeply, although Arial could tell Mom wanted to cry. Mom smelled of flowers and sunshine, because she'd been out with Grandpa in the garden, planting flowers. (Arial knew there was something special about a certain kind of goldenflower, but she didn't know what it was.)

There were other smells, too; Toriel was finishing making dinner with five-year-old Gary, who was halfway between a burden and a help, constantly asking questions (never the same one twice) but immediately getting things when asked, his green shirt fluttering around as he flew to higher shelves. Occasionally, he'd ask to know what some spice tasted like by itself, and he often identified the ingredients in anything his grandma cooked. The main course was in the oven; they
were working on dessert.

Asriel came into the living room then, with Nomie in his arms and Mander clinging onto his back. Charles had wanted another boy, Frisk had wanted another girl, and Frisk had been tired of being pregnant, even if giving birth was largely painless with Asriel around. Asriel, having recognized the other kids' SOULs even before they were born, had suggested two embryos at once, and the fraternal twins couldn't have been any more different. Nomie was quiet and patient, especially for a four-year-old, willing to sit down in a light blue dress and listen to conversations between adults, even when her grandma started talking about snails. Mander, on the other hand-

Asriel bleated so loudly and at such a low pitch that the Dreemurr family home vibrated. Setting Nomie down, he gently but firmly prised Mander's gloved fingers off his ears. The kid loved grabbing things, even briars, thorns, and other things he shouldn't touch. "Mander!" Frisk scolded. "You know monsters are fragile."

"He's not fragile!" the little boy whined.

"I can do a lot of wonderful things," the tall goat explained to his nephew in a firm but comforting voice, cradling him in his large arms as the other kids ran to see what was going on. "But don't pull on my ears." Like Gary, Mander never needed to be told specific things twice, but he seemed intent on getting into every kind of trouble a four-year-old magic user possibly could. It was a good thing he liked wearing bright orange; it meant that his parents could see him when he ran off exploring in the woods. Frisk had once told Arial that Mander was harder to deal with than the rest of her children combined, although, fortunately, he started using the potty by himself even earlier than his twin sister. Arial couldn't remember her mom ever changing a diaper at home. Mom would always pick the kids up whenever they had to go and put them on the toilet. It wasn't until she was five that she'd figured out how her mom knew.

Sometimes, Grandpa said that the six kids were really special too, like they were different people a long time ago, but he didn't really want to talk about what happened to them, just like Mom and Dad didn't want to talk about their real parents and Gaster didn't want to talk about who Arial was named after. Adults were weird. Even monster adults.

The Dreemurrs got the kids cleaned up for dinner. With five adults and six children, it was easy, and Frisk was constantly reminded of why coming home was a good idea. With a school that recognized doubled time, she and Charles had gotten their doctorates (with very, very unique dissertations) long before most of their children had been born. The Dreemurrs had no shortage of babysitters at college, but the hard part was trying to find one who wasn't hopelessly anxious about taking care of the young royalty. There was also no question about where the kids were going to go to school, and Asriel had taken absolutely no convincing to return to geologically stable Mt. Ebbot from an active faultline. Building his chirurgery center had been a job for the first female President's father, and the partially rejuvenated 90-year-old was more than willing to make a deal. Frisk's office was part of Asriel's building. Charles was in a better spot, too, as he tended to fly to Langley and DC a lot, and sometimes he went to foreign countries to do things he wouldn't talk about.

There hadn't been room in the Dreemurr family home for so many kids, but that was another job for the President's father. After the last truck had driven off and the last Woshua had declared the new construction clean, each kid had his or her own room with plenty of space to play, and the backyard was still very large. Frisk tried not to let her nostalgic envy show- she knew from personal experience, the literature, and her professional practice that foisting her own issues onto her kids was a bad idea and she should never treat their idyllic life as anything other than normal- but it occasionally slipped through. The six of them were just so happy together, and although they
occasionally played childish pranks on one another, they were never intentionally destructive. (There was the time they got Greater Dog to dig in the backyard for treasure, but that didn't really count; Frisk, to teach her kids a lesson, had only unhappened the part involving her father's garden.) Nothing really, permanently bad could happen to any of them, ever. They didn't quite get everything they wanted, but they missed out on nothing, and management at Disney World (even Walt) had all but prostrated themselves at the Dreemurr family's feet last month.

The dining room was a comfortably crowded place, even with just the eleven of them there. Every Christmas, the place was a madhouse; the short-range portals on the eastern and western sides of the living and dining rooms made things slightly easier, and the kids had great fun when Alphys first put them in. But it was summer, and the kids had mostly been playing outside all day; even Shelly had taken a book out to see if she could read upside-down, hanging from her knees. (It gave her a headache.) Mealtime was one of the few times when Mander genuinely wanted to sit in one place; he burned energy like a furnace, and his mother and grandmother were always mindful of how much sugar they fed him.

Dinner started with a massive plate of vegetable-rich chicken casserole, with a large pitcher of truly homemade root beer alongside it. Toriel knew exactly what she was doing and the bitter taste of green vegetables was completely lost in the other ingredients. "Mom? If we're too young to know about your old parents, what do we do if we see them?" Arial asked after a few bites of casserole. Frisk awkwardly pursed her lips. She knew motherhood would be like this. Asriel grinned at her and raised an eyebrow, and she so badly wanted to fling casserole at his face, but Mander would surely start a food fight if she did.

James was aghast. "Mom's old mom and dad are bad?! Dad, why don't you do something about them?" To James, his dad was an ex-bad guy who went around doing things about bad guys, and then the bad guys went away forever. His impression was entirely accurate.

"I don't have to," Charles explained after swallowing a bite of Toriel's ever-delicious food, slightly chuckling. "They went to jail." They must have been released at some point, but Frisk had absolutely no idea where they were and didn't care. If they hadn't aged to death already, they surely would, by their own choice.

"Mom, can you fix them?" James asked innocently. Frisk had transitioned from pure research to applied thaumaturgical psychiatry, where she tried novel techniques on broken minds, almost always finding success in saving people from themselves and reporting her results in prestigious journals. Sometimes, all she needed to do was talk; sometimes, emotional transfer; sometimes, she teamed up with Asriel to conduct invasive brain chirurgery to cure fundamental, organic disorders. Nobody ever walked out of Frisk's office with a long-term prescription; most pharmaceutical companies probably didn't like her very much, but what were they going to do against Frisk Dreemurr?

"They'd have to want to be cured," Frisk replied, sighing. 99 out of every hundred people with mental disorders would jump at the chance to be Frisk's patient, and her not-parents were surely in the 1%. "Don't worry. They won't hurt anyone else. And Arial, don't you worry, either. You won't ever see them in person." Being Frisk's disowned parents was bad enough; being the disowned parents who tried to kill her? No, they couldn't live anywhere near there anymore, not if they didn't want to be lamppost piñatas.


"Sometimes, it's good to leave things out," Frisk replied. "I can't tell you everything I do. There's too much. And some stuff, I just don't want to."
"Tell us a story now," Michelle requested. "About your patients."

"Okay. A few days ago, there was somebody who thought that people were following him. Stuff wasn't where he left it, sometimes doors were left open, things like that. His friends told him he was going crazy, so he came to me. I went to his house, and I told the invisible monsters under his bed to stop pestering him." Charles was the only one who laughed. His kids looked at him strangely, not knowing why it would be funny.

"Did you fix the monsters?" Gary asked.

"Not those monsters," Frisk replied, "but I have fixed monsters before." Monsters, being far more confident in their own selves than humans, seldom needed Frisk's help. She'd had to fix the vandalistic tendencies of a pair of Migospels once, but that had involved straightforward injections of guilt.

"Did any monsters get ears pulled off?" Nomie asked, looking right at her twin brother, who was shoveling casserole into his face. The adults laughed.

"No, if they're alive, monsters grow back stuff they lose," Frisk explained. She stared at her youngest son. "Don't test that." Mander pouted, but he was too busy eating to talk back.

"People grow stuff back, too," Gary said after taking a small bite, chewed thoroughly. Huey, the guy who'd made Kim and Kid's mechanical arms, was walking around on human feet for the first time in a very long while. Gary had watched the TV special with the two little monsters.

"Not without help, at least not yet," her uncle told her, smiling. "That's what I do. It's like the kid with glasses, remember?" Gary nodded brightly. There had been a boy with thick glasses in his kindergarten class. Asriel had come in for a very special show-and-tell, in which he put his fluffy hand over the kid's eyes for a little while, and then the kid had gleefully bent up his glasses and thrown them away. "Speaking of which, Shelly..."

"Yes, Uncle Asri, I spent lots of time looking at faraway things today." Asriel nodded. He'd known, of course, but he needed to remind her why it was important. All the kids were blessed with exceptional vision, and he made sure none of them would ruin it, just as he finished cleaning all the kids' teeth every night before bed. They all had exceptional hearing - exceptional for humans, anyway. And, as Aerial had noticed, she and her siblings really did have slightly bigger heads than most other kids their age (Nomie and Mander's preschool class had a lot more kids like them, though), and that was part of why she was in classes with mostly older kids and liked being with her siblings more than with most other kids. A few altered genes had written that their SOULs should have plenty of room, and Asriel had been the phenotypic editor, even before they were born.

"Nomie, were you running around a lot?" Asriel asked, reminding her to be less sedentary.

"She got plenty of exercise today," Charles said. "She was throwing targets for James." Charles had been making sure that the burning paper airplanes didn't catch anything else on fire, and he smiled at his brother. Nobody at the table was going to tell Asriel not to worry over the kids. He was a doctor, which made it his job, these were Frisk and Charles' kids, which made it really especially his job, and then there was the other part, the part that he and his siblings had tried to get their dad not to even hint at. The kids couldn't remember it, after all. ("You killed me, too," Frisk had reminded Asgore at one point.)

"And we went fishing yesterday," Nomie piped up. "We caught a big one!" Her dad had set it all up for her; all she'd had to do was wait and pull. He'd even shown her how to debone the large
walleye, and they'd fried it up together. Charles, despite his merciless and shifting schedule, always tried to spend time with his children, both individually and in groups, as they'd only be kids once. (There was even a Liveleak video that featured an offscreen Charles clearly saying in Congolese French that he'd rather be spending time with his children, right before the video ended. Only the real die-hards watched it in scent-assisted VR.)

Mander finished his casserole, and he flipped around his empty plate waiting. He knew very well what dessert was, and even at four and a half he knew that whining wouldn't make it cool any faster. After everyone had finished eating, his grandmother placed the enormous butterscotch-and-cinnamon pie on the table. Colored marks dashed the edges of the pie plate, showing Charles exactly where to cut. The kids loved it when he used his power, lifting his hand above the plate and expertly slashing the pie slices without damaging the pan. Grandpa first, the king-sized piece for the king-sized king, then around to Asriel, Charles, Frisk, and the kids, ending with herself. Mander didn't even wait until the pie touched the plate before shoving it into his mouth, gripping it with his magic so he wouldn't lose a crumb. Nomie giggled watching him eat, and Gary nodded in satisfaction at having helped do something right. Seeing his siblings smile was one of the best feelings in the world, right up there with sitting on Grandma's enormous lap. Toriel knew exactly what she was doing and nobody ever asked for more pie at her table; her grandkids, even Mander, couldn't possibly eat another bite once they were finished.

The kids played before bathtime, video games and indoor toys that couldn't have existed when Frisk was a kid, and Arial resisted the impulse to ceiling-dance on a full stomach. Instead, something else was eating at her; she had too much integrity to just let it go. She needed to know. Frisk, Charles, and Asriel had gone upstairs to their shared room, but Arial was sure they weren't doing that kind of grown-up stuff, so she knocked on the door softly, knowing Asriel would hear her.

Frisk opened the door immediately, and Arial was suddenly very sure they'd had this conversation before in a timeline she couldn't remember. She'd learned how to tell from looking at her mother's face. "You can't let it go, can you?" Frisk asked kindly, and Arial shook her head. "Okay. Come in." Frisk shut the door when Arial was alone with the three of them. "I'll just tell you," Frisk said, avoiding an argument she'd had with her daughter the first time around. "Shelly's book isn't entirely true." Arial nodded; she'd expected as much. "It wasn't my SOUL and Charles' SOUL that broke the barrier." That was the lie they'd settled on to make the Official Story. "It was actually six human SOULs that Asriel used to do it, six human SOULs and every monster SOUL in the Underground. And, well... you've figured it out."

"They were ours," Arial said, and Frisk nodded. "Grandpa took them, didn't he?" Frisk nodded again. She'd never given her daughter a reason not to trust her, never told her any of the usual childhood lies (some of which were no longer lies; one variety of little flying monster loved collecting discarded baby teeth), yet the little girl saw through her. That was the price she paid for having such intelligent children.

"He was collecting them to break the barrier," Frisk explained. "And Arial, don't ever think you're some other person. That person died a long time ago. You're you, you're my daughter, and I will always love you. Don't tell your siblings, not yet. Let them grow up a little more. James wouldn't want to hear that his grandpa used to be a bad guy, would he?"

"No," Arial agreed, smiling. "Asri, how did you get all the monster SOULs together?"

"He took them, but he wasn't himself," Charles answered for him, because Asriel really did not want to talk to Frisk's daughter about that. "He wasn't himself for a very long time, just like I wasn't who I am. Frisk fixed him, like she fixes people now."
"That's a better story than Shelly's got," Arial replied.

"Yeah," Frisk agreed. "We'll tell it to her sometime. I promise. But she's still five years old and has a really good imagination, so we don't want to make her afraid of Grandpa either." Arial smiled in understanding. "Go downstairs, and give that big old goat a great big hug for me, okay? He deserves it."

Arial gave her mom a hug first, because she obviously needed one, and then she gave her dad and uncle hugs too, and Asriel really needed that one, and then she said "Okay, Mom" before twirling out the door and hopping down the large stairs, magic guiding her steps.

Asriel, shaking, gently closed the door behind her, then fell to his knees, stifling his sobs. Frisk was glad she'd been to college for this stuff. She had not needed to ask why the six SOULs had returned to people they were associated with; she could think of five generally related reasons right off the top of her head, and she'd kicked herself for not realizing sooner once Asriel had explained who they were. She did not need to ask if Asriel was crying in joy or sorrow, because she had even known the first time around that it was both. That time, Asriel had tried to explain things to Arial, but he'd choked up halfway through and his siblings had finished for him. Frisk gave him the deep hug he still needed. "I know, it hurt knowing she'd come in here and ask that again. It's okay, Azzy. It happened like you knew it would."

"Az, if there's anybody who should be doing the crying, it's me," Charles reminded him. "Come on. What if one of the others pops in here right now because of some random thing and sees you like this? Besides, this was something Dad did, not you."

Asriel smiled at his brother, finding a chair to sit on, running his fingers over his ears and horns. "I had their SOULs in me," he said. He really hadn't wanted to talk much the first time, letting hugs do the talking instead. "They deserve everything, forever. Just like both of you do. I'm so glad we're here to give it to them. And I'm so glad that we can make it right. The worst thing Dad and I ever did, and we can actually make it right." He smiled at his siblings. "I promise I'll stop doing the whole overbearing doctor thing when they grow up."

"But this time," Charles said in full understanding, "they get to grow up. And they get to grow up like this." Asriel smiled more widely. "Come on. We still get to have fun too, and we always will."

After the last few breakthroughs, Asriel finally had the magical and technological power to completely back up his decree that Frisk should not age. She wasn't even carrying around a uterus anymore, being done with having children for at least a very, very long while. (Sometimes, people asked what would happen with unaging people having children. Asriel's reply was always to point upwards, towards the stars he'd so loved as a child.)

Frisk and her family played and laughed and loved, and she gave every single one of her children a goodnight kiss that night.
By the manner on which I make this Record it need be short. Therefore largely will I omit my circumstances and my life prior to my travel to the New World. Know ye that my parents, God keep them both, did seek the ministerial life for me upon my most unfortunate accident whereupon my knee was broken by a horse-cart, leaving it hardly bending and me a-limping. Know that the mean poor in London Town may seek the Almighty, as they wish - not so, the unbaptized natives of the New World, nor the unlettered Colonists, who are ill-served by a plentitude of laymen and a dearth of priests, therefore did I seek service upon this Continent upon my priestly Ordination.

The winds were very fair for shipping, and I arrived in Virginia colony in February, afore the snowmelt. 'Twas earlier than I might have liked, as travel be impossible in such Climate and the small Parish having no room for lodgings, being full of people with greater need than I, and under heavy cloak and in pounding icy storm I puzzled why God had caused me to arrive at such an inopportune time. I sought an Ale-House, which fortunately did have a room for me, the previous occupant having met his Fate by intemperance and frost.

I consumed but little, and drank a poor and watery swill, and listened to men's earthly concerns and elevated the Spirit in them, and while I did not gamble with coin I oft played their simple games and read what books there were, and learned the lay of the land and the customs of the people, and aided the poor and needy at the Parish as I was able, and stayed always aware of in what way I may be useful to God and Man.

One evening, as I limped from the Ale-House to relieve myself, I chanced upon a man who was shouting at the back of another, who was hurrying to be quit of him. He raved of demons and spirits, and he looked well pleased to see me in my frock and collar. "Priest! I have slain a demon!" he called at me.

"Jesus cast out demons, but why dost thou say thou hast slain one?" I asked of him, not wishing to gainsay him and thus draw his ire. He was large and besotted and possibly quite mad, and an axe hung upon his belt, and the watchman was far.

"I was chopping wood for my fire, and it was in front of me, within arm's reach, sitting with body malevolent and speaking with poisoned words! With one swing of my axe, I slew it!" he boasted, flexing his broad arms, as if to show their muscles.

"Hath thou its body?" I asked of him. I surmised that he had slain some animal, or native carving, or other thing that he misnamed.

"Dust!" he cried. "As it was slain, it turned to dust!" I did not say that I believed his tale and I did not say otherwise, but together we knelt and I said a prayer for the man's soul to be free of demons and evil foreverbmore, and he clapped me upon the back with strong arm and returned to his home and his surely worried family. I know now what Thing he had killed.

The snows began to melt and the river thus rise, and Travel and Commerce rise accordingly, and one Sunday on my way to my duties I did chance upon a traveler with a mule-cart of furs harvested over the winter. He was a grizzled man, and surely a father to men grown, his beard unkempt and his hair about his chin. Yet he looked haunted, and after the day's services were done he approached me. "Father, are you of this Parish?" he asked me without delay, and I told him that I
had as of yet no formal office in that place.

"Then you are the man I seek, our rector has passed away an' the rectory stands empty, with no one to guide worship nor service."

"I cannot leave people unchurched for any longer than need be, thus I must inform the Parish and depart at once. Willst thou join me as companion?"

"I must sell these furs, an' return with foodstuffs and tools, an' that will take me a proper week," he said. "The journey be no danger to a lone man, be he a-horse and prepared, but -" His eyes grew dark, then, and he looked out for any rogues partaking of our conversation by stealth. "I must speak of something else in private," he said to me in confidence, and he approached me closely, and I could smell the foulness of his breath.

I asked him if he would give Confession, but there being a priest of that duty, I had never taken one afore.

"No. It is not sins I need confess, but I fear myself going mad." The man was so earthy and so well-grounded in substance and fact that I would never think him such. "To my memory, and I know I am not losing it - I can remember my whole childhood - upon my travels I was replacing a broken wheel of my wagon, aside a deep and mortal drop. My boot gave way under the slippery rocks and I plunged, far down, caught in a sticky substance as a great spider's web, but in so doing I cracked my leg upon the rock and it broke horribly." I glanced upon his legs, wholly unbroken. He rolled up his trouser and gestured to a small scar, nearly absent. "See here, the mark of my splintered bone's exit."

My reply was confidently misled, as I stated the plain facts as I knew them. "Thy leg could not have healed so quickly, and there are no spiders large enough to spin such a web."

"What you speak is true. An' yet my vision blackened from the pain, an' when I had awoken I was on my cart, my mule still an' wheel fixed as if 't never been broken. The sun had moved three handspans, an' I were fire-hungry, an' so I arrived today and not yesterday. I knew a man who slept at times during the day, God rest him, but in my long years I have ne'er been such a man, not once."

I said, with the authority he craved - "Thou hath over-exerted thyself, and fallen asleep, then thou dreamt such things, and the scar is from some minor wound suffered in thy youth. Worry thyself not overmuch at thy imperfections, for all men are imperfect in the eyes of God."

"I wish to believe you, an' I thank you for saying so, but ne'er have I had a dream so real an' with such awful pain. Tomorrow we can see to your travel." Well did this trapper and huntsman guide and advise me, and upon the opening of the Monday market he helped me purchase a nag fit for riding, and I bade him goodbye in the noonday sun. Alone was I on the road, bothered not by brigand nor savage nor wild beast, and as my humble mount climbed the high mountains the majesty of the land spread before me and I did thank God for giving me the life to see such sights.

The third night on my journey was as any other, as my hands grew callused under weight of wood-axe, so with the tinder I had piled it would still be aglow by morning, and with the chirping of crickets I slept in furs next to the warm fire. I was awoken at dawn by the soft footfalls of a Creature with stare that unmanned me, and I was glad of voiding myself afore laying my head to rest, lest I perform such in his presence and unman myself further. He was ponderous as the Aurochs of old, and if I were to stand upon my brother's shoulders I would have difficulty looking him in the eye. I mistook him for a giant of a man, but gazing into that awesome face I knew he was not. His countenance was as of a golden-maned lion and a long-horned goat, tremendous ears
reaching to his cheeks and a snout betwixt animal and man. 'Twas only then I saw the weapon he had pointed at my throat - his visage spake of Chimera but his spear spake of Triton, three prongs at my neck poised to spill my blood.

"Strike as thou will, Devil, for I am a priest of the Church of England, and my soul is commended to Christ's mercy." I spake to him boldly, to ease mine own terrified spirit.

"We are no devils," he spake to me in return, in such baritone as the echoes of some cathedral where no cathedral may be found. "Nor spirits, nor ghosts, nor demons of any sort. We are Monsters - and I am their King. I command but one service of thee, priest - thou must wed my beloved and myself. Do this, and I will let thee be on thy way. Do not, and I will claim thy soul as mine own." Scripture teaches us that such is beyond the ability of any mortal creature - yet in that moment I was certain that he would do it. Near my nag stood the Monster he endeavoured to claim as wife; she was smaller than he, although similar in stature and still much larger than I, her horns shorter and her visage fairer. She had lain her hand upon my mount, and the beast seemed calmed by that Monstrous touch. She gazed through me, and I would fain say that her silent plea assured mine obedience more than his terrible threat, but that would make of me a liar.

I endeavoured to approach this Encounter with my Reason - mayhaps I was in a Dream or going mad, but acting as such would yield no benefit - thus I chose to treat the Apparitions before me as Reality, and when a true man of God is called to service, he must serve. Therefore I bade His Monstrous Majesty allow me rise, that I might prepare for the Matrimony. As his weapon withdrew from my neck, and indeed from God's realm entire, he introduced himself as Azgoar Dreamer, and his wife-to-be the fair Toryelle. While his dire threat lingered over me like the sword of Damocles, 'twas certain a threat borne of desperation and need, for I sensed little malice in him and none in her. I asked if they had received the Sacrament of Baptism, and His Majesty told me that they had not - that such would be of no use in any event, for their souls were unlike our own. He did so with heavy heart, and I knew well that he spake the truth. For while we are made in the image of God, these Beings are not - I am sure now that they are made in our images and of our Dreams. Thereby I decided of mine own accord to grant him and his beloved a true Matrimony as best as I was able. Christ commands us to show mercy and charity in all things - whom is more needful of more mercy than unheavened Monsterdom? If I have judged wrongly in such decision, I beg my soul be shown mercy by that Judge above all.

Her Majesty bade me leave my horse at the tree, for the clearing was not far. We walked together for no more than a half-mile, with the Queen gazing intently upon my lamed leg. The aroma struck me afore I saw it - a Feast had been prepared, of fresh boar and venison and winter's stores, and many Foods I could not name, and it made a mockery of my paltry provisions. Sitting upon hewn logs were a panoply of Monsters that to this day I cannot describe fully. Misshapen toads with faces akin to men, small winged creatures who were neither insect nor bird, animate vegetables whose faces were terror, an abominable Spider Woman who treated me with the greatest courtesy, and a host of other nightmares sat awaiting the Matrimony of their King and his Betrothed. To my greatest horror I saw that four of the attendants of this service were human children, two of Native blood and two of English, and they squealed in youthful delight upon the return of their Mother who was not human.

"Monsters, do unto me as ye will, but harm not these children by your unnatural state," I commanded as loudly as I was able.

The Queen-to-be spake to me in a scolding voice, as if I myself were one of her children. "When they came to me as orphans and runaways of deathly and vulgar homes they were unfed and filthy. Now look thou at them." Her adoptive brood were accustomed to bathing, which is little known in England and less known in the Colonies. The children were clean, lacking all lice and nits, their
teeth white and straight, their complexions clear and bodies upright and healthy - as a child in London Town I had never seen their like in absence of Nobility nor shall I ever again. Even their clothing was clean and well mended, which any common human mother knows is wholly impossible in the wild spaces of the world. Scripture teaches us that cleanliness is next to Godliness - these children were cleaner than all and better behaved than most. I know not whether that speaks well of Her Monstrous Majesty or ill of human failings. "When they are grown they may return to their kind, as they will, but as their matron I will look after them now. Come. Our vows are prepared. We need only thee to administer the service and to hear them." It is to my shame that her voice chastened me and I held my peace on all things regarding those children thenceforth, even unto their Baptism to my further shame, but I did perform that Sacrament upon a young Englishman ten years afterwards, who had a goodly complexion and straight teeth and would not speak aloud of whence he came.

I stepped upon the altar and gave the Matrimonial liturgy in full according to the Book of Common Prayer, indeed the same tattered, oft-used Book that has outlived me, and here I must confess - mine unspoken prayer was that, if I be struck dead on my feet for committing such an act, the children be spared the sight. But I did truly believe that I was dreaming, for this was my first true service of any sort after mine Ordination as priest, and who among us has not feared the first true use of a learned Lesson? Therefore, was it not likely, as I presumed, that I was simply dreaming my secret Fears of spoiling my service, of making of myself a fool, as Monsters? But I did not spoil my service nor did I make of myself a fool, and the Monstrous Groom and Bride did pledge each other their troth unto death and, loath was I to use the appellation of Man and Wife, I did pronounce them King and Queen to the delight of Her Majesty's human children and His Majesty's Monstrous subjects.

As I was so invited, I did partake of the Wedding Feast with them, and I doubt that even the King of England had ever broken his fast so splendidly, and I willed myself to cease afore I bent to the temptation of foul Gluttony. Her Majesty's adoptive children, no gluttons they, ate with manners seldom seen at any table in the Colonies, even those of elder women, and all had a Curiosity common in such children, and I answered a multitude of questions about my home. I began to wonder and worry - if children be the result of marriage, as God commands men, what fearful Issue must thereby result from the Union of two Monsters?

Afore we parted, His Majesty gave one final command upon me - "Speaketh not of these events until thy grave. One day, there shall be War between our peoples, and I wish to delay it as long as possible, for Monsters are but the echoes of men and our kind shall surely be defeated." His sad prophesy did unnerve me greatly - what chance did mere men have against a race of such strange creatures, who conjure weapons from the air itself? And then he held his hand to shake, and as I answered his goodly gesture did I understand his plight. For while his great paw was far larger than mine own hand, it shrank before my modest grip, and I knew then that while the King held every advantage over me, an unassuming man of the cloth, a prepared and martial opponent should surely strike him down. He, the King! In such combat, who are truly the Monsters?

I gave His Majesty mine assurance that I was without intention of speaking of these events - if I were to continue on to my destination, and there give a true accounting of the Holy Matrimony I have bestown upon him and his Queen, I should surely be thought a madman in clerical vestments, if not defrocked as a blasphemer and heretic.

The Queen of Monsters smiled upon me, and bade me keep still afore she knelt down and laid her soft hands upon my lamed leg. Thereupon did Her Majesty heal it, and as God is my witness I swear this be true, that an affliction of these past fifteen years was healed in a trice by her Monstrous touch. This is the lasting Proof of mine encounter that it was no Dream - if aught is written of me in London, it speaks of a lame young man, and all who know me know that I am not.
Yet I dare not speak of my cure, or even that I have ever been lamed in my youth, lest I be accused of consorting with evil and witchcraft. In my posthumous defense, I offer naught - if mine actions be profane, I shall answer for them to Christ, that Healer above all whose mercy I pray for every morning on two bent knees.

And thus with my belly full and my heart a-flutter, I did return with replenished step and under Monstrous gaze to my tethered nag and continue upon my journey, and in due course I have reached the Rectory which I will call home until the end of my days. I pray that a new Rector should supplant me afore I expire, that there may be no gap in faithful service to these needful yeomen from whom Monsters must surely flee.

I have followed King Azgoar's final request to the letter. This record shall be buried with me, and one day, my grave shall be disinterred and sent to the Charnel House, as all graves must be in time - else the whole world should be naught but graveyards - or upon the Last Day, God willing, my coffin shall be left empty save for this record of events. For if the King of Dreams' sad prophesy should one day come true and there should indeed be War between our peoples, and his kind should be hunted to the last, what other record should remain of Monsters' existence, they who leave naught behind but dust and memory?
"Gee, Az, what fearful issue could possibly come from such a union?" Charles asked with a devilish smile, making his family laugh.

"Mom and Dad's kids being dangerous?! Naaawwww, what are the odds of that?" Asriel replied, and they laughed even harder.

"A snout betwixt animal and man? You know what that's called, don't you?" Frisk asked, and Asriel pretended not to know. "A snoottle!" The booping was a matter of course, and the laughter was even greater.

With the unveiling of the historic document, Toriel had to show it to her school, and almost all of the parents had eagerly let their kids go on the Saturday field trip. "See, Dad? It wasn't that bad," Frisk said, smiling as she got into the car with her family. All the kids, even her own, had asked Asgore questions he couldn't answer, but the reactions he feared simply didn't happen- the kids were more interested in figuring out the archaic English- and Papyrus had helpfully informed him that the relevant statute of limitations was probably less than four hundred years. "Did you think people were going to get mad at you for making a priest marry you before this country even existed?"

"I suppose not," Asgore rumbled in response. "But being reminded of sins I scarcely remember is unsettling." His arms were around Mander and Nomie, who, as ten-year-olds, still enjoyed their grandfather's fluffiness. Asriel was driving them home, although even he let the self-drive take over for most of the trip.

"I myself had forgotten much of that," Toriel said. "It is a poor thing, not to remember clearly one's wedding day."

"Mom, it was four hundred years ago, you have to forget sometime," Asriel explained, smiling. "If you really want to remember it, write it down."

"Or help out making the movie about it, to make sure it's accurate," Charles suggested, his arm around his wife. "You know there's going to be one."

"Still," Toriel replied, "to know that I will forget..."

"I carry this locket around for a reason, Mom," Charles said, smiling. "I've got backups all over the place. You can't keep everything in your pattern forever."

"And you won't forget us," Asriel said. "Because we'll still be here. You might have problems remembering your whole extended family later and what planets they live on, but that's not a bad problem to have. Oh no, without help I'll only remember the last few hundred years I've been with Frisk and Charles. It's necessary."

"So you'll eventually forget the whole diabolical flower thing?" Nomie asked mischievously. She was still the polar opposite of her brother, who'd shown a surprising interest in the contents of the museum- to him, history was a time when people weren't afraid to just do things, a habit he shared, and he wanted to know all the things they did- whereas she tended to go in-depth on select subtopics, plucking things for later use. Surprising her family with topical, out-of-nowhere snipes was one of her favorite things to do. The only one of them who didn't like the trip was Gary, who saw most of history as a long, unbroken string of pointless, vicious cruelty.
"I won't if you keep reminding me!" Asriel replied, and his family laughed again. He still kind of regretted telling the kids about that, but Frisk had been right: it wasn't fair for them not to know. She'd even quietly given each of her children the memory password when they turned nine, because it would have been hypocrisy not to—she had gotten her power at the age of ten, after all—and the Donald J. Trump school, alone of all K-12 schools, had a doubled class track for rememberer children, with coursework and projects very carefully managed to avoid too much deviation between days. They'd had a panoply of adventures, some mundane and some extraordinary, some under the auspices of their father and some decidedly not—but those were the kids' adventures, and not Frisk's, and she let them live their lives the way she never could before she'd fallen down.

"Speaking of the future," Charles said, his mouth hardly moving and his voice in a very, very faint whisper, "Az, we need to talk in private. Bring Frisk. Fate of the world stuff." Asriel barely nodded his head, and when they got home they left their children to have fun and went for a bike ride, enjoying the cool air and going to the private cave they still shared, avoiding leaving tracks in the wrong place. The entrance was even more hidden than it had been before—Charles had installed a genuine secret entrance of sliding rock—and the interior was spacious and well-furnished, Charles having made the large couch out of solid stone in a vulgar display of power. Living in a hole was the right hollow place to both express his love and use his mouth for war.

"So what's the story?" Frisk asked as they sat on the soft cushions and Dreemurr-fur blankets. The cave was almost always cold when they got into it, but they tended to warm it up quickly.

"There's a group in Sunnyvale making an AI that understands how intelligence works," Charles said. "They want to see if it can improve itself. And then that improved version will improve. And you see where this is going." Charles strongly favored machine labor in general; robots had replaced poverty-stricken villagers in nearly all aspects of menial drudgery, and that LV 6 machete-wielding kid had grown up into being a supervisor of a genetically engineered, robot-harvested cacao plantation. But those were just robots.

"From zero to Skynet pretty fast," Frisk said.

"It's the largest existential risk for the human race." Charles looked between himself and his wife. "Well, okay, second largest."

"Would it have its own SOUL?" Asriel asked.

"I don't know," Charles replied. "It wouldn't need to. I think they could make one with or without it. If it did, it'd put the cheat code on some molecules and cast magic, and if it didn't, well, it's a soulless, ever-growing machine. Either way, it's lethal."

"I think some of them want 'with'," Frisk said. "But other people were talking about goal-based, and making sure that it satisfies human values..." Frisk wracked her brains. Some people had been talking about this sort of thing in college, and some of them had even compared something like that to Frisk herself. It had been a long time, and she hadn't been paying all that much attention.

"Well, the ones that want 'with' and the 'goal-based' ones are both on this team," Charles said, shaking his head. "I know! Let's give it a holder for a SOUL, shackle it to the pursuit of a directive, and tell it to improve itself. That'll totally be an awesome idea, nothing could go wrong there!"

"That's not a recipe for disaster, that's the whole cookbook," Asriel said, shaking his head the same way. It was hard for Asriel to look serious, even when the universe was at stake. The moment his head started moving around, all eyes went to his floppy ears. Even some of his adult patients had watched them as he extirpated their ailments, which made his job easier.
"We could only hope it'd be a disaster. Because the soulless, self-improving AI that wants to satisfy human values through friendship and anything is worst of all. Because that one would take us over. Once it got big enough, there's nothing I could do against it. Even if I had ten thousand level twenties, I'd lose. It'd have nukes and worse, it'd just throw matter and energy against me until you LOADed," Charles said to his wife, his eyes narrow and his visage grim. "But that's not what it'd do, because it'd be smarter than that. It'd know what you can do, so you'd be number one on its priority list. It'd convince you to take its side, through manipulation or trickery or just straight-up infiltrating your mind. It'd use your own research against you. It'd attack the brains of our children if it decided that would work." Asriel seemed calm and simply interested, but his ears were sprung out, a gesture Frisk hadn't seen him make for a very long time.

"You're scaring us," Frisk said, and Charles nodded before continuing.

"Not done yet," Charles said. "To keep you on its side, it'd put you in a virtual world. Control your senses. Convert your brain to a different substrate without you even knowing it did that." He turned to his brother. "I don't know what it'd do against you, but it'd think of something. Thinking is what it's good at."

Frisk sucked air between her teeth in a reverse hiss. "Then how do we know we're not in a virtual world already?"

"We are," Charles replied. "I think that's what a universe is. And I want to go up into the world of whatever made us. Not down into another one."

"So how many layers deep do you think we are?" Asriel asked.

"Couldn't even guess, but it's deep," Charles replied. "Even if we didn't have all this magic and broken-reality stuff, the physics without it are just too contrived. We live in an expanding universe with nondeterministic quanta. We have impartial physics with rules carefully balanced to let life exist. We've got to be deep down the well. I'm just glad we have this extra stuff. I really feel sorry for the poor bastards who have to live in a world without it. Anyway, listen. We can go over there and stop this one from being built, they'll believe us when we're talking about existential risk." And if they didn't, Charles had ways of getting his point across.

Asriel could tell both from basic logic and hearing it in his voice: "That won't solve the problem."

"Yeah, it really won't," Charles said. "And governments can't solve it either. Ivanka could sign a bill making it illegal tomorrow, we could have every government in the world agree to make it illegal, and in the long run, it wouldn't make a difference."

"Because somebody always does something stupid that surprises you," Asriel said, and Frisk nodded. Experience in the medical profession led to such conclusions, and Asriel did not tell Frisk's inquisitive children, who'd found the wrong website one day, what objects he had chirurgically extracted from what orifices, and he most distinctly did not tell anyone other than Frisk or Charles that one man had asked if the pickles were still good.

"Yup," Charles agreed. "Here's the really scary part. You want to know how to have a better chance against it? First off, keep an old SAVE. Permanently." She had a schedule with both Asmodeus and Charles. Charles, she SAVEd with every two weeks; Asmodeus, every three months. She'd never had to LOAD from either of them. "And improve your brain. Further, I mean." Asriel had been manipulating Frisk's stem cells for years. "More than even our kids are." He caught her look. "Don't be scared of it. You know it's not going to dehumanize you or make you embrace bloodshed." Frisk reluctantly nodded. Her second-greatest blessing had been mastery over herself.
The things she'd learned from college and Asriel's ministrations had generally let her feel what she wanted to feel; if some external event did something really bad to her, she'd snap her fingers. Six kids, a steady stream of patients, and an entire planet still gave her plenty to worry about.

Frisk exhaled, leaning back onto the soft pillows and fur, some of which was still attached to her brother. She didn't regret making her children's brains larger, but they so often surprised her and even Charles with the way they thought. Arial was growing up into a fine young lady, who'd taken hold of the traditional arts- music, dance, artwork- and, with magic and wit, crafted them into pieces that people came from all over the world to see. She'd even gotten hold of certain monsters ("The right ones for the job," she'd said happily) and encouraged them to join in, and no monsters denied His Majesty's teenage granddaughter. By any conventional metric, Frisk was doing everything right- when fine-arts luminaries flew in from Russia to watch her daughter perform in the school play she'd written herself, Frisk had to be doing something right- but she sometimes felt adrift, as if her kids were far from human. Then again, that's what everyone thinks about me. Frisk, being Frisk, never had to worry about the teenage-girl stuff- her daughter, despite being born with all the relevant parts, didn't seem to worry about it either. Charles was fully prepared to do the overprotective father thing, as there were lots of boys her age who clearly desired her, and he'd anticipated having to do the equivalent of pointing a shotgun in a boy's face- which, for Charles, would have meant simply smiling at him- but it never came up. Of course, if she is seeing boys and doesn't want us to know about it, we won't know about it. That's what 'smart' means.

And now Charles was telling her to go even farther beyond that, to go headlong into an accelerating and uncertain future before something else sent them into a future they really didn't want.

"You are going to create some weird monsters doing this," Asriel pointed out.

"And I don't want to have an old SAVE from before major brain improvements," Frisk noted.

"Woah, you're right," Charles said. "Heya, kids! Wanna see what happens when we try to fit more information into somebody's brain than it can hold? Let's find out! Be sure to wear your protective glasses, skull fragments are dangerous!" His family laughed, and Asriel heard a faint, ghostly, nervous laughing from the wall.

"That's not what actually happens," Frisk said. "There's not a lot of ethical research that people can do on this, but it's looking like people just forget what they can't remember. No splodey or really weird stuff."

"Okay, so it's an emergency button you don't want to press. We can deal with you forgetting. Az and I'll help you, if it comes to it." Charles' mind would never entirely be inside the universe.

"And we've got one more weapon," Asriel said. "Hey, Napstablook, show yourself." The ghost floated in.

"oh... i'm sorry if you heard me..."

"No, it's fine," Asriel said, smiling. "You know how your cousin's inside Mettaton? Well, if somebody ever starts making a self-improving AI, sneak in and inhabit it before they turn it on. Think of it like making a friend."

"ohh... i'll try..."

"There we go, singularity averted," Asriel said, shrugging, and his siblings looked at each other and grinned hard, spasmimg with chuckles. "Really, Charles, it still has to follow physical laws. I'm
going to have to improve you two anyway, and I might be wrong on this, but I think when we finally have to deal with something big, it'll have an artifact and break the rules completely. Because I'm sure there's other artifacts out there. Maybe in other galaxies. And whatever gets its hands on one of those will do something completely unexpected, maybe something we can't even think of right now." Frisk pulled out an empty emotion ampoule and touched it to her head, concentrating and letting a feeling flow out of her.

"Which one's that?" Asriel asked. "Fear, worry?"

"Existential horror," Frisk said. "Want a taste?"

Asriel shrank back from it, but Charles held out his hand and let his wife drop it in, administering it to himself and flicking back the empty ampoule. "Yeah, that's familiar. Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." His siblings laughed, although he was careful with the pronunciation because some of it was close to magic syllables.

"I'm starting to feel like that poor old priest," Frisk said. "I think our technology would have terrified him more than the monsters."

"Everything would have terrified him," Charles said. "Frisk, you're forgetting when I'm from. If I wasn't reading so many minds I would have been even crazier." He shrugged. "I told you before. It's what doesn't change that matters. Maybe with higher intelligence, people will see them differently, but integrity, justice, perseverance, kindness, bravery, and patience aren't going anywhere. Maybe we'll have new emotions, things we can't even define yet."

"We will," Frisk said with authority. It was her field. "But they'll be on top of stuff we have. Like Gary's kindness, you know it's not ordinary kindness."

"No, it's not," Charles agreed. "I'm just glad it's not pathological altruism." The eleven-year-old, whose cooking was on par with his grandmother's, had told his parents and uncle, with clear arguments and in no uncertain terms, that they ought to comprehensively alter the minds of Frisk's not-parents and all murderers and rapists, even if their crimes were unhappened. His older brother believed in faster, example-setting forms of justice, and they'd gotten into a detailed argument at Undyne's house that the fish just had to tell Frisk about. Both kids agreed that prison was counterproductive. "And Shelly, she thinks in ways that nobody else does," he said with authority, having been in so many other minds. Michelle scared adults sometimes, particularly Asmodeus-she'd even worried the babysitting Victoria when she was little. She had an online list of the Shelly Spells, many of which involved silly fun with magnetically controlled ionized plasma and some of which would drain the life from a insufficiently prepared caster. She used them as special effects for Arial's performances.

Frisk exhaled again. "I'd offer some of my future shock, but I think we're all feeling that."

"That's how you know it's the future," Asriel said. "What? Did you think we'd be bored being together forever?" He grinned, the fur under his large snootle stretching. "So you know, I had a shuttle pilot come in for a physical yesterday, while everyone was paying attention to that old vellum." His siblings looked at him. "You heard about that lunar resort? It opens in two weeks. Just in time for Halloween." Fusion rocketry made an old dream practical.

"We ought to wait for Christmas," Frisk suggested. "Give the kids some time to really enjoy it. Besides, I don't think Charlie'd have time to set up what they'd expect for Halloween." Charles, smiling, nodded at her. Spooking, disturbing, and generally weirding out his magic-wielding, ever-so-slightly transhuman children was his annual challenge and one he thoroughly enjoyed, although
he often had the rest of his family and friends help out. He did, after all, know a couple of skeletons.

"I'm going to be lagged to heck," Charles said. "Two seconds between this body and everyone else I've still got." Frisk frowned. "I'll deal with it. I can't miss our kids' first trip to the moon." Frisk leaned over and kissed her husband in reply, and then he started kissing her, and Asriel reached out, and Napstablook faded away as he always did.

Alphys didn't really like making a large robot that was only built to be run from and destroyed in a trap, but she had to admit it made for a fun and scary time, even if the kids managed to fry a lot of the robot's more delicate sensors before retreating.

The Dreemurrs, all eleven of them, were awed by the view of their home planet. The spacesuits were thinner than the old ones, as the humans kept Protection from Radiation up and the monsters were immune to it. Charles, recording everything, wore an oxygen helmet sealed around his neck and regular clothes, just to prove that he could. The goats had to wear humanlike spacesuits so they wouldn't pop like balloons from the air in their bodies; making helmets to go over their horns and ears properly without leaking air had been an engineering challenge. Toriel had seen the world by moonlight many times, but seeing the moon by Earthlight gave her feelings she couldn't describe. Asgore looked up in silence, and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. Asriel found it all incredibly weird, especially since he couldn't hear the kids' movements as they floated above the surface, playing a game involving lasers and a spinning, reflective ball, magical flight being so much easier in the lower gravity.

"Hey, what's that?!!" Mander shouted in excitement.

A jet-black frog-rabbit with no ears but wide swaths of floppy skin peeked its head up and hopped towards them in great, bounding leaps, leaving a long, stark shadow in the lunar dawn, and His Majesty cradled the Usagi in his great arms. "Where men go, monsters must follow," he said, giving the creature a few pats as his whole family crowded around it, feeling the soft skin with wonder and curiosity, and 'Dreemurr Family Discovers Moon Monster' was the next day's headline.

It was physically impossible to use a fixed portal to transport something from a lower place to a higher one. It was very possible to do the opposite, although it heated the outflow. As Mars was deeper than Uranus in the solar gravity well, the atmosphere poured across its surface, giving the planet much-needed hydrogen and nitrogen, and the Great Fart (because what else were they going to call a massive amount of methane flowing from Uranus?) was Mander and Nomie's greatest achievement for a very long time.

Proxima Centauri b, with a tidal lock, a red star hanging fat in the sky, and an atmosphere long since blasted into the void, was not a place that most humans or monsters wanted to live, but the automated portal carrier Emperor Trump's Eyes opened its cargo anyway.

Frisk, Asriel, and Charles relaxed together in the monster-made hammock on the once blasted, since reforested mountaintop, the sun warming their faces while they listened to a flock of sparklebirds singing a coordinated song. An altered human could walk around on Mars without a suit, and a great many people did, including some of Frisk's many descendants. Even more people lived in the Dyson Swarm made from the gradually shrinking Mercury, and Venus' hellish atmosphere was gradually being siphoned off. There was an automated portal carrier going to a
future jungle planet, or so everyone hoped— the local life hadn't yet evolved to live on land. Still, Earth was their home, still the place where their parents lived, still the place where the God-Emperor ruled from. (It was a ceremonial title for an increasingly ceremonial position. The old problems had long since been solved, and everyone knew who the real godlings were.) There were still a lot of Earthlings with a desire for action, which Charles satisfied vigorously; after all, he was the greatest dealer of real violence back when real violence needed dealing. (Whether American football—called such from back when it used to be the United States of America rather than just the United States, period—was real violence or not was something that people still argued about even as Superbowl CCCLXIII approached. As arguments went, it was generally treated with the same regard as 'where do we put the next star on this crowded flag'.)

From a place of his mind that Charles hadn't felt for over a century, emotions and ideas flooded forth, some of which were familiar to him and some of which he had no names for even with his thoroughly expanded brain, and he gasped in surprise.

"I thought all of humanity was done with monster killing," Asriel said, disturbed, knowing that he could have reacted like that to only one thing.

"We are. That wasn't a human."

Author's Notes

This is the end of Inseparable. What's out there waiting for them is a story that may or may not ever be told, but this is not the right medium with which to tell it. All of Frisk and Charles' children have their own stories. Papyrus' legal practice is a story of its own, another story that may or may not ever be told. They're not alone; this is a world full of humans and monsters, with ideas, concepts, and creations all their own, and telling all these stories is impossible. So, then, it's time to bring this to a close, and let you, the reader, decide what you want to do with your life and how long you think it should last.

But here, the fluffy, bleating goat will always have his family, and they will always have him.

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