

One By One

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One By One

by [CourierNew](#)

Summary

"You can decide when it ends."

The world is saved, but that wasn't enough. Asriel remains lost in the dark. To retrieve him, Frisk is ready to crack apart time itself. As he turns back the clock again and again, undoing every happy ending, Sans reluctantly confronts his own past in the most secret corners of the underground. Together, they must overcome their regrets, recover the last soul, and give the world back its future.

Hold your friends close. Seek the broken man. Beware the whispering shadows. Be kind. Be brave. And above all - stay determined.

Notes

Some things you'll do for money
And some you'll do for fun
But the things you do for love are gonna come back to you one by one.
- The Mountain Goats, "Love Love Love"

- Translation into 한국어 available: [One By One 번역](#) by [Rainingoutside](#)
- Translation into 한국어 available: [하나둘씩](#) by [HartesWelt](#)

Reset

“You can’t regret hard choices your whole life, right?”

This was the only place in the underground where you could see the sky. If you placed your back against the wall of this dank cavern, heedless to the stones scraping against your spine, and turned up your head just so, you would glimpse it – that thin blue crescent at the outer edge of the cave mouth above. That merest hint of color. It would disappear completely at night. It would never be enough to see the stars.

But sunlight lanced in anyway, and pooled in the center of this cave, where the earth lay rich and golden flowers clustered by the dozen. Their stalks waved in unseen breezes; their pollen faintly smelled like sweet lemons. The two of them sat crosslegged in that splash of color, their striped shirts garish in the fading light. Asriel sat with his hands on his knees. The stubby fangs at the end of his muzzle sparkled.

“Well, not that I have much of a life left.” He smiled. “But that’s besides the point.”

Asriel’s smiles never reached his eyes.

The rest of his face made an effort, all the right muscles worked, but his eyes stayed sunken and dim, the brows hanging low. It made him look much older than he should have been. The same went for the boy sitting across from him. His own eyes were perpetually half-lidded, his mop of hair askew. His disheveled appearance gave him the impression of someone who was always fighting to stay awake. He never seemed to smile at all.

“Be careful in the outside world, okay? Despite what everyone thinks, it’s not as nice as it is here.”

The flowers bent as if in agreement.

“Frisk...don’t kill, and don’t be killed, alright?” Asriel’s expression turned wistful. “That’s the best you can strive for.”

Frisk nodded.

“Well, see you.”

Several seconds passed. Frisk made no sign of getting up. Asriel tilted his head, then laughed, a little awkwardly.

“Frisk,” he said. “Don’t you have anything better...to...”

Confusion flitted across his face. He put one hand to his head, gently massaged his scalp.

“Ha...that’s funny. I feel like I’ve said that before. Right here, like this.” He tried to smile again. “I’m not surprised. After all those resets I did-”

Frisk reached out and took his hand.

“Huh?”

Frisk enclosed both his palms over Asriel’s own. Asriel’s fur felt like terrycloth against his skin. His hair fell over his face. His expression was inscrutable.

“Wow, you’re, uh, really holding on tight.” Asriel put his other hand on top of Frisk’s. “Hey, come on. I’ll be fine. You don’t want to keep all your friends waiting.”

Slowly, Frisk shook his head. He released his grip and stood up. His gaze lingered on Asriel for a moment longer, then he carefully stepped around the flowers and out of the sunlight.

Around that patch of vegetation, the shadows were so deep as to be almost solid; anything that stepped into them lost its outline, its color bled into the surrounding black. Frisk’s shoes squeaked on the stones, his two-toned shirt turned monochrome. Just before he disappeared, he turned and saw Asriel sitting where he’d left him, head bowed low. His ears twitched gently in the breeze. The green and yellow of his own shirt blended with the flowers. Already he resembled the plants themselves.

Asriel raised his head, then turned to Frisk. He lifted his hand and waved. Frisk waved back.

The sounds of distant birdsong faded. The smell of sweet pollen gave way to earth and damp. Frisk left Asriel behind, and did not turn around again. The stained stone arch to the Ruins loomed like an open mouth.

The waiting dark filled him with determination.

* * *

Again.

Sans

(Knock, knock, knock.)

The brothers' house was well-insulated against the Snowdin cold. This seemed unnecessary, since its residents didn't have any skin, but Papyrus hadn't wanted guests to feel unwelcome. Still, a thin draft wisped in from underneath the front door, and pattered about the house like an annoying dog.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

The draft maneuvered through a small galaxy of spare change under the couch, which was lumpier than Undyne's mashed potatoes. This was impressive, as Undyne mashed her potatoes entirely with headbutts. Her head often wound up with more lumps than the potatoes. Undyne insisted that this improved the flavor. She emphatically denied the concussion had anything to do with it, often just before having a couple of aspirin and a nice lie down.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

It brushed against the lengthy trail of Post-It notes dangling from Sans' discarded sock. Papyrus had long since given up adding to this record-breaking chain letter, but as the glue wore off and the notes fell down, he just re-wrote everything on new ones and stuck them on the sock again. He said they really tied the room together.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

The breeze ambled into the kitchen, where occasional doggy snores sounded under the magnificently elongated sink. In the fridge, Papyrus' collection of spaghetti brooded under low light. The lids of the spaghetti containers were a fantastic cornucopia of colors. For that matter, so was the spaghetti. Several containers had at this point developed rudimentary societies of their own, and plotted dark conspiracies against Sans' interloping chip bag in the corner.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

It sniffed at the end table, where Sans' pet rock slowly digested its chocolate sprinkles, and, apparently deciding that there was nothing of interest in the house besides that persistent knocking, headed back out the door, and disappeared.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

The knocking continued – three polite raps, every five seconds, made with metronomic precision.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

Frisk stood at Sans' bedroom door, staring straight ahead as though he'd found a prophecy written in the wood grain. He raised his fist.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

He lowered his fist again.

He raised his fist.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

He lowered his fist again.

He raised his fist.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

He lowered his fist again.

He raised-

The doorknob turned. The door swung open.

"Heya, kiddo."

Sans shuffled out of the impenetrable murk of his bedroom, grinning the same as ever, two dim points of light shining deep in his eye sockets. The aroma of gently used socks wafted out in his wake. No one knew exactly how he accumulated so many socks, or why they always smelled like they hadn't been washed in a week. He never stepped out of his fluffy house slippers. He didn't even have calves. He was a skeleton brimming with unfathomable mystery.

"So, you've been knocking...pretty regularly...for about twenty minutes straight." He glanced down at Frisk's knuckles, which were slowly staining purple. "Man, doesn't that hurt?"

Frisk said nothing. Sans raised what would have been his eyebrows – it was always a little odd, the way his and his brother's skulls could move like soft clay – then shrugged and went on.

"Anyway, sorry I took so long. Usually when someone knocks I just figure it's Papyrus asking me what happened to his Junior Jumble or where pirates come from or something, but at this point he'd have given up, or, you know. Said something. Literally anything."

He peered out of the room and down the hall. "He must be out doing...whatever it is he does. Lucky, 'cuz otherwise he'd have heard you and dragged you out of the house to go on friendship adventures." He glanced back at Frisk. "Friendship adventures. His words. Not mine. Just got to state that for the record. I think his action figures were involved."

Frisk remained silent.

“That’s some pretty good timing. Catching me when I’m home, and Papyrus isn’t. Usually it’s the other way around.” His grin widened. “You must really need me for something.”

Frisk nodded.

“Welp, sorry, can’t help ya.” He gingerly stepped around Frisk and headed for the stairs. “Got a lot of work to avoid, you know how it is. Keep an eye out for me in Waterfall or something, we’ll get brunch.” He stopped at the front door and turned back to Frisk, who was watching from the second-floor rail. “And put some ice on that hand, kid, geez.”

He stepped outside and shut the door. Frisk was left alone in the house, and the only sound was the tick of an unseen clock.

* * *

(Knock, knock, knock.)

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“So, you’ve been knocking...pretty regularly...for a while now.” He glanced down at Frisk’s knuckles, which were covered in sunset-colored bruises. “Man, doesn’t that hurt?”

Frisk said nothing.

“Anyway, sorry I took so long. Usually when someone knocks I figure it’s just...Papyrus...” His eyesockets crinkled for a moment, and he reached up and tapped his skull. “Heh. Wicked déjà-vu just then.” His pupils swiveled towards Frisk. “And that expression...if I didn’t know better, I’d say you heard all this before.”

Frisk remained silent.

“You need my help with something?”

Frisk nodded.

“I’ve been keepin’ an eyesocket out for ya since we first met. Doing all I can, here.” He stepped around Frisk and headed for the stairs. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I gotta see a man about a dog. That man is my brother, and that dog is probably his arch-nemesis.”

He went to the front door, grabbed the handle, paused, and looked over his shoulder.

“And, kid? Don’t do that again.”

He stepped outside and shut the door. Frisk was left alone in the house, and the only sound was the tick of an unseen clock.

* * *

(Knock, knock, knock.)

The brothers’ house was well-insulated-

“All right, *knock it off.*”

Sans was still grinning, but now his bony brow furrowed in irritation. A moment passed, and it smoothed out again.

“Heh. Knock it off. See what I did there?”

Frisk nodded, and made a see-sawing gesture with his unbruised hand.

“Ahh, everyone’s a critic.” Sans kept his voice light, but the way the bone around his eyesockets crinkled suggested that he, too, wasn’t very amused.

“So, okay, you’re a time traveler. Congrats. Round of applause.” He clapped his hands together with a sound like castanets. “Kind of a weird way to show it off, but hey, I’m not judging you. I guess this isn’t just a house call?”

Frisk shook his head.

“You need my help with something.”

Frisk nodded.

“You gonna finally bang together a couple syllables and tell me what it is? Heck, what even makes you think I can do anything?”

Frisk angled his head slightly. The way the light fell on his face turned his stare accusatory.

“...heh heh heh. Okay.” Sans stuck his hands back in his pockets. “I guess that goes without saying. So here’s the twist ending, kiddo.” He leaned in close. “The answer’s no.”

He did a nimble half-step around Frisk and headed for the stairs, whistling tunelessly as he walked. Frisk watched him go.

“Take it from me – you gotta learn to be satisfied with what you’ve got. That little piece of advice is all the help I’ll give.” He paused with his hand on the doorhandle. “Don’t waste any more of your time with this. You’ll get sick of it *way* before I do.” He opened the door, turned, waved, and stepped out.

Frisk stood in the empty house, listening to the clock tick. That sound filled him with determination.

He cracked his knuckles, and winced at the pain.

* * *

The fifth visit.

“Heya. Still at it?” Sans held up a small memo pad, then shoved it in his hoodie pocket. “Figured I’d keep a running tally of your visits. That way, at least one of us can have a good time.” He slid around Frisk and headed for the stairs. “Well, so long.”

The front door opened and shut.

* * *

The eleventh visit.

“Look at that, I think we already broke double digits! Feels like it took no time at all. For me, anyway. I bet it’s getting real boring for you.” He insinuated around Frisk and headed for the stairs. “You know, I can put in a good word at Grillby’s and get you on my tab. Unlimited burgers, or staring at my door forever. Your choice! Keep it in mind.”

He paused at the front door. “Though I guess I wouldn’t remember telling you that. Eh, just let me know I told you. I’m sure I’ll believe me.” His grin turned slightly rueful. “Time travel. Ain’t it a delight?”

He shut the door slightly harder than usual.

* * *

The twenty-third visit.

“’scuse me, please.”

Sans stood in his doorway, grinning wide. After a long moment, Frisk stepped aside and let him pass.

“Thanks. Everything’s so much easier when you just ask.”

Sans ambled down the stairs, hands in his hoodie pockets. “Our little tally’s gonna fill up the page at this rate. No worries. Plenty of space left in my notebook.” Sans pulled the memo pad out one pocket and waggled it in Frisk’s direction. “C’mon, kid. Don’t you have anything better to do?”

The color drained out of Frisk’s face. Sans’ smile dimmed.

“Uh...was it something I said?”

Frisk chewed his lip, stared down at his feet.

“Guess I. Uh. Touched a nerve, or something.” Sans replaced the notebook, opened the front door. “Sorry.”

He left anyway. Frisk stood there for some time, his fists clenched at his sides. His right hand was becoming badly swollen.

* * *

The fortieth visit.

Sans’ bedroom door swung open.

“Hey, kiddo,” Sans said, opening the front door. “Bye, kiddo.”

Frisk did a double-take from one doorway to another, mouth hanging agape. By the time he worked out what had just happened, Sans was already out and away.

* * *

The fifty-fifth visit.

Sans stepped out with his cell phone pressed to the side of his head.

“Hey, bro, got someone wants to speak to you.” He tossed the phone to Frisk. “Catch.”

Frisk fumbled it with his left hand – the fingers of his right no longer bent properly – and picked it up just in time to hear a distinctive voice erupt from the receiver. It sounded a bit like a kazoo attempting to yodel.

“Congratulations, mysterious caller! You have successfully reached the phone of the great Papyrus, most definite future member of the Royal Guard. Now, identify yourself! Are you a friend, or a future friend!?”

“You two have a nice conversation,” Sans called from downstairs. “Or, you know, any kind of conversation. Cheers!”

“Hello? Why aren’t you saying anything?” The front door shut. *“Ahh, I see. You are so intimidated by my greatness that you need extra time to think of the perfect greeting! A salutation that will pierce my stern exterior and render me your comrade for life! Do your worst! Also, do your best! I believe in you!”*

* * *

The sixty-third visit.

Sans strutted out of his room whistling through his teeth; a jaunty, jazzy tune that, somehow, didn’t sound like the kind of song you’d hear if you were having a good time. He passed Frisk without a word, slid down the banister of his stairs, moonwalked across the living room carpet, and held one, final note, arms outstretched, jazz hands shaking. He froze stiff in that pose. Frisk stared down at him.

Sans stuck his hands back in his pockets and left the house.

Frisk sighed, turned back to the bedroom, and jumped at the sudden noise. The front door popped open and the gleaming brass end of Sans’ trombone popped out. He played three warbling notes, a dismal, heart-rending coda, and then shut the door again.

* * *

The eightieth visit.

Frisk had switched to his left hand for knocking long ago. And while Sans no longer kept him waiting for nearly as long – in fact, he often popped the door open at the first knock – he still had to tap his knuckles on the wood as gently as possible. The handle turned. The door swung open.

Sans’ bedroom was empty. But on the floor was a single sheet of lined notebook paper. Frisk bent over and carefully picked it up. In Sans’ thick, loopy print was written the words:

gone fishin’

you know the spot

Frisk stared at the paper for several seconds before folding it up and sticking it in the back pocket of his shorts.

The Snowdin chill bit at his bare legs and he had to walk half the town’s length with his arm over his eyes before his vision adjusted to the light, but the fresh air was a welcome relief from that miasma of socks and sadness. He passed by Grillby’s, caught a whiff of food greasy enough to lubricate an engine, and felt his stomach rumble. He hadn’t eaten or slept since the first visit. His vision was starting to swim a bit.

Nevertheless, he walked across the mountain, over Papyrus' meticulously re-painted "bridge," past the humble dwelling of Greaterdog. He took out his stick and traced idle trails in the snow, broken lines running parallel to his footprints. Eventually he arrived at the riverbank where the world's saddest pick-up note dangled from its fishing line. Sans was not there. Instead, Frisk saw another sheet of paper, held down by a rock. Frisk blew two white jets of steam from his nostrils, then bent down over the note.

"Hi there, honey," said the rock. "That nice skeleton-man said you'd stop by. Here, let me get out of your way." It gently slid off the sheet and continued into the underbrush. "Send my love to my brother in town."

Frisk waved goodbye and scooped up the note. It read:

stopped fishin'

find me at home

The skin under Frisk's eye twitched. He folded the note and put it in his pocket with the first, then headed back across the mountain.

The Snowdin cavern ceiling brooded high overhead. The light that lay on these woods filtered in from sources unseen. As Frisk crossed the bridge again he turned and gazed down at the expanse of pines jutting arrow-straight from the earth. The wind hummed like breath across a bottle; it plucked at his hair and his thin clothes like fingertips.

Forests beneath mountains. Mountains beneath mountains. The underground was beautiful in its way, but it had no weather or time. You couldn't look up and see the movement of the clouds or stars, that comforting reassurance that the world continued to turn. Instead there was only darkness, the sheer presence of Mt. Ebott pushing down on you. You tried not to think about how you lived and slept under that weight. The first time he had left the barrier, he'd looked back at that blank cliff face and thought of Asriel, alone, buried, with what remained of his essence trickling out like sand. And that thought had stayed with him. It wouldn't go away.

He re-entered Sans' and Papyrus' house. The place was still quiet as ever. Sans' door was shut again.

Frisk climbed the stairs, approached Sans' bedroom, and knocked. The door swung open.

On the floor was another note. Frisk picked it up.

gone fishin' again

sorry, kid

maybe you should give up for today and try (turn over)-

Frisk turned the paper over.

-tomorrow.

The rest of the page was taken up by a sketch of Sans' winking face.

It was quite well-drawn.

With great deliberation and infinite patience, Frisk withdrew the other two notes, put them on top of the third, and crumbled all the paper into a ball. He walked downstairs, approached the garbage can, raised the ball high over his head, and dunked it.

* * *

The ninety-sixth visit.

Sans opened the door. He was still grinning, but the look in his eyes suggested that this was only because his mouth was incapable of doing anything else. That grin was there because it had to be, and it felt lost and all alone in the world. Frisk didn't look much better – his skin was pale, his hair more askew than usual, and strange ticks fired off in his face and limbs as his body struggled to stay upright.

The silence was broken by a long, luxurious growl from Frisk's gut. Sans glanced down, then back up.

He said, "Wanna go to Grillby's?"

Frisk nodded.

"Go on ahead. I'll catch up."

Frisk's expression turned wary.

"No tricks, kid. I'm pretty sure you've used up all my material." He started to close the door, and stopped so that only the light in one eye and a sliver of his grin was visible. "And I think you'll agree – no one likes repeat performances."

The door closed. Frisk waited for a second, then carefully made his way downstairs. He wasn't sure how long he'd been awake at this point, but he felt very aware of each muscle and how much they wanted to turn to jelly. He stepped outside, circled around the side of the house, then took a deep breath and shoved both hands into a snowbank.

He hissed air through his teeth and flashes of colored light went off in his vision. His left hand didn't look too bad, but the skin on his right had turned shiny and taut and sent needles of pain up his arm with every flex. He kept them in the snow until they went numb, then pulled them out, shook them off, and limped to Grillby's.

The usual clientele was present, amidst the soft smoky haze. The place smelled like hardwood and dog fur. The Royal Guard's card game continued apace, and by the state of the chips, Greaterdog and his indefatigable poker face appeared to be dominating. Doggo waved at the spot where Frisk had been a second ago. As he approached the counter, Grillby glanced up, his flickering match-head glinting orange-red off his spectacles, and then quietly went back to polishing a glass with a clean rag. Due to the incendiary nature of its proprietor,

everything in the tavern was magically fireproofed, though the jukebox had somehow managed to burn out anyway.

The punk-rock horse leaning against the juke gave Frisk a quiet nod. Frisk nodded back, and then looked at the open stools. On top of one was a strange lump, cunningly painted the same color as the wood. Frisk eyeballed it, and hopped on top of the other stool.

(PPPPBBBBHHHTTTTPBHTPBHTPBHTplbrplbrplblblbrplbprfweetfweetfweeeeeet...poot.)

Frisk groaned and pulled the whoopee cushion out from under him. The first stool-top was innocent and bare. There were a few good-natured laughs from the other customers.

“Don’t sweat it,” said the bird sprawled out against the bar. “Grillbz says he was watching the whole time, and he has no idea how Sansy pulls that off either.”

Frisk kept his eyes forward as he heard the tavern door creak open. Sans’ slippers shuffled across the hardwood.

“No one panic, it’s only me. What’s up, Grillby, Dogamy, Dogaressa, Doggo, Greaterdog, Lesserdog. Hey, L.D., nice hand you’ve got going there. Have a bone on me. No...no, man, not the bone that’s literally *on* me, I meant- ow, not the tibia, *not the tibia*. Here, this one. Good boy.” Frisk heard muffled chewing. “Jimmy, you mind clearing out the corner? Me and this little guy need some quiet time.”

“Sure thing, Sans.” The horse’s imitation-pleather jacket crinkled as he pushed off the jukebox. “I need some fresh air anyway.”

As Jimmy clip-clopped away, Sans drifted into sight like a squat rotund moon and took the stool to Frisk’s right. “What’s up, kid?” Frisk dangled the whoopee cushion in front of him. “Oh, neat, was wondering where I left that.” He grabbed the cushion and stuffed it into his hoodie pocket. “How’s about you take a seat right here.”

He patted the stool to his right, nearest the jukebox, then gestured to Grillby. “Mind getting us a couple deluxe platters, man? I think we’re gonna be a while.”

Grillby flashed a thumbs-up and headed into the back as Frisk changed seats. Sans drummed out an uneven rhythm on the bar with his fingertips.

“Let’s wait for the grub before we talk,” he said. “You look worn out. You...seriously did this all in one shot?”

Frisk nodded, and it took visible effort to lift his head again.

“Somehow I think that even if I got an answer out of you it wouldn’t make sense. Don’t do that to yourself, kid. Someone your age needs their sleep.” Grillby emerged from the kitchen with two plates piled high with burgers and fries. “Aha, perfect timing.”

Grillby set down their plates and discreetly moved to the far end of the bar. Sans grabbed a ketchup bottle, flicked the lid off like a quarter, took a swig, then smacked the bottle back down just in time for the lid to land on the bottle-top again.

“I never get tired of the food in this place.” He bit into his burger, then looked to his right and saw that Frisk had already demolished half of his. “Heh. Looks like you’re the same way.” Frisk swallowed and took another bite.

They ate in silence for a while, their food diminishing by degrees. Eventually all that was left of Sans’ plate was a stray smattering of fries. Sans pushed them around for a bit and waited for the sounds of Frisk’s chewing to cease.

He said, “Alright.”

Frisk pushed his empty plate away and folded his hands on his lap. The atmosphere in this corner of the tavern grew solemn.

“At this point it’s pretty clear that you’re not knockin’ on that door just to hear my jokes. Though I bet some of ‘em were hilarious. Did I get you on the phone with Papyrus?” Frisk wearily held up four fingers. “Heh heh, priceless. But that’s the thing. I’m no time traveler. Every time you pull that trick,” his voice dropped an octave, “those *resets*,” his voice lightened again, “I don’t get the privilege of remembering what happened. Memories can’t survive. But, with a little work,” he produced the memo pad from his hoodie, “other things can.”

He slid the pad across the counter. Frisk hesitantly picked it up and flicked through it. The first several pages were covered with tally marks.

“I’ve got more, of course. Taking notes helps pass the time when I’m at my guardpost. Usually I don’t bother reading ‘em after, because what’s the point, right?” The light in his eyesockets dimmed. “It’ll all be undone anyway. But, just for you, I did some quick skimming, and I can more or less guess why you’re here.”

He swiveled his plate around. Frisk looked down at it, and the pad slipped out of his fingers. Sans had rearranged his fries to spell out one word:

A-S-R-I-E-L

“Gotta admit, I didn’t see *that* coming,” Sans said cheerily. “The crown prince of monsters. Guess he’s got something to do with that rascally flower runnin’ around. Heh heh. The same one whispering sweet nothings to my brother. That’s funny. That’s really funny.” He scooped up several fries and bit them in half. “And I know what you’re thinking: it’s not right. It’s not fair. You’ve got a great big heart in that ribcage of yours. I bet you’d do *anything* to help him out.”

Something in the tone of Sans’ voice made Frisk back away to the edge of his stool.

“But, speaking of unfair. I said I kept good records. Notes, sketches, amusing anecdotes...” He flicked something else out from his hoodie. “Photographs.”

Frisk already looked wan, but he turned even paler when he saw that picture.

All seven of them were there – Sans, Papyrus, King Asgore, Toriel, Undyne, Alphys, and Frisk himself. Papyrus was waving so frantically at the camera that his arm was a white and red blur. Toriel and Asgore both smiled wide, though Toriel's smile looked a little strained, and Asgore's a little desperate. Sans was giving Frisk bunny ears. Undyne had Alphys in an amiable headlock and, in an inspired move, was giving Sans' bunny ears bunny ears. The sky overhead was a faultless blue. The sun-drenched silhouette of Mt. Ebott towered in the background.

"Nice, ain't it?" Sans said casually. "Looks like Undyne and Alphys finally hooked up, always thought they'd make a cute couple. I guess that lady is Asgore's ex, sucks that they seem on the outs, but them's the breaks. Papyrus is just happy to be there as usual, and you appear to have fallen victim to the classic Two-Tier Ear, though you're taking it like a champ. Oh, and one other thing, minor detail, almost forget to mention it, really – it looks like we all made it to the surface."

Frisk reached for the photo and Sans snatched it away.

"That isn't yours."

Frisk's hand flinched. For a moment the lights in Sans' eyes had died completely.

"We were there. We were out. And now we're back where we started, trapped in the dark. What, saving the world wasn't good enough? You had to send us all back because you couldn't get a perfect run?" He shoved the picture back in his hoodie. "Like smashing the cookie jar because you couldn't reach the last crumb. I bet he didn't even *ask* for your help. Otherwise you wouldn't have that guilty look on your face right now." His gaze was unrelenting. "I don't even want to know how many times you've put us all through this."

Frisk slowly turned in his seat and stared at his empty plate.

"You know what, kid? I'm fine with it. I expect this. Our reports showed a massive anomaly in the timespace continuum. Timelines jumping left and right, starting and stopping – until suddenly, everything ends." His grin widened, his eyesockets darkened. "Heh heh heh...that's *you*, isn't it? But don't expect me to play along. And better yet, don't think you can just keep me trapped in my own bedroom until I give in. Otherwise I might have to re-think that promise I made."

Frisk said nothing. Sans waited a moment, then scraped his stool across the floor and stood up.

"I'm going home. Have fun with the next one."

He turned away, stuck his hands in his pockets, took a deep breath. By the time he exhaled, his face was calm and jolly as ever. He started toward the exit.

"...please."

Sans' foot froze in mid-step. The voice was so thin it was more remembered than heard; it awkwardly sidled past his hearing and lodged in his mind. Frisk's head was down, his fingers

splayed on the countertop. His shoulders shook. The myriad of bruises on his hands glistened under the tavern's lights.

Sans stood there long enough for several of the patrons to raise eyebrows, or approximations of eyebrows. Then he sighed heavily, and slid back into his seat.

"Grillby? Glass of soda, please. No ice." He rapped on the counter next to Frisk's head. "Hey. Look at me."

Frisk turned by inches. The corners of his eyes were wet.

"I guess you're gonna keep going with or without my help, so..." He drummed on his skull. "Ugh, how do I explain this to someone who's still in short pants. Look, you're talking about the impossible here. Asriel's long dead. Once a monster's soul is gone, it's not ever coming back. All that's left is to scatter the dust, and we both know how *that* turned out. But if we're talking about the impossible, then there might be...*something*...I can do."

Grillby set down the glass. The fizzy yellow cola inside bubbled and frothed as Sans pulled it close. "Thanks, man. Give us some space?"

Grillby tapped the side of his spectacles and moved back to the other end of the bar.

"Okay." Sans slid the glass between himself and Frisk. "This soda is time."

Frisk looked at the glass, then to Sans, then back to the glass. His expression became slightly concerned.

"Just...stay with me. See all these bubbles? These are moments in time. Events that happen, people you'll meet, or don't meet...or maybe you want to meet again. The bubbles you see now are the things that are happening. But they don't stay where they are, right? They move, they disappear, they get replaced. See, right now this glass has a whole lot of bubbles in it, but it can also contain *every single bubble* that ever has or will exist. Do you understand, like, half of what I'm saying so far?"

Frisk's forehead was scrunched and a vein throbbed at his temple, but he motioned for Sans to keep going.

"All right, let's keep the soda train rolling. Whenever you pull one of those minor resets, you give time a little...nudge." He flicked the side of the glass and it fizzed. "So new bubbles can show up. Like how I'm sitting with you this time instead of all the others. But when you do a big one? The kind that pulls us all out of the sunlight and back down here? That's a little more intense."

Suddenly, Sans pounded the counter hard enough to make the whole glass jump. Frisk flinched and every head in the tavern turned.

"Everything okay over there, Sans?" Dogamy called.

"Yeah, man, just showing the kid here something cool. Don't mind me!"

“Give us some warning next time, Sansy,” Dogaressa said. “You almost gave poor Doggo a heart attack. And he owes us money!”

“Ah ha, that’s a funny joke,” Doggo said darkly. Greaterdog barked and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

The glass now fizzed ferociously; new bubbles surged and burst. “You see? Look at all these possibilities that just showed up. All that potential. Now here’s the important part, kid – out of every single bubble that could possibly show up in this glass, there’s exactly one that might be able to help you out. Even then, it’ll be hard to find. I can look for you. I know the shortcuts. But one timeline might not be enough. You get me?” Frisk’s face fell. “Yeah, that’s right. You’ve got to keep doing what you’re doing, over and over again. Mixing up time. Creating your ripples until the path is clear. I’ll take the best notes I can, give you a call now and then to keep you updated, but this is on you. This might take a hundred resets. It might take forever. And even then, there’s no guarantee that we’ll get what you want in the end.” He stared at the glass. “But as long as you can keep it up...I’ll try to do the same. Heh, should be a decent way to kill time. It’s been a while since I’ve hit the books.”

Frisk stayed in his seat for a while longer. Then, he slid out and stood up.

“Leaving, huh? Guess that’s a no?” Sans got up, too. “Welp, I did my best-”

Suddenly, Frisk threw his arms around Sans’ waist and hugged him tight. Sans’ eyesockets widened. He was a little too round for Frisk’s hands to meet, but Frisk made an attempt anyway, burying his face in Sans’ hoodie.

“Heh heh, okay, wow. Watch the ribs, I’ve only got twenty-four of ‘em.”

Eventually, Frisk let go, leaving two dark moist spots on Sans’ hoodie where his eyes had been.

“Done? All right.” Sans winked. “Knock ‘em dead, kid.”

Frisk nodded and stepped around the bar. Sans sat back down and stared at the bubbling soda glass until, after an unusually long time, he heard the tavern door open and shut. Only then did he grab his memo pad, slip it in with the rest of the detritus in his pockets, and leave his seat.

“Alright, that’s it from me. Put it on my tab like always, Grillby.”

Grillby let him know that his friend had taken care of it.

“What, he paid already? That was generous of him.”

Grillby corrected him – the young man hadn’t paid for the meal, he’d paid Sans’ tab.

Sans stared.

That was pretty impressive, Grillby continued, since Sans’ tab was, at this point, probably greater than the net worth of half the underground. Not that he was complaining.

Sans looked at the tavern door.

Grillby remarked that he seemed nice. A little quiet, but a good kid.

“Yeah. I think so too.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “And I’m pretty sure that’s why he’s gonna have a bad time. Bye, Grillby.”

He sauntered out of the tavern and into the snow. “Hey, Jimmy, your spot’s free. Sorry we took so long-“

Jimmy was nowhere to be found. Sans glanced up and down Snowdin’s road and didn’t see a hint of that radiation-green mane. What he did see were small footprints headed in the direction of Waterfall – evenly spaced at first, then growing off-kilter and unsteady. Then he saw the vaguely pumpkin-shaped indentation in the snow where Frisk had finally lost consciousness and face-planted into the ground. And finally, here were the hoofprints heading towards that indent, and off in opposite direction, where Jimmy had picked Frisk up and carried him to the Snowed Inn.

Sans rubbed his chin. “Heh. Guess that gives me a head start.”

As he walked down the path, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed. It barely rang for half a second before picking up.

“Hello, Sans! It’s me, Papyrus!”

“Hey, bro. Where are you at right now?”

“In the woods, of course!”

“Yeah, I figured. What’re you up to out there? Besides looking for humans, I mean.”

“At this moment? Yoga!”

“Cool. Anyway, I, uh, got a message from King Asgore. Long story short, I’m gonna be working extra hours for a while, so I won’t be home as much. Just giving you the heads-up.”

“You’re...actually doing your job?” Sans crossed his fingers. *“That’s amazing!”* Sans uncrossed them. *“You’re finally turning your life around, Sans! This is the first step of a bright and glorious future! Keep doing what you’re doing, and you might even be as great as me! You can even go back to dental school, like you always wanted!”*

“Heh. Yeah. Maybe.”

“Do your best, Sans! That’s all I could ask for!”

“I’ll try, Pap.”

“Goodbye, Sans!”

“Seeya around, bro.”

“I’m hanging up now!”

“I know you are.”

“This is me, hanging up!”

“This is me, waiting for it.”

“You will hear a clicking sound!”

“Looking forward to-“

(Click.)

The phone went silent. Sans stared at it, then shook his head and pocketed it again.

“Brothers,” he said, to no one in particular. “What are you gonna do.”

He’d reached the river running into Waterfall, where the water ran just warm enough to send up clouds of freezing fog that lay over the landscape like a veil. Sans peered into that milky air, and couldn’t see a thing.

“Well. Better get started.”

His slippers crunched in the snow as he walked into the fog. Before long, the sound of his footsteps ceased. The wind picked up and stirred the mist just long enough to expose the landscape again, and Sans was nowhere to be found. Even his footprints had disappeared.

* * *

Again.

Friends

(Ring, ring...)

(Click.)

“Yeah, um, hey. This is Sans speaking. This number belongs to Frisk, right? ...okay, you’re not saying anything, which I assume means yes. Looks like you somehow convinced me to do something really stupid. Dunno how you pulled it off, but I’m getting in touch like I said I would.

“I followed up on my old leads and couldn’t find anything. Not even the start of something. I’m going to try some different routes on this go-around, so take your time, okay? You’ll probably be tempted to rush through this, but setting things up on my end takes a while. Not to mention I’ve gotta convince Papyrus that I’m doing my actual job. You’ll like him, he’s nice. But I’m sure you know that already.

“Anyway, that’s it from me. I’ll meet you outside the Ruins. Looking forward to it.”

(Click.)

* * *

(Knock, knock, knock.)

Frisk’s bedroom door opened a crack. Through it peered a single red-gold eye, the color of beaten copper.

“My child? Are you awake?” A pause. “Oh. Well, I suppose that would have woken you up anyway. I apologize for my rudeness.”

Frisk wasn’t in bed. He sat at the nicked wooden desk in the corner of the room, its lamp providing a hard, clean light against the soft golden glow that seemed to permeate Toriel’s house. The delicate scritch of his pencil was the only sound in the room. He didn’t even know Toriel had come in until her shadow fell over him; she stood over six feet tall and frequently joked about her age, but she could still move like a ninja in a library.

“What are you doing, child? Drawing another picture?” She peered over his shoulder and saw the neat lines of arithmetic in his notebook. “Oh, your homework! You’re such a good boy. Although, should I really call it homework if I’m teaching you at home? That would just make it...work.” She frowned and scratched at the underside of her muzzle. “That won’t do at all. I want your education to be fun. I will think of something better to call it.”

Frisk nodded, still bent over his work. Learning his times tables was a relief in comparison to some of the things he’d been doing. And Toriel clearly enjoyed teaching him – her voice became stronger, more clipped, less prone to rambling apologies. They held their lessons at her dining room table, passing ragged textbooks back and forth to each other, Toriel taking

down notes for him in her careful, delicate script. Afterwards she always smiled wider than usual, and hummed little tunes that Frisk thought he'd heard before.

"In any case, I thought you might like to go for a walk. I was not able to give you the full tour of the Ruins when we first met, after all. You must be very curious about this strange place." She cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses. "Of course, if you would rather finish your...bedroom-fun...no, no, that's just awful..."

Frisk carefully set down his pencil in the spine of the notebook, stood up, and offered Toriel his hand. She beamed and held it tight.

He'd never spent so much time in the Ruins before. He had always lingered a while – the first time because he'd just taken a long fall, and every time after because of what he'd learned and what he knew lay in store – but now he'd gotten several proper nights' sleep, and given Toriel a chance to start his schooling, and even braved some of her snail-based cooking. It actually wasn't that bad, provided you focused on the crunchy bits. After dinner they'd both sit down with books, her in the overstuffed recliner, him cross-legged in front of the fireplace. Toriel's private collection of reading material overwhelmingly favored snail-based trivia, but there were a few decent adventure novels in there as well, and he'd go page by page, occasionally pointing out longer words to her so that she could sound them out for him. The golden light never faded. It was difficult to tell day or night. Life in this house was a loop inside of a smaller loop, but this one had a soft bed and a warm hand.

The two of them stepped outside. Toriel had to duck slightly to avoid scraping her horns on the doorframe.

"I just wanted to thank you for staying so close. I know the Ruins must be tempting to explore, but they are more dangerous than they look. The floor in several places is very unstable, and many of the monsters are ill-tempered."

He knew every square foot of crumbling ground. He was on friendly terms with every monster in the Ruins – the Froggits in particular were actually quite philosophical when you got to know them. He stayed close to home for other reasons. The flashes of yellow at the corner of his eye. The feeling of always being watched. The distant, mocking laughter.

The fallen leaves at the foot of Toriel's coal-black tree were crunched down from where he'd often sat on them, idly scraping at the trunk with his stick. The stick was the same one he'd had since he first fell, but all this time, the wood had remained alive and flexible. Maybe it, too, wanted to put down roots and grow. He promised himself he'd plant it, when he didn't need it anymore.

The path branched; to the left was the ledge where the crumbling panorama of Home lay spread out in the cavern below, the dust of fallen masonry sapping away its color a little more each day. Toriel guided him in the opposite direction.

"In truth," she said, "this place can seem very small, once you are used to it." She pulled him a little closer, so his cheek brushed against the side of her robe. "But maybe that is not so bad. If you are ever lost, or hurt, just call my name. I promise I will hear you." She laughed. "Well. Maybe not my name. You can call me whatever you like."

He always ended up calling her ‘Mom.’ It had only been an accident the first time.

They walked through the shifting-perspective puzzle, past the crumbling pits, around the long-defunct spider bake sale. They passed the strangely adhesive cheese table without comment. When they approached cracked ground, Toriel glared and waved her hand, and the stones knit themselves together, making it safe to walk. She grumbled about the spike-path puzzle, saying she’d always intended to shut the thing down for good or at least file down the spikes, it was completely irresponsible, someone could get hurt. Eventually they stepped out of the Ruins gate, and descended the stairs into the foyer. Where Frisk had first looked up at that great entrance, and felt the stirring of determination.

“While we’re here, I suppose we could have another look at the flower patch,” said Toriel. “I have been meaning to pick a few more for the house. The ones I have now are beginning to wilt. Come along, my child.”

She started to walk, then stopped. Frisk hadn’t moved. She looked down at him, her smile fading.

“Is something wrong? You look very pale.”

This was a good place. But there was wrongness here.

The children’s knick-knacks were the first he’d noticed – in fact, he’d noticed them the very first time he’d arrived. Broken crayons, mismatched shoes, scarred toys dusty from disuse. They were scattered around the house like relics, in drawers that Toriel never touched, on shelves that were otherwise bare. And then he’d noticed other things. How sometimes, when he was reading in front of the fire, he’d feel her gaze on the back of his neck, and see guilt flash in her eyes when he turned around, as if she’d expected to see another face. The yellow-and-green shirts he refused to wear. The way she never asked for his name. The bedroom that was always “under renovations.” He’d snuck in there once, after Toriel had dozed off, and found it cold and completely bare. He’d been able to hear the sound of his breath echo off the walls.

And no matter where he was, or how long he’d stayed, the same thing happened whenever he asked how to leave. It was like pulling a switch. Her expression would shift and harden, she’d hurry to the basement. And then he would find himself wreathed in her flames until he could barely stand, watching her eyes fill with tears. Her regrets hung over her surely as Mt. Ebott hung over the entire underground. It didn’t take much to send them all crashing down.

He pulled his hand free and stood there in the foyer. Toriel began to fidget with the front of her robe.

“Are...are you feeling unwell? I am sorry, I should not have taken you out this far-”

He ran forward and held her tight. She made a funny little gasping noise; two high points of color became visible through the fur on her cheeks. Then, she placed a hand on his back, gently ruffled his hair.

“What a strange child,” she said, not unkindly. Frisk’s grip tightened. “Would you like to go home?”

He did. But instead, he asked her how to leave.

It smelled like pie crust and clean linen.

* * *

Again.

* * *

(Ring, ring...)

(Click.)

“Hey, Frisk, it’s Sans. Here we go again, right? Looked over my notes and it turns out one of those new leads might actually pan out. I’ll investigate and see where it takes me.

“And, uh, while I’ve got you on the line, could you do me a solid and get in touch with Papyrus? I haven’t been home lately, and the places I’m going don’t exactly have cell phone reception so I can’t answer his calls either. You know Pap, he’s got a real thick skin, but I think it’s starting to upset him a little bit. He was fired up about that whole pasta play-date you two put on, so another visit might take his mind off things.

“Welp, that’s my soft and fuzzy moment for the day. I’m getting back to the grind. Tell my brother I said hi.”

(Click.)

* * *

Frisk had been shanghaied into a friendship adventure. Location: Papyrus’ room, specifically his burning-red race-car bed. Guest-starring: Papyrus’ action figures.

“- and this one had human-to-monster transformation powers, but that part broke. And this one had a button you could push to make her say hurtful things, but that broke too! And this guy has an ugly face and a bad attitude and he cares a lot about clocks! That’s it. That’s his entire character.” Papyrus sounded incredibly excited by this.

They sat side-by-side on the bed with Papyrus’ collection spread around him like a ragtag and badly disorganized army. Frisk leaned in close to examine every new toy he picked up and showed off, but had to time his movements carefully; Papyrus was such a jumpy collection of joints and angles that his elbows alone posed a serious threat to Frisk’s skull.

“Ooh, ooh, and this one’s Zacharie!” The toy was of a masked man in a sweater decorated by a single red heart; Frisk touched his own chest at the sight of it. “He’s super mysterious and has strange powers over time and space! But he only ever appears in really special episodes.”

He paused. "I mean. Strategies. Nyeh heh heh." He twiddled with the toy's limbs a little bit. "Sans likes him a lot."

He went silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was uncharacteristically subdued.

"I collected these back when we lived at the capital," he said. "Except for the ones Santa got me, of course. I'd show them all to Sans when he came home, but he always fell asleep before I got to his favorites. But then he told me that he saw them in his dreams! So I know he really cares!" He turned to Frisk, and perked up again. "And you, human! You, too, appear to be an aficionado of the collectible arts! I was really surprised when you asked me to show them to you! I thought you had something better to do!"

Frisk held up the toy and swiveled its head back and forth: *Not really.*

"Nyeh heh heh! Well! Your timing was impeccable! I was. Actually. Starting to wonder where Sans had gone." His expression turned sly, which was a terrible emotion to show up on Papyrus' face. Slyness on Papyrus' face was an immigrant from a faraway land, and it had no map and empty pockets. "Say. You didn't come over because my brother asked, did you?"

Frisk thought for a moment, then shrugged and crossed his arms in front of his chest: *Guilty.*

"Aha! I knew it! My powers of deduction remain unrivaled!"

Papyrus sprang off the bed with such force that the mattress nearly rebounded Frisk into the wall.

"Listen well, human! I, the great Papyrus, have something I must say!"

Papyrus stood tall and dramatically swished his cape. His battle armor gleamed, especially on the bits where the paint had chipped off. Frisk instinctively scootched a little further away. Papyrus on a monologue was dangerous, even outside of combat. His gestures became so fierce that a wayward thumbs-up could knock you out cold.

"Human! While we have established our relationship as strictly platonic, I still must confess something." His joint popped like a gunshot as he jabbed a thumb at his own face; he'd have taken his eye out if he had any. "From the very first moment I saw you, I had a good feeling! Even before I discovered our mutual love of puzzles and pasta! I saw you and thought, 'I would very much like to be this human's friend! And if I feel that way about him, then surely he must feel the same about me! What a shame that I have to capture him, because that will make a terrible first impression!' But in the end! I did not have to capture you! So that all worked out okay!" Frisk's ears were starting to ring.

Papyrus took a moment to catch his breath. He rubbed his chin, his glove squeaking against the bone. His eyesockets narrowed.

"Not only that," he said, "but I can tell from your expression..."

Papyrus' arm scythed through the air. His fingertip stopped a mere inch from Frisk's nose.

“...that *you* feel the same way! About someone other than myself, of course.”

Frisk’s jaw dropped. He looked away, feeling the blood rise in his cheeks.

“Nyeh heh heh! Once again I penetrate your aura of silence, and see the truth beyond!” He smacked his chestplate. “In that case! I hope your pursuit of this special someone is going well!”

Frisk curled up on the bed. His head gave a little shake. Some of Papyrus’ enthusiasm drained from his expression.

“No? Hmm. How odd. I can personally vouch for your friend-making abilities.” He tapped his skull. “Then, I ask you this! Do you think being friends with this person is a good idea?”

Frisk looked up and nodded, and then nearly fell off the bed as Papyrus’ fist swung skyward.

“Then I am behind you all the way, human! Because I know you are a good person! And if you think that doing something is a good idea, then it must be a good thing to do! Just look at Sans! When we lived in the capital, he really wanted to be a dentist. He would spend weeks away from home, studying at dentist school! I was so proud! Then we moved away, and he never talked about being a dentist again! And that was okay, too! As long as it’s what he wanted, I was prepared to support him. Just as I will support you, human!” Plaster dust sifted down from the hole Papyrus had accidentally punched into the ceiling. “And I will fix that later!”

Frisk sat there a while, his legs dangling over the edge of the bed. Then he walked over to Papyrus and held him tight. It was an awkward hug – the skeleton was a mess of sharp edges – but he put in the effort anyway.

Papyrus’ whole body stiffened up. Then, little by little, he relaxed.

“Oh. Nyeh heh heh! For a moment I thought that you were going to suplex me.” Frisk looked up from the vicinity of Papyrus’ knees, his expression genuinely bewildered. “Well, Undyne taught me that every hug is actually a suplex! She did this by hugging me, and then suplexing me, while yelling ‘Every hug is actually a suplex!’ It...wasn’t a very fun lesson.” He patted Frisk on the back. “But this is nice, too.”

They stood like that in the middle of his room, Papyrus’ action figures watching silently.

“I’ll have to teach you proper hugging technique sometime. You sure are lucky to have me around!”

It smelled like bones and spray-painted plastic.

* * *

Again.

* * *

(Ring, ring...)

(Click.)

“This is Sans. Giving my update, like I promised.

“The route I investigated on the last loop got me somewhere. I didn’t find the person I’m looking for, but I ran into a few of his...representatives, I guess you could say. They weren’t very helpful. I, uh...I don’t think he actually wants to meet me. Heh. Have to admit. I didn’t expect that.

“But I made a promise, right? So his opinion doesn’t matter anyway.

“This route’s a dead end. I’m going to have to go back and start from square one. Given how long it takes me just to get my materials together, I don’t expect to find anything earth-shattering on this loop. Guess you’ll have to save the world a few more times, bucko.

“So, how are you feeling? Getting a little worn down? Hey, maybe you should treat this as a learning experience. Now you have some idea of what you’re putting the rest of us through.

“...sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.

“I’ll talk to you later.”

...(Click.)

* * *

With every cycle, there were certain constants. Events unaffected by circumstance. Toriel always tried to block the exit to the Ruins. Papyrus’ special attack was always stolen by that nefarious dog. And Undyne’s cooking lesson always ended with her house set aflame. Although, Frisk wasn’t sure if he should count that last one. From what Undyne had told him, most of her cooking lessons ended with something on fire. Lots of things Undyne did ended with something on fire.

At least this time they’d managed to make the sauce. It lay in the pot, blissfully unaware of the violence in its immediate future.

Undyne leered over the stove and, with great relish, sucked tomato pulp off her knuckles. Frisk had surreptitiously backed away to the piano. The kitchen counter was a scene of culinary carnage that would have made a Vegetoid froth at the mouth and pass out. Juice stains ran all the way up to the ceiling.

“The kitchen,” Undyne said solemnly, “is a battlefield. The meal is your enemy. In its feeble way, the food you cook resists your efforts to make it delicious. And so, as with any opponent, you must strike *fear* into its heart.”

Her blue limbs blurred. In one motion she yanked open a drawer, extracted a wooden slotted spoon, and spun it around her finger. Then she seized its handle and brandished it at Frisk.

“Human! You’ve already bested me in battle! But can you hope to overcome the lingering will of these wholesome ingredients!?”

Frisk stepped behind the piano.

“Wait, what are you doing?”

Frisk picked up the piano stool, carried it over to the stove, adjusted the seat, and climbed on top. Now, at least, his head was actually over the pot. Undyne snorted despite herself.

“Fuhuhu, you’re such a tiny thing. It’s hilarious. Until I remember the fact that you defeated me.” Her pupil visibly dilated. “Then it’s *enraging*. Now take hold of your weapon!”

He took the spoon from Undyne and stared down into the sauce. A single bubble popped apologetically on its surface. Undyne moved in uncomfortably close.

“Now, it’s time to stir! As a general rule of thumb, the more you stir something...*the better it is!* Ready? Let’s do it!”

Frisk stirred the sauce.

“Harder.”

Frisk stirred the sauce harder.

“Harder!”

Frisk stirred the sauce yet harder.

“*Harder!* Ugh!” She reached for the spoon. “Let me-”

Frisk’s eye flashed. He smacked his hand down on the counter and reversed his grip on the spoon, thumb and forefinger extended, its handle down at an angle. He stood poised over the stove. The sauce burbled in confusion.

Undyne’s eye widened. She took a hesitant step back.

“That...that stance. Impossible-!”

The spoon sparked off the side of the pot as Frisk executed his latest stirring maneuver. With the added leverage of the counter and his revolutionary diagonal movement, he was able to achieve velocities unheard of by novice sauciers. The sound of wood scraping against cast iron filled the kitchen. Undyne stared, then gradually broke out a grin. And she had a lot of teeth to grin with.

“Yeah.” She started to fistpump. “Yeah. Yeah! Keep at it, human! Pour your whole being into this dish! The zest of this marinara comes not from fresh basil and oregano, but from your *burning spirit!*”

On cue, Frisk reached for the burner and turned it on high. Flames gushed out from around the pot. The edges of the spoon were beginning to wear down.

“Can you feel it!? That fire in your chest! That heat boiling in your veins! That’s *friendship* you’re feeling! Man, I am *stoked!*” She turned and stomped hard enough to send cracks spiderwebbing through the linoleum. “Destroy that sauce, human! That sauce is your mortal enemy! That sauce owes you money! That sauce’s name is *Jerry!*”

The spoon continued its rotation. Moving in endless circles. Looping around the pot without end. Frisk bared his teeth. His eyes were open so wide that his pupils were nearly visible. Behind him, Undyne was fist-pumping so hard that her knuckles were creating localized shifts in barometric pressure. Approximately eighty percent of her face now consisted of her many, very sharp teeth. The stove roared. The flames leapt. The sauce itself actually began to rise out the pot in a column of red, as though Frisk were summoning it from the depths of some acid reflux-inducing netherworld.

“Yes! Hell yes! *Hell freaking yes!* Friendship!” Undyne flipped her table through the ceiling. “*Friendship!*” Undyne headbutted her piano in half. “*FRIENDSHIIIIIII-*“

Then, they stood outside her burning house.

The flames licking out her open windows cast the two of them in silhouette. Undyne stood with one hand on her hip; she looked lost in thought. Frisk stared directly ahead. His shirt and face were marred by sauce and soot. He was breathing heavily.

“How in the heck did that happen?” Undyne asked. She glanced over to Frisk. “Do you know?”

Frisk kept watching the fire. Neither he nor the dummy in the corner seemed to have any answers.

“Well, anyway.” She grinned. “You might be a weenie in combat, but that was some performance! Another couple weeks of this and you might even be ready to tackle risotto, the *slayer of legends*.” She looked back at her house. “Uh, hopefully by then the renovations’ll be done. Asgore’s always ready to foot the bill.”

Frisk’s chest rose and fell. His fists were clenched at his sides.

“You know,” said Undyne, “it looked like you were way more tense in there than when you were fighting me. Either you didn’t think I was a threat, *which would be a terrible mistake*, or you must’ve been really stressed about something.” She narrowed her eye. “Feeling better now?”

Frisk wiped sauce off his face and nodded. Undyne gave an approving grunt.

“Good. You’ve gotta get that passion out into the world where it can actually help someone. Fight some good fights. Or in your case, go and snuggle something *really aggressively*, I don’t know.” She smirked. “If you’d prefer, I’m always up for a rematch. And next time, I won’t be so nice. Except I will be. Because I guess we’re friends now?”

Frisk turned to her, then sniffed and rubbed his eyes. He moved in with arms outstretched.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! What the hell is this!?” She pushed him away and he looked up at her, confused. “No hugging! Hugging is literally the worst possible tactic on the battlefield. Do you have any idea how vulnerable you are in mid-hug? Do you know the only difference between a hug and a suplex?” She jabbed a finger at him. “*Lack of follow-through!*”

Undyne formed a fist and flexed. Muscles bulged along her wiry arm. She held the fist out to Frisk.

“This is much better. With this simple gesture, you can express your undying friendship,” she flexed again and grinned, “or *annihilate your enemies*. You get the nice one today. Thanks for showing me a good time, pipsqueak.”

Frisk held up his own fist. Undyne bumped knuckles with him as gently as possible, but his hand was still numb for the rest of the day.

It smelled like smoke and tomatoes.

* * *

Again.

* * *

(Ring, ring...)

(Click.)

“It’s Sans.

“I know I’m calling you later than usual. Tried something different. Didn’t work out. You’ll have to go back around again.

“...okay, by the way you’re huffing and puffing into the phone I’m gonna guess you’re a little frustrated with all this. Kid, I’m seriously doing the best I can. With every new loop my paper trail gets longer and my new leads shrink. I told you from the start this wasn’t a sure thing. And even then, between you and me? That might have been a little too optimistic. There’s not enough variance between timelines. I keep seeing the exact same bubbles.

“I should’ve seen this coming. Half the reason I signed on for this in the first place is ‘cause I figured you’d stay on the straight and narrow. I’ve looked over your every judgment. Every fluctuation. And don’t take this the wrong way, kiddo, but you’re more cuddly than Greaterdog out of his armor. I don’t even think you’ve got it in you to hurt someone’s feelings. And that’s fine. That’s a-ok. But if you hug it out with everyone you meet over and over again, that just means we’re both gonna keep treading the same ground.

“I made my promise. I won’t give up on this. But I think you need to reconsider. You clearly care a lot about all these friends you’re making, so maybe spare ‘em a thought instead of resetting ag-”

(Click.)

...

(Clatter.) (Crunch.) (Crunch.) (Crunch.) (Crunch.) (CRUNCH.)

* * *

Alphys' laboratory was an intimidating structure from the outside, a gleaming chrome hulk that wavered like a mirage in Hotland's burning air, but anyone who stepped through the door would find an interior as understated and apologetic as its owner. Furniture pushed into corners and out of the way. The chilly silence broken only by the low click of hard drives and thrum of very, very potent air conditioning. And like Alphys, the laboratory was more complex than it first appeared. Up above was the blinding anime wonderland of her bedroom, containing no less than seven consecutive weeks' worth of shows featuring characters with improbable hairstyles. And down below, the rust-choked skull of the D.T. Extractor moldered in the shadows, and the shambling amalgamates babbled to each other in voices that they themselves barely knew.

The "bathroom" door hissed open. Alphys shuffled out, her claws deftly navigating her phone's screen.

"God, I'm glad that's over," she muttered. "What was he thinking with that last question? Oh God. Oh *God*, he was broadcasting that. Ohhhh my *God*, I hope Undyne hasn't replaced her TV yet..."

Her spectacled eyes still glued to the phone screen, she turned and headed for her computer. She glanced up and saw Frisk standing there in the middle of the lab. She glanced back at her phone. She glanced up again, and emitted a sound not unlike a balloon being rubbed on a windowpane.

"Ah! Y-y-you're still here! I. I mean. Th-that's fine! It's not like I t-told you to leave or anything! My house is your house! Even though it's also my lab. Ha ha. Ha." She shoved her phone into her pocket and added, "Ha."

Frisk made no indication that he'd heard her. He stood in place, his head bowed. Alphys crept a little closer, and saw the shattered remains of his phone lying at his feet.

"Oh. Oh no. It's, it's the phone I gave you." Frisk's head snapped up, but Alphys' attention was elsewhere. "You must've accidentally dropped it. And then. Accidentally stepped on it several times." She kneaded her labcoat between her claws, made an unconvincing smile. "Um. D-did you not like the color...?"

Frisk shook his head, held out his palms in apology. He knelt down and tried to gather up the shards, pushing the phone's shattered casing together like a jigsaw, but they slipped through his fingers and clattered back to the floor. His shoulders started to shake, but he kept at it until Alphys finally crept over and took the pieces from his trembling hands.

“No, i-it’s okay! Sometimes things just, um, break mysteriously. I’ll fix it up better than ever. It won’t even take me thirty minutes!” Frisk stood back up as Alphys pocketed the phone’s remains. “I, I, I used to take things apart and then t-time myself on putting them back together again. That’s a normal scientist thing to do. It’s not weird at all.”

Frisk wrapped his arms around himself and nodded. His hair hung in a brown curtain over his eyes.

“A-anyway, I’m sure Mettaton can wait for us to finish. Killer robots are. Totally known for their patience.” She averted her gaze when saying this. “Um. Y-you can relax here while I work, if you like. There’s sodas in the fridge and plenty of, um, historical viewing material in my room. You could stay up there for days if you want to, God knows I have...hey, why are you shivering? Is the AC too high?”

More than just shivering, Frisk’s whole body vibrated like he was about to detonate. He clutched his arms tight enough for his nails to leave half-moon indents in his flesh. His breathing hoarsened, then turned into a sort of hiccup that made his whole chest jump. As Alphys watched, tears began to trickle out from behind his hair.

“Oh. Um. Okay. This is happening now.” Her eyes darted around frantically; her skin turned a darker shade of orange. “Um. Um. Um.”

Frisk’s tears kept coming, despite his best efforts to hold them in. His hiccups deepened into sobs. He pressed his sleeve over his face; the fabric rapidly started to darken. He cried like someone who’d forgotten how. He was bent double from the effort of it.

Alphys looked down at her hands as if noticing them for the first time. She took a deep breath.

“Alright. Okay, Alphys, you can do this. Psyche yourself up. Power at maximum...”

She sidled up to Frisk and held him close. Her arms were stubby, but they still easily encircled his thin frame. “Uh. There, there?”

Frisk went stiff for a moment, and then rested his face against her shoulder and kept sobbing. Alphys could feel the heat of him straight through her scales. She frowned, experimentally rubbed the small of his back.

“It’s all right,” she said. “Come to think of it, when I was watching your adventure I thought you looked kind of depressed. It’s been really hard on you, huh?” She patted his head. “Hey, come on. You’ve got me now, r-right? We’ll get through this together. That’s what friends are for.” A pause. “Uh, y-you’re crying a lot harder. All of a sudden. I, I don’t know if that means I’m doing a good job or a bad one. Should I let go?”

Frisk clutched at her and started to wail. His body convulsed in her grip from the force of his sobs. That high, lost sound echoed through the laboratory. Half of Alphys’ labcoat had become quite soggy.

Alphys gave him another awkward massage and looked at the lab's central monitor. She saw the two of them there, in each other's embrace, tear-stains spreading down her sleeves. She saw the guilt in her own expression. She looked away.

"It's all right," she said again, quieter. "We can stay here as long as you need."

It smelled like flavor packets and Pocky.

* * *

Again.

* * *

(Ring, ring...)

(Click.)

"...nothing.

"See you in the next one."

(Click.)

* * *

The same place, the same thing.

There they were again, the two of them. Frisk's head lowered, his face blank. Asriel's smile nowhere to be found. The flowers murmured to each other in the breeze.

"What did you just say?" Asriel asked.

Frisk replied, "My soul."

His voice was wispy as cobweb. Feeble from disuse.

"I thought about what you said. That you need a soul to. Stay yourself." He touched his chest. "Monsters and humans. They can take each other's souls, right?"

"Yes. They can, but-"

"That's what you and your friend did."

Asriel looked away. "I really don't want to talk about him anymore."

"But it's true. Isn't it?" Frisk raised his head. "If you had mine, you could stay."

"He had to *die* first. And." Asriel clutched his knees. "And I'm not even sure if he was really my friend."

“What about us?” Frisk asked. “Are we friends?”

Asriel gave another of his half-smiles. “Well, you did save me.”

“No. I didn’t.”

Frisk cupped his hand in front of his chest. Warm red light spilled out from between his fingers.

“Asriel. If you were okay, then...I don’t think I’d mind.”

Asriel’s eyes went wide. He backed away from the light as though it burned.

“Frisk, stop it.”

The light intensified.

“I said stop it!”

His shout echoed through the cave. Frisk glanced up in surprise, and the light from his chest sputtered and dimmed. Asriel had moved back to the very edge of the flower patch, his knees drawn up to his chin. He was shaking like a leaf. His round, wet eyes were wide with fear.

“Asriel?”

“I don’t want it. I don’t.”

“But-”

“I’m so tired of other people getting hurt because of me.” Asriel unfurled himself by degrees, allowing his legs to splay out once again. He rested his palms on his legs and stared down at the flowers. “Please. Just let it be.”

Frisk lowered his hand.

“Sorry,” he said. “I thought it would help.”

“And I appreciate it. Really. You’re...you would have been a really good friend. But it’s too late. You should be with the others, Frisk. I don’t know how much longer I can hold on.”

“Don’t you want to leave?”

Frisk’s question hung in the air, the sound unspooling into the cave above. Asriel reached out, picked one of the flowers, and held it to his chest. He stroked the petals with an outstretched claw. The sunlight streamed down his face, carved dark circles under his eyes.

“I’ve made my peace with it,” he said. “It’s better this way.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Then my answer’s no. I don’t.” Asriel let the flower fall, and looked up. “I won’t take your soul. I can’t get mine back. And...I don’t want to be around anyone, knowing what I’ll turn into. I can’t break their hearts all over again.”

“But they-”

“It’s all right if you don’t understand. It’s good, actually. You shouldn’t have to.” His voice became pointed. “Why are you still here, Frisk? What are you looking for?”

Frisk remained still for a long time; for a while, it looked like he’d fallen asleep sitting up. Motes of pollen danced around his head.

“I don’t know,” he said at last.” A happier ending. For you. For everyone.”

“And you found it. You did the best you could.”

“I can do better. I know I can.”

Asriel actually laughed at that. “You really are determined, huh? No wonder you defeated me so easily. And I tried so hard to look cool, too. Was I cool? Frisk?” He scanned Frisk’s face. And little by little, his smile faded. His eyes widened in horror.

“Frisk,” he said. “You didn’t.”

Frisk said nothing. He clasped his hands as if in prayer.

“How many times?” Asriel’s voice was hoarse.

“...I stopped counting.”

A long silence followed. Frisk couldn’t bring himself to meet Asriel’s gaze. Then he heard Asriel laugh again. Higher. Jagged. And when he spoke, his voice reminded him of someone else.

“I was right about you the first time. You really *are* an idiot.”

Frisk heard a quiet hiss and looked up to see Asriel’s face contorted. His eyes narrowed, his fangs bared in a cruel smirk. Dust trickled from him in glittering ribbons. His fur grew bare. His eyes grew hollow. The flowers drank what remained of him and shuddered with leftover life. And as he continued to dissolve, Frisk saw his skull exposed. Not bone. Rust and steel and clots of oil. The silhouette of the D.T. Extractor.

He couldn’t breathe.

In unison, the flowers swiveled toward him and raised their faceless heads.

“Stay away from me, Frisk,” they whispered. “If we’re really friends...you won’t come back.”

It smelled like nothing at all.

Frisk awoke half-strangled by his sheets.

He gasped in air and clawed his way across the mattress just before gravity could reach up and yank him off the bed. At once, he shoved his hand into his mouth and bit down until he saw stars. Only then was he sure that he wasn't still dreaming.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and waited for his heart to stop jackhammering in his chest. His pajamas were clammy with sweat.

His last meeting with Asriel hadn't ended quite that way. But it hadn't ended well.

This bedroom was smaller than the one Toriel had first showed him, but she'd brought as much furniture from the underground as she could carry – or, to be more truthful, Asgore had carried it all himself, and she'd rapidly grown weary of telling him to stop. There was the toy trunk, and the armoire, and that scarred and pitted desk. It was largely bare except for the books that Toriel brought in from the library; he never asked her for anything. The window let in moonlight that striped the desk and floor like frost. Navigating by that milky sliver, Frisk slid off the bed, padded across the room, and opened the door a crack. In the dark hall beyond he could hear the soft bleats of Toriel's snoring. That was good. If his thrashing had woke her up, he wasn't sure if he could have thought up a good excuse in time.

He closed the door and sat against it, hugging his chest. Shadows skulked around the desk and under the bed. But he'd stopped being afraid of the dark a long time ago.

All in all, the monsters hadn't had as much trouble integrating as they'd feared. For all his faults, King Asgore couldn't have made for a better representative – his eight-foot bulk and wicked horns combined with his embarrassing earnestness, fondness for tea parties, and expression of faintly concussed good humor tended to confuse people long enough to agree with whatever he had to say. A society with magic as its fulcrum and gold as its currency had plenty to offer to the world above. The war was long over. Humanity's grudges and their ghosts had long given up and found other haunts. And while he'd done his best to stay out of the public eye, to hide his face, Frisk's presence hadn't hurt, either. The image of a human child clinging to a grandmotherly goat did a lot to alleviate concerns about the future of human-monster relations.

There were still rough spots. Toriel, from time to time, in her oblique way, worried about what would happen if anyone found out how her ex-husband had kept himself occupied over the years. Those smashed jars and those colored lights that soared out of the barrier and into parts unknown. He overheard her and Sans talking about it, sometimes, when he came over.

Sans stopped by often. As in the underground, it was an enigma how, exactly, he managed to earn a living, but he and his brother took care of themselves without the need for handouts from Asgore. While Papyrus attended driver's ed, with predictably entertaining results, Sans whiled away afternoons with Toriel, spicing their conversation with puns awful enough to peel the wallpaper. Frisk would hear their laughter from his room, and always cover his ears too late.

He avoided Sans whenever possible. He saw the pleading look in his face whenever they met, and he didn't know whether the plea was *Let me go*, or *Let me stay*.

And always, that feeling in his chest. Determination tugging like a fishhook at his heart. Undo it. Try again. Asriel. Asriel.

Frisk stood up and walked over to his desk. He picked up the chair and carried it back a few inches – he couldn't risk pulling it, it would scrape across the floor – then clicked on the lamp and rummaged through the drawers. He withdrew a blank sheet of paper, a box of crayons.

He was trying to save someone who didn't want to be saved, and that was wrong. He was taking all of this away from people – this sunlight, these conversations, all those futures left un-lived – for that reason, and that was worse. But he couldn't fit the pieces together. Asriel telling him to leave. Asriel's broken smile. Asriel kneeling among the flowers, waiting for the end to come. He didn't understand.

He'd seen his smile reach his eyes exactly once. Right after he'd stolen the souls of everyone in the underground. His fingers had flexed, his shoulders had shook with suppressed laughter. And when he turned around, the joy on his face had been real. Right before he'd turned himself into the adult he could never become, and called Frisk by a different name, and tried to destroy him with a barrage of technicolor shooting stars. Frisk couldn't lie – he had looked cool. At the very least, he'd made a strong first impression.

"You know...I don't care about destroying this world anymore."

He started with two black half-circles at the bottom of the page. Then four parallel lines, going straight up.

"After I defeat you and gain complete control over the timeline...I just want to reset everything."

Then a straight horizontal line, and an upside-down U on top.

"All your progress. Everyone's memories. I'll bring them all back to zero!"

Straight lines across that center shape. Diagonal lines jutting out. Impossible to draw fingers with crayon. He settled for two circles instead.

"And you know what the best part is? You'll do it."

Now the important part. He started with the ears – two flappy oblongs trailing down his shoulders. Like thick parentheses. That was easier. That was the best place to begin.

"And then you'll lose to me again. And again. And again!"

That narrow circle joining the ears. That tuft of fur on the top of his head. Save the face for last. Save it. Save him.

"Because you want a 'happy ending.' Because you 'love your friends.' Because you 'never give up.'"

Water spotted the paper. Frisk rubbed his eyes and kept working.

“Isn’t that delicious? Your ‘determination.’ The power that let you get this far...”

Two black spots for the eyes. Smaller ones for the nostrils. Inverted triangles for the fangs. Remember the way the skin under his eyes had crinkled. How his brow hadn’t been heavy with guilt. Just before the giddy rush of his own power had twisted him. That one moment. Bring it back.

“It’s gonna be your downfall.”

He pulled out the yellow and green crayons and finished before his shaking hands could ruin it any further. He stared at his work. He wasn’t very impressed with himself.

Frisk got up and stepped over to his window. They lived on the edge of town, and outside he could see the blackened shapes of the woods cutting through the shadows. Night opening into darker night. On the horizon was Mt. Ebott, the full moon hanging behind its peak like a diadem. He waited a long time for the moon to continue its journey across the sky. But it never did.

He picked up the paper and pressed it to his chest. He held it close.

It wasn’t a very good drawing, but it filled him with determination.

* * *

Again.

Flowey

The same place, the same thing.

Frisk remembered how the first time he had entered Asgore's house, the similarity had struck him so that he'd hesitantly called for Toriel ("Mom?"). The doorways, the carpets, every stick of furniture the same. Only on closer examination had he seen the disparities. The scuff-marks on the carpet from small, careless feet. The gouges on the doorframes from where someone with very sharp horns had forgotten to duck. The books on the shelves covered in patinas of dust, the reading chair whose seat was stiff and cracked. The color of the light, the lingering, melancholy air. And the monsters. He remembered how confused he'd been at seeing them all in this house. They'd croaked quietly on seat cushions, buzzed on high shelves, gently jiggled on end tables and in corners. None of them had acknowledged him. He'd crept around feeling like an intruder. In a sense, that's what he had been.

Now he stepped into the house and shut the door behind him. He made his way to the right and down the hall and into the first room on the left.

He remembered how he'd finally shaken off his déjà-vu in this room, how the twin beds and different toys had convinced him that no, this wasn't where he had been before, and Toriel wouldn't come no matter how loud he called. One bed surrounded by dusty toys, their blank button eyes staring off into space. The other one undecorated and bare, the air around it oddly cold. The two unopened boxes lay on the floor. He remembered that one held a heart-shaped locket, and that wearing it had somehow made him feel safer, giving him the determination to make it through the fights ahead. He had left the locket untouched every time after that. It didn't belong to him.

Instead, he bent over the other box and opened it. He removed the knife he found there. Its blade nicked and mottled with rust. He held it up to the light. He tested its weight. Then he left the room, and approached the key on the far side of the hall.

He remembered that this is when they would speak. And so, on cue, the monsters raised their heads.

"A long time ago, a human fell into the Ruins." "Injured by its fall, the human called for help."

He remembered the first time he had fallen. Lying there breathless among the flowers, staring up at that circle of sunlight. Unsure of whether he could get up, or whether he even should.

He took the key and returned the way he came. He avoided looking in the mirror. He felt the monsters' gazes on his back.

"Asriel, the king's son, heard the human's call." "He brought the human back to the castle."

He remembered that this was the first he'd heard that name.

He stepped into the kitchen and took the second key. He pulled open the door to the oven and saw the empty pie tin that lay there. He went back into the living room. He avoided looking at the golden flowers.

“Over time, Asriel and the human became like siblings.” “The King and the Queen treated the human child as their own.” “The underground was full of hope.”

He remembered seeing Asriel for the first time, and how his face had lit up when he’d called out that unfamiliar name. How he had done the same later, with his body warped and surging with power, the unlocked souls surging with white light from every seam. How he’d drowned Frisk in searing light until it had felt as though his skin would peel away and leave his soul bare, howling all the while for someone Frisk wasn’t, begging for him not to leave.

Frisk unlocked the chains blocking the staircase and descended. The knife’s handle cold against his palm. He reached the bottom step and stared into the hall beyond. It was thronged with monsters against both sides, all shapes and sizes, every one he’d met and then some, all silent, averting their eyes or equivalents of eyes. They felt like the crowd for a funeral procession. In a sense, that’s what they were.

He took a deep breath and kept walking.

“Then...one day...” “The human became very ill.”

The tapes in the laboratory depths. Dark words sealed within sticky cases. The trembling in Asriel’s voice as he’d promised to fetch the flowers.

“The sick human had only one request.” “To see the flowers from their village.” “But there was nothing we could do.”

The flowers bending in the breeze. The scent of sweet lemons.

“The next day.” “The next day.” “...” “The human died.”

The flower patch in the Ruins, its earth soft and welcoming. The half-open coffin in the basement, filled only with darkness. Toriel standing over the flowers with her palms clasped and her head bowed. Asriel standing in the same place, in the same position, before he’d sensed Frisk approaching. Frisk and Asriel speaking there, and how Asriel would sometimes, half-consciously, place one hand on that earth as he talked, as if lulling the ground back to sleep.

The monsters unspooled their history as Frisk walked amongst them. Explanation and apology in one. The cause of their regret, and why he had to die. As he stepped out of the hall and onto the bridge leading to the castle he found himself flanked by the carved metropolis of New Home, where everyone who had watched Mettaton’s last hurrah had stepped away from their televisions and taken to the windows, the rooftops, the streets. Innumerable gazes pressed down on him like weight. The monsters on the bridge continued their story, each picking up where the previous had left off, their souls resonating with this bitter nostalgia. Though every face was different, and some barely had a face at all, Frisk could make out something their expressions all shared. Maybe gratitude. Maybe relief.

He remembered that this was where he had cried, for the first time in a long time. He'd been frightened of his own tears. He hadn't been sure what was causing them, or how to make them stop. Now his step did not falter. He silently mouthed each word as it was spoken. With each swing of his arm, light winked off the knife's blade.

"It's not long now."

"King Asgore will let us go." "King Asgore will give us hope." "King Asgore will save us all."

He remembered Asgore's face when they had first met. That uneasy mix of resolution and resignation. The look of someone who had found himself hopelessly trapped in the machinery of his own choices. He understood that face a little better every time they met.

"You should be smiling, too." "Aren't you happy?" "Aren't you excited?"

He remembered that this was when the final Froggit would leap off the parapet and land at his feet. The way it would turn its head up to look at him, the first monster to meet his eyes since he'd entered the house. That faint, desperate reassurance in its voice when it told him:

"You're going to be free."

And he was filled with determination.

The antechamber beyond. Where the Delta Rune was tattooed on the far wall in stained glass and the shadows of the columns crosshatched the ground like prison bars. Frisk passed through that alternating darkness. He saw the figure standing there at the far end, its hands nestled in its hoodie pockets.

Sans was always around for this. No matter where'd he had been, or whatever dead ends his latest attempt had sent him to, they would meet in this hall. Time after time, he would appear.

As Frisk approached, Sans' pupils shone. The only points of light in his silhouetted frame. Frisk felt that gaze bore through him. Then, those two bright spots swiveled down to the knife clutched in his hand. They remained fixed there for a long while.

Sans turned on his heel and walked off.

"Despite everything," he said, "it's still you."

He stepped under the shadow of a column and did not emerge again. The only proof he'd ever been there was the echo of his footsteps, already fading away.

* * *

The same place, the same thing.

The cavern that held the barrier was unutterably vast. Maybe it was a trick of the light – maybe that pulsating wall warped the twilight that seeped through it, altered the cave's dimensions – but to Frisk it seemed like it could hold every monster in the underground with

room left over. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the entirety of Mt. Ebott was hollow, and this was its interior. The barrier's size must have only worsened the monsters' hopelessness. Standing near it, you could feel your skin thrumming from its power.

Asgore knelt in front of him, one hand clasped over the gash on his breastplate. The six souls quivered in their jars, emitting their unfinished rainbow of light.

"After everything I have done to hurt you," he murmured (and even in this low, hurt tone, his voice was so deep that Frisk could feel it rumble in his soles), "you would rather stay down here and suffer...than live happily on the surface?"

He remembered every time he'd died at Asgore's hand. Wreathed in flames until he'd felt his soul crack in two, only to wake up again outside the door to the barrier's cavern. The first time he'd been so shocked by the resemblance to Toriel that he hadn't even found it in himself to avoid the king's attacks. Then he'd tried to talk him down, again and again, fighting for the words that would raise Asgore's head and make him understand, unable to find them before he was struck down. Finally he realized that he would have to fight. And then he'd died again. He'd had no practice actually attacking anyone with his stick.

"Human...I promise you...For as long as you remain here, my wife and I will take care of you as best we can."

Asgore's face had lit up. Frisk wanted to approach him. Apologize somehow, for what was to come. He knew he had to keep his distance. His grip on the knife tightened.

"We could be like...like a family."

Gleaming white pellets haloed Asgore's kneeling body. Frisk looked away. He heard a single, strangled gasp, and the sound of dust sifting to the ground. When he looked up again, he saw the soul – that pure white light shuddering above Asgore's remains. Then another pellet drifted cheerfully downward, and struck the light, and shattered it into prisms, falling down, fading out, already gone.

And now. Here was his best friend.

"You *idiot*. You haven't learned a thing. "

That voice again. High and bright and laced with cheer like cyanide. Buried deep underneath, Frisk could still hear the echo of Asriel.

He remembered that this was the first face he'd seen.

Deceptive in more ways than one. Normally like a child's sketch – penciled-in eyes, toothless smile, those lines of black moving seamlessly around the surface like ink roiling on water. But then it would distort like putty, gain dimensions and darkness out of nowhere, and the eyes, already lusterless and black, would crack open and form holes that continued right through the back of his "head" and into parts unknown. They did so now, as vines burst from the earth, encircled the soul jars, cracked them open like eggs. And the face grew fangs, it seemed to decay, it dripped a viscous colorless liquid that sizzled when it hit the ground.

“In this world,” Flowey shrieked, “*it’s KILL or BE KI-*“

Then, Frisk stood over Flowey’s broken body.

He remembered the terror he’d felt that first time. Deliberate, certainly. Every aspect of the experience tailored to sap his will to fight. That momentary feeling of being *nowhere at all*, floating in empty dark space before he was yanked back to whatever warped facsimile of reality Flowey had created with his stolen souls. Flowey’s face blown up bigger than the Core, ranting down at him in a voice that made his bones shudder. The twitching, cackling nightmare that had descended on him when he’d held his ground. But that had been a long time ago. Flowey was always so entranced by his own power that he never noticed how Frisk’s face no longer betrayed a hint of fear, or how his unceasing barrage of incomprehensible attacks were dodged without effort or concentration.

The knife really did make things so much easier.

This was the only time he was ever able to get so close, and as ever, he was surprised by how small Flowey really was when he wasn’t constantly mutating himself. He barely came up halfway to Frisk’s knee with his stem fully extended. And right now he was hunched over, his petals tattered, his face blackened. The barrier wavered where the human souls had escaped their captivity and burst through to the other side. If Frisk wanted, he could step right through in their wake, before that wall solidified once again.

Flowey turned his head just enough for his photo-negative eye to be visible.

“What are you doing? Do you really think I’ve learned anything from this?” He sagged again. “No.”

Frisk stared down at him.

“Sparing me won’t change anything.” Even now, he could hear the smirk in that voice. “Killing me is the only way to end this.”

Frisk held up the knife. He turned it back and forth in his hand. The dying twilight caught the blade and briefly stained it a bloody red.

Flowey turned again. His grin was a pale crescent.

He watched the knife rise...

“I knew you had it in you.”

...and fall.

“...wait, what?”

Working quickly, Frisk used the blade of the knife to carve out a circle of earth around Flowey. He sawed through the dirt, levered it loose. And as Flowey’s face snapped this way and that, his pencil-sketch eyes struggling to keep up, Frisk reached down and scooped up dirt, Flowey, and all, and held him in the palm of his hand.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” Flowey’s scarred, smudged face turned up to his, gnashing its teeth. “You can’t do this! You can’t *do* this!”

Frisk turned and walked away from the barrier.

“Hey, I’m talking to you! You think I’m just going to stand here and take it!?” He summoned up all his remaining power and attacked. This resulted in a single white pellet drifting down towards Frisk’s head like a sad snowflake. Frisk didn’t even have to dodge; his leisurely stroll was enough to avoid it. Flowey stared, then thrashed inside the clod of earth, to little avail.

“Do you even care about the barrier, you idiot? It’s going to close up again any second now! And then,” his mouth turned toothy, “you’ll be stuck down here, with *me*. And I’ll make you pay for this. I’ll kill you. I’ll kill *everyone*. I’ll kill everyone you-”

Frisk looked down at him and put a finger to his lips. “Shh.”

Flowey’s grin fled. He blinked. He seemed at a loss.

Then his smile returned again, thin and sharp.

“Ohhh, I get it. Hee hee. Just killing me isn’t enough for you. You want to have some *fun* with me first, huh?” His face molded itself into Asgore’s rotted visage. “Maybe you want to get revenge for that useless king?” It smoothed into Frisk’s own features. “Or maybe,” the eyes popped open, full of darkness, “you’re just a lot sicker than you look.”

Frisk had reached the throne room. The last vestiges of sunlight lay warm on his skin. Birds were singing, flowers were blooming. He looked up at the cave ceiling and still couldn’t see the sky; he had always wondered where that light came from. The stones up there held a quartz-like gleam; it was possible that the sun down here was only a reflection of what came from the surface. The golden flowers grew thick. The air was ripe with their scent.

“Boy, King Asgore sure did care about these flowers. Definitely more than he cared about his subjects, am I right? They’ll probably be glad he’s dead!” Flowey’s usual twisted chirpiness was coming back, but it was an uphill battle – his gaze still darted this way and that, and his smile wavered around its outline, as though he had to make a serious effort to keep it in the right shape. Frisk could feel roots squirming like worms against his palm.

The antechamber and the bridge stood empty. The monsters had dispersed and gone to await news of victory or defeat. Frisk pushed the elevator’s call button with the hilt of the knife and stepped in when it arrived. He stood quietly in place with Flowey held out at his side. Flowey kept surreptitiously glancing at Frisk’s face for any sign of his intentions. Judging by the way his scowl got a little deeper every time he looked, he wasn’t finding much success.

Frisk walked down the hall, up the stairs. On the steps he could see numerous footprints, claw marks, and suspicious stains where the monsters had trooped up and out. Asgore’s house stood empty. The only sound was the tick of an unseen clock.

“It’s a nice place, right?” Flowey observed. “And no one’s ever going to live here again. Hey, it could be worse! If you hadn’t killed him then he would have just lived here by himself,

forever. You know, like *she's* doing!”

Frisk carried him to the kitchen and carefully placed the knife on the counter. Then, he opened the oven door. Flowey's grin fell so far it almost literally dropped off his face, sliding down to his petals.

“Whoa, whoa, wait. Don't do anything crazy.”

Frisk pulled out the oven rack.

“You go all this time without hurting a single person and now you're going to do *this* to me!? What is *wrong* with-”

Frisk pulled out the pie tin, replaced the rack, shut the door. He slid the handful of dirt and Flowey into the tin. He put the tin on the counter. He turned on the sink. He washed and dried his hands. He washed and dried the knife. Then he picked up the knife and the pie tin again and left the kitchen.

Flowey now appeared to be thinking very hard of something to say. He'd grown himself a brow just so that he could crease it.

Now the bedroom. Frisk set the pie tin down on the right-hand bed, amongst the menagerie of stuffed animals. He went over to the opened box and put the knife back in. He closed the box back up as best he could.

“You're putting it back? Why are you putting it back? Who do you think's going to come *get* it? Hey! I'm talking to you!” Flowey was making a game attempt to rock himself out of the pie tin, but by the looks of it, he was still too weak to do much more than feebly drape his roots over the tin's edge. Frisk imagined that's why he always made sure no one got too close – he was lightning-quick so long as could burrow, but get him off the ground and he was immobile as any other flower. Any other flower that could murder you with friendliness pellets. But that was off the table now, too, as another limp attack from Flowey proved – his latest projectile barely scorched the floor.

Frisk picked the tin back up, now holding it in both hands so it wouldn't rock around as much. He left the house, took the elevator down to the Core.

“Okay,” Flowey said. “Let's see what you're planning. But you'd better move quick. Because,” he slowly turned to face Frisk, his mouth full of dripping fangs, “once I get my strength back...”

Frisk wouldn't even meet his gaze. His nightmarish face turned irritated.

He proceeded through the Core, making sure to keep his distance from the sea of plasma – the heat was tremendous even with Ice Wolf's diligent cooling efforts. He walked down the outer bridge and into the MTT Hotel lobby, where Mettaton's glorious fountain statuary continued to violate both the carpet and nearly every safety code law known to monsterkind. The usual crowd of monsters was clustered around the busted elevator to the capital. He saw several of them turn to him with wary eyes. Flowey noticed, too, and tittered.

“Ohh, boy, here we go. I bet they’re wondering if you’re back from the fight. Whatever happened to their king?” He turned again. “Well? Should we tell ‘em? I’ll shout it out loud as I can, if you like! Ready?”

Frisk stared down at him, then held out the pie tin to the monsters. Flowey looked at them, then back to Frisk, then back to the monsters. Angry eyebrows appeared on his face.

“...it’s no fun if you’re just gonna *let* me!”

Frisk sighed and carried him out the front door. The elevator crowd watched them leave.

“As a slime, I’m puzzled,” said a slime, who was puzzled.

He walked down the steps. He waved to 01 and 02, who were, at the moment, practicing their synchronized bouncing (02 was still a little behind, but not for lack of trying). The Nice Cream salesman hummed along to the jolly clatter of their armor. 01 and 02 waved back; even that was in perfect unison. Their symmetrical camaraderie was fearsome to behold.

He took the elevator to Hotland’s bottom level. Alphys’ lab wavered in the blistering air ahead. Flowey’s expression turned sly, which was a totally expected emotion to appear on Flowey’s face. Slyness on Flowey’s face was a bi-annual vacationer, and it had a time-share and knew where to find all the best restaurants.

“So, you’re taking me to Dr. Alphys. What, you think she’s going to find a way to keep me trapped? Hee hee hee. You really don’t know anything, do you? She’s not even-” Frisk headed in the opposite direction. “Oh. Uh. Never mind?”

He stopped at the water cooler, poured a cup of water, and then poured the cup into the pie tin. Then he poured another cup for himself, drank, flung the cup into the lava, and continued on. He avoided glancing at Flowey’s face during all this. He didn’t miss much. Flowey was running out of ways to express bewilderment.

Outside Hotland, the enormous marquee sign stained them both blood-red. Frisk’s footsteps echoed at an even pace. Flowey craned his head this way and that.

“This is where you fought Undyne, isn’t it? And then you made friends with her. And then you burned down her house! And then you *killed her boss*.” He smirked. “I wonder if she’ll still wanna be friends when she finds out you took away her home *and* her job. Maybe she can stay with Alphys? Oh, but wait...she was the Royal Scientist, wasn’t she? So now she’s got no job, either! Wow. You ruined so many people’s lives in just one day!” Frisk kept walking. “...stop ignoring me.”

The damp, cool air of Waterfall was soothing after the sizzling atmosphere of Hotland and the Core. Water trickled down the walls, dripped from the ceiling, seeped up from unseen cracks in the floor – it all made its own quiet music, a distant patter, a liquid rhythm. On one loop, Sans had told him something. That the water down here was so suffused with magic runoff that it actually ran uphill, falling down and then flowing back up against gravity, forever cycling through unseen capillaries in the stony flesh of Mt. Ebott. The ceaseless rain in the marsh’s center wasn’t really rain, but water from the marshes themselves crawling up

to the cavern ceiling only to fall down again. It felt like a taunt. Another reminder that time here always stood still. Not even their water was allowed to move on.

His shoes squelched through the tunnel where the memory flowers bent low, perpetually whispering their passing conversations. At least one voice sounded like someone he knew:

“Someday...I’d like to climb this mountain we’re all buried under. Standing under the sky, looking at the world all around...that’s my wish.”

“Hahaha!”

“Hey, you said you wouldn’t laugh!”

“Sorry, it’s just funny...”

“That’s my wish, too.”

He stood and waited until the conversation was done.

Flowey spoke again, his voice unusually hushed.

“Can we go somewhere else, please?”

He walked past the plaques bearing the sordid history of the war, past the waterfalls that held his reflection. He maneuvered through the mushroom cavern, tapping each mushroom to refresh its cool blue bioluminescence as the room fell dark. Every time the light flared, Flowey had made a new horrifying face. Toriel half-melted with bone exposed. A shifting mass of vegetable meat bearing remnants of everyone he knew. Dripping fangs open wide and ready to close on his throat. After the third complete failure to get a reaction, he settled on a sulky pout for the rest of the trip.

They stepped back out into the light. In the distance was a joyful chorus of, “hOI! i’m temmie.” Flowey swiveled up to Frisk, his expression haunted. Frisk shook his head. Flowey looked relieved.

They approached another crossroads. To the right, Frisk could hear Gerson tidying up his shop. He occasionally went “Wahaha!” for no reason at all. He was a fascinating character.

“What, so that’s where you’re taking me? You think the so-called Hammer of Justice is going to keep me in line? What a joke! Even the King had more of a spine than he did! That old fool’s only accomplishment is living so long that everyone forgot what a *failure* he was.” His face warped into a turtle’s twisted beak. “All I have to do is wait ‘til his back is turned, and then-“ Frisk headed in the opposite direction. “All right, quit messing with my head! Where are we going!?”

Down the steps, where the River Person hunched over their vessel. Their hooded head turned to Frisk when they saw him approach.

“Tra la la. There you are. I was starting to think you wouldn’t show.” The River Person had a voice like a bass beat – pleasant and musical in its way, but hard to place.

Frisk hopped onboard and sat down with the pie tin in his lap. He waved. The River Person did not wave back, but that wasn't their fault. It was still a bit of a mystery how many limbs they actually had under that cloak.

"So, shall we go where you requested?"

Frisk nodded. The River Person faced forward.

"Then we're off. Tra la la."

The boat rocked away from the stones, then glided down the underwater river. The trip, as always, was a smooth one. Soft blue light seeped in from crystal deposits in the walls, from the funnels of magically charged water. Frisk idly drummed on the edges of the pie tin. Flowey snapped at him to cut it out. Frisk stopped drumming.

"Tra la la. Think of something beautiful really hard, and maybe you will see it tomorrow."

Then, a diversion. The boat jerked in the water and headed down a side tunnel, far more cramped than the main river. The River Person had to hunch a bit as they sailed through the darkness.

"These waters are unfamiliar, and quite turbulent. Do be safe."

They exited into the marshlands, where the concentrations of magic were especially high. The water shimmered cobalt and every ripple sent up motes of light like fireflies; it was as though they were sailing through a field of stars. Frisk's face glowed as he took in the sight. Flowey looked extraordinarily bored.

The boat came to rest on a mudbank. Frisk stood up and waved goodbye.

"Until next time. Tra la la."

He hopped off and carried Flowey through the marsh, and into the canal where Onionsan dwelled. Onionsan rose from the water, smiling. Onionsan saw Flowey's molten glare. Onionsan sank beneath the water, smiling.

Past Shyren's makeshift concert hall. Avoiding Undyne's dastardly piano puzzle. And at last he found himself in front of that strange horned statue, hunched and huddled under the umbrella Frisk had placed in its hand. The music box secreted in its base played without end. Now Frisk remembered. This was the melody Toriel would hum after teaching him. He stood with Flowey close to his chest, listening to the song patter out its notes like raindrops.

"You know," Flowey said thoughtfully, "I'm feeling much better."

Vines burst from the pie tin and coiled around Frisk like snakes; they squeezed his chest tight enough to make his ribs groan, they cut an angry red rash across his throat, they seized his arms and lifted the pie tin up to his face. Flowey's head inflated into a grin with teeth like tombstones. Frisk showed no change of expression whatsoever. Not even when white pellets popped out of the air and encircled his neck, ready to close in.

“I wanna make a bet,” Flowey said. He swayed in the tin like a cobra. “I bet that if I kill you *really super quick*, I can grab your soul before you even get a chance to reset. Then I can head up to the surface and have all the fun I want! I’ll even be real nice and only kill you once. I’ve done it plenty of times today already, don’t cha think?” He leaned in even closer; it smelled like dirt and decaying vegetables. “’course, I’ll pay a visit to all your friends before I leave. And before they die, I’ll let ‘em know that it’s *your* fault.”

“Then do it.”

Flowey almost flinched. Frisk’s words were toneless and low.

“Maybe,” Frisk added, “you’ve done it already?”

Flowey’s mouth twitched. “Ha. Hee hee. You can’t fool me. I’m not affected by your resets, remember? I don’t forget *anything*.”

“You’re right. You don’t.” The vine around Frisk’s throat squeezed tighter, but the words kept coming anyway. “Not unless I’m trying really hard.”

“It...it doesn’t work that way!”

Frisk said nothing more. He turned his attention back to the statue. The music box’s song filled the silence between them.

After a long moment, the vines loosened, uncoiled, and retracted into the pie tin. Flowey’s entire body seemed to shrink.

“Just tell me where we’re going, already,” he muttered.

“Not much further.”

Down the tunnel was the bucket of umbrellas. Frisk took one as the sign politely requested, fumbled with it one-handed, and eventually popped it open. He continued into the center of Waterfall, where the rain fell.

To the best of his knowledge, this was the only place in the underground where it rained. The ceiling overhead was so seamed, cracked, and pitted that those hidden rivers streaming through Ebott seeped out, and the result was an unceasing drizzle that bubbled around the stones like a secret, before the water was sapped back into the mountain to begin its journey all over again. Frisk’s every footstep created small ripples in the film of water on the ground. Flowey practiced his faces in every puddle they passed. The reeds in the surrounding mud bent over the path like eavesdroppers.

He stepped out into the central cavern, where the thick dark mud stretched all the way into Hotland; if you had the nerve to actually brave that murky land (Frisk had never dared, he was just too short), you’d find the ground gradually turning hard and cracked as the magma crept closer and baked it into pottery. But out here, the air was cool and damp. A single rocky path ran through the outer edge of the marsh, and Frisk’s footsteps splashed across it as he walked. Small ponds rippled and heaved in the swamp, making it look as though the whole

cavern was taking slow, shallow breaths. Overhead, the crystals embedded in the ceiling sparkled like an overturned jewelbox, the closest thing to a starry night sky the monsters had ever seen, their positions forever unchanging. Asgore's castle glittered in the darkness at the far edge of the cavern, the silky light here turning all its turrets sapphire.

Frisk set Flowey down and sat at the edge of the path, his shoes hanging over the swamp. He winced a little as cold water seeped through his shorts. He kept the umbrella held over them both.

"That's it?" Flowey looked around. "That's it. Why here?"

"I like it here," Frisk said. He stared out at the castle. "I came here with a friend, once."

"What, that armless freak with the crush on Undyne?"

"That's right. Do you know their name? I never ask."

"Yeah, I do! And I'm not telling you!"

"Okay."

Flowey's face warped in rage once more. Then he looked back at the view, the castle in the distance, the points of light overhead, and little by little, he arranged himself into a more neutral shape.

"I'm not impressed," he said. "I've been here a hundred times. I've been *everywhere* a hundred times. What, did you think taking me here would make us friends?"

Frisk said nothing.

"It's all fake, you know. Those aren't real stars, they're just rocks. This isn't real rain. That's not even a real castle, because now it's got no king! And even when he wasn't dead, dead because of *you*, it's not like he ever helped anyone. He could have just stayed in that stupid garden of his forever and nothing would have changed." He glanced sideways at Frisk. "Y'know...it seems to me that you've got this entire place down by heart already. How much time have *you* spent down here? How much longer before you get as bored as me?" He grinned. "You know the funniest part? Right now, there's only two people in the whole wide world who'll ever understand how you feel. And both of 'em *hate your guts*."

His insults ran once again into Frisk's wall of silence and broke. His grin wilted.

"Why do I even bother?"

Flowey sighed and turned his gaze back to the swamp. "There's only one person out there I won't get tired of. It sure isn't you. You're the most boring person I've ever met. And even if he was here, it's not like I could...really care about him." He shook his head. "Why am I telling you all this?"

"I'm a good listener."

“Was that a joke?”

“I don’t know. Was it funny?”

“Oh, ha ha.” His root bed writhed. “Can I go now? It’s not like either of us have anything better to do. Not since you wrecked my plan.” He smiled. “I’ll just have to kill time until you reset again. Then we can do it *all over*.”

Frisk’s head finally turned, just enough so that one heavy-lidded eye rested on Flowey. His bedraggled hair curled around his face. He looked exhausted.

He said, “Can I ask you something?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

“Fine,” Flowey snapped. “Ask me, then.”

“You really do want to leave, right? And go to the surface?”

Flowey’s face reverted to its most basic shape – straight-line mouth, two dot eyes – possibly because he was too dumbstruck to attempt anything more complex.

“That,” he said slowly, “is the single stupidest thing I’ve heard anyone say, ever. What the hell do you think!? I didn’t steal all those souls and kill you over and over again for fun!” He paused, then smiled. “Not *just* for fun.”

“So if I found a way to break the barrier. Without hurting anyone. And leave with all the monsters. Would you come with me?”

For a long time, the only sound was the gossip of the rain.

“...there’s no way to do that anymore,” Flowey said. “Not without the souls.”

“You know better.” Frisk’s eye bored through him. “I could. If I wanted to.”

Flowey blinked. For a moment, his expression seemed almost wistful.

“Heh. That voice...kinda reminds me of someone.” Then he shook his head, stiffened his stem in rage. “You don’t understand anything about me! You can’t just toy with me like you did with all the other idiots down here! I’m *better* than them!” His eyes turned sunken, his mouth grew fangs. “You’d get to see what they were really like, if they could just remember what I did. Do you have any idea how many times I’ve messed with all of them? Do you have any idea how many times I’ve killed all of them? Every single one. Again and again. If they had any idea, they’d be happy to kill me on sight! Because, as you keep failing to learn, you idiot, that’s the way this world *works*!”

Frisk’s face didn’t even twitch.

“And stop looking at me like that!” Flowey shouted. “It’s pissing me off!”

Frisk looked away and waited until the sounds of Flowey’s grinding teeth ceased.

He said, “You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right. About what?”

“I don’t understand you.” Rain dripped off the shaking umbrella. “But I’m trying. And I think I might have learned something new.”

“What, that you’re a selfish brat with too much time and not enough brains?”

“I’m not going to kill anyone. I won’t let anyone kill me, either. And I know I’m not the person you want me to be.” He looked over at Flowey again. “But. As long as you need someone to play with, I’ll be around. Until you’re ready to leave.”

Flowey shrank back from his gaze. He huddled in the pie tin. His features shifted like fog.

“Why?”

The rain whispered.

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

Frisk remained motionless for a while. Then, inch by inch, he transferred the umbrella to his other hand and rooted around in his pockets. There was a crinkling of paper. He withdrew the picture he had drawn of Asriel, unfolded it, and held it up in front of Flowey.

Flowey stared at the picture. He tilted his head. His expression turned confused. Then, gradually, his features softened. He leaned in closer to the picture, his head crafting itself into Asriel’s smiling face.

Frisk started to smile, too. His cheeks hurt a little from the effort.

That was when Flowey’s head jerked up to meet his, his grin feral and his eyes two burning holes. Pellets encircled Frisk’s wrists and snapped shut like handcuffs. He cried out in pain and dropped both the umbrella and the picture; as the umbrella rolled away and he nursed his burning skin, Flowey howled laughter into the air and fired bullet after bullet into the paper until it was nothing more than sodden scraps, indistinct, transparent, washed away, already gone.

“You *idiot*!” he cackled. “That’s what this is all about? *Him*? Did *she* tell you about him when she was tucking you in at night? That’d make for one sad bedtime story!”

Frisk looked down at his shuddering hands. His wrists were covered in angry red welts.

“I bet she did! You must have reminded her of him in so many ways. But hey, you want to know how that story ends? The minute he poked his head out into the real world, he got exactly what he deserved. He died all by himself, in the dark, crying out for *anyone* to come

and save him.” Flowey’s whole face blackened and his voice dropped into a grinding rasp. “*But nobody came.* So keep that in mind the next time you trot out your worthless, useless, pathetic sympath- *Ack!*”

With expert timing and precision, an especially fat raindrop had fallen down and hit Flowey right in the eye. His wicked expression fled and he shook his head back and forth, trying to shake the water out. Already his petals were drenched and the pie tin was overflowing.

Frisk looked up from his injuries. He reached out for the umbrella and, though his burned hands screamed from the effort, held it over Flowey, keeping him dry.

Flowey looked over at Frisk, eyes hollow. He sagged.

“...I can’t understand you at all.”

Frisk kept his distance, now. He was outside the umbrella’s radius, and rainwater turned his hair into a ragged mass of brown clumps that clung to his face like river-silt. Flowey looked lost in thought.

“Sorry for ruining your picture,” he said. “I got a little carried away.”

Frisk stared out over the water.

“I, uh, can make it up to you, if you want. What if I told you...I knew some way to get you a better ending?”

Frisk’s hand tightened on the umbrella’s handle, despite the pain. Flowey didn’t seem to notice. He kept talking.

“You’ll have to load your SAVE file, and...well, in the meantime, why don’t you go see Dr. Alphys? It seems like you could have been better friends.” He looked hopeful. “Who knows. Maybe she’s got the key to your happiness.”

Frisk set the umbrella down. He picked up the pie tin, then tilted it so Flowey and his clod of dirt slid out. Flowey’s roots dug into solid stone. He wriggled in place as though he was trying to get cozy. He smiled wide at Frisk.

“See you soon,” he said, and disappeared into the earth.

Frisk didn’t bother picking up the umbrella again. He looked out at the swamp, hands in his lap, water coursing silently down his face. He didn’t look at the false stars. He made no wishes. He stayed there for a long time, and all the while, the rain kept falling at the same pace, in the same places, as it always would and always had before.

* * *

Again.

* * *

Always the same place, the same thing.

He was in the Ruins again. Sitting against the pillar with his knees pulled up to his chin. Toriel had given him the phone and then left. Told him to stay and wait for her. She never showed up and never would. Another constant. He would have to go and look for her eventually. No rush. There was always time.

The phone rang at regular intervals. First reassurance, then worry, then dogs. He remembered every one. He kept a tally in his mind. Eventually the calls would stop coming and he'd have some peace. He was certain that if he just sat here for another hundred years or so, everything would be fine.

(Ring, ring...)

Another call. Maybe Toriel had retrieved her phone after all. Maybe she'd come and pick him up. He could draw a new picture. He wouldn't let anyone else see it this time. That had been his mistake. This time, he'd do better.

(Ring, ring...)

He picked the phone up off the ground, put it to his ear.

(Click.)

And what he heard widened his eyes, and straightened his back, and filled him with determination:

"I found him."

? ♥ #

Long before.

King Asgore's Royal Scientist had been hired for his genius, not his interior decorating skills. This was evident from a single glance at the Core's laboratory, all pitted linoleum and sharp right angles and dark gray metal; even when it was first constructed, it had already looked a hundred years old. The ventilation fans buzzed like cicadas. The sleeping quarters were in a completely illogical central chamber that was full of drafts and foot traffic. The elevators moved along strange vectors that made the riders feel small and uncertain about their place in the universe. The break room's videotapes were always strangely sticky. And the lights – and this was especially dangerous – flickered from time to time, thanks to the power draw in Observation. It had been a while since the last accident. But, for obvious reasons, Sans wasn't about to take any chances. That was why he'd secreted himself in one of the side offices near the freezers, where the circuits was more stable, and rigged up lamps off the central grid for good measure.

To say he was surrounded by reading material would be accurate, but insufficient – “ensconced,” or possibly “entombed,” would be better. Ragged textbooks formed corridors, and parapets, and precariously wobbling towers all throughout the office. It was unknown if

you could construct a flying buttress out of notebooks, but the stacks were making a good try of it. The scritch of Sans' pencil could be heard over the buzz of the lights.

"Uhh, ok, something else on wave-particle contrasts, that goes *here*, and I guess we've gotta maybe find another thing on photons next? This stuff needs a name. Mal-temporology? *Chronomalacia*. Heh heh, oh man, that's a good one, put that one in the books..."

(Knock, knock, knock.)

"Yeah, c'mon in, Alphys."

The door creaked open. "H-hi, Sans. How did you know it was m- *oh my God where did you even get all these.*"

"You know how it is, they sorta multiply on their own after a while. And if it was the Doc knockin' then that sound would've been about six feet higher up. Come on, follow my voice. And, uh, watch your step."

Tentative shuffling could be heard through the stacks. Alphys' orange snout peeked gingerly around a wobbling pile of engineering manuals.

"I, er, j-just wanted to let you know. I heard the oven ding. In the kitchen. Where the oven is."

"Oh, great, thanks for the heads-up. Means my quiche is ready."

"Your what?"

"My quiche."

"Your what?"

"My. Quiche."

"Oh! Oh, sorry, I misheard. I love those!" A rustle as she got out her phone. "Um, h-how do you spell that again...?"

"'s a casserole, Alphys. They're good for you. The Doc loves 'em, when he can actually remember to eat." Sans set aside his pencil. "I figured I'd try and drag him out of Observation before he wastes away to bones and skinnier bones."

He stepped around his desk and met Alphys in a papery courtyard, hands in his pockets. In deference to his work, he was wearing a lab coat. In deference to the fact that he was Sans, he was also wearing house slippers. They were approximately the same height, but Alphys managed to hunch herself shorter anyway. She smiled nervously.

"It, it actually smells really nice! I thought I'd make something of my own, too. So we could all eat t-together for a change."

"Is it ramen?"

“No!” She reconsidered. “Yes. B-but it’s the gourmet stuff! Real meat and everything!”

“Cool. C’mon, let’s get out of here. Baby steps. I think some of the essays are restless.”

They tiptoed around the paperwork and out into the hall. Sans instinctively glanced up at the lights. “You checked the grid, right?”

“Yep! Everything’s running fine! Which is good! Because that’s the rules! Ha ha!”

Always stay in the light if you were alone. Even when you were asleep. Especially then. Alphys had made it clear to Sans that she was totally okay with this guideline pasted on the walls every two dozen steps. She didn’t think it was ominous at all. Sans hadn’t said anything, because Alphys had told him this completely unprompted, with a pronounced twitch under her eye. This place really didn’t agree with her.

He’d tried, with decreasing levels of subtlety, to convince her to leave, but she was having none of it, and getting a word from the Doctor on the matter was a lost cause. She’d apparently approached Asgore personally with a request to work with the Royal Scientist, and said Royal Scientist had apparently managed to get his brain and his fingers lined up long enough to sign off on the request. Sans could understand up to a point; the girl was a sizzling bundle of nerves, but put her in front of a machine, any machine, and she’d work the kind of magic that even monsters would have trouble believing. And they needed someone to perform maintenance. Observation was just sucking up too much juice, even this close to the Core. The lights couldn’t go out again.

“It, it’d be really nice to all get together for a change, you know?” Her tail dragged on the linoleum as she walked. “Just, you know, off the r-record. I wasn’t expecting it to be quite like this. It’s really...uh. Empty.”

“Yeah, well, you know.” He tried to leave it at that, but Alphys soldiered on.

“I mean, there’s a lot of beds in the sleeping area. A...a lot of beds. And most of them. Don’t look like they’ve been slept in for a while.”

“I nap pretty much anywhere and the Doc seems to think sleep is a thing that happens to other people. As for everyone else, they’ve, you know, passed on. To other jobs. Place is a little gloomy, in case you didn’t notice. I’m mainly stickin’ around because I promised the Doc I’d help him out, someone’s gotta translate his notes. Most everyone else has families they wanna see.”

“Oh, I get it. I, uh, don’t have that problem. Ha ha!” She tugged at her labcoat and grinned in an unsettling way.

They stopped in front of the central elevator. Sans hit the Call button. A deep thrum reverberated in the walls.

“What’s the Doctor doing in there, anyway? If you don’t, er, mind me asking.”

“Sorry, Alphys, it’s hush-hush. Another reason why everyone left, you know? Gets a little frustrating, not being able to brag about your job.” He rocked back and forth on his heels. “Even me. I got a brother back in the capital. He thinks I’m studying to be a dentist.”

This elevator really took its sweet time.

“Won’t matter for much longer, anyway. Research is movin’ on. Asgore’s more interested in soul properties than our current project, so the whole thing’ll be shut down soon as he figures out a polite enough way to ask.”

“Oh, I wanted to tell you! I actually found some of the Doctor’s blueprints. I hope that’s o-okay?” Sans looked at her. She timidly tapped her claws together. “And, you know, at least for the ones I could actually read, there’s some really good ideas there! I might b-be able to put together something that’ll make Asgore happy. So you can continue your research!”

“Oh.” Sans stared. “Heh. That’s nice. I’m sure the Doc’ll be impressed.”

With blessed good timing, the elevator dinged open, bathing them in cold white light. Sans stepped in. “Take my food outta the oven, would you? By the time I drag the Doc up here it should have cooled off.”

“S-sure thing. And, uh, Sans?” She sidled a little closer to the elevator. “Is everything okay? Things here seem really...tense.”

“Ahh, we’ll be fine.” He winked as the elevator doors slid shut. “Do I look worried?”

He held the wink until the doors fully closed and the elevator jerked into life. Then he calmly turned around, rested his head against the cool metal wall, and took several deep, shuddering breaths.

It was stressful enough having to cobble together an entirely new branch of science with nothing but waterlogged textbooks from the surface. The atmosphere in this place wasn’t helping at all. Papyrus and his endless procession of action figures were a soothing balm whenever he managed to slip away and get home, but right now leaving the Doctor alone didn’t seem like the smartest idea.

It had started as a study to find new ways to break the barrier, because of course it had – the monster community had one problem on its mind, and no one was keen on waiting for who knew how long until another human fell down with a soul to claim. The Doctor had overseen the construction of the Core just to generate enough power to find a solution. For what, exactly, Sans was never quite sure, but the man was the Royal Scientist for a reason. Much like this elevator, his mind tended to move in weird directions, but it’d always reach its destination in the end.

As a matter of fact, the elevator currently felt like it was traveling diagonally.

The Core was completed, the lab was built. The early experiments had been tentative things, sending out feelers, mapping unfamiliar ground – none of them had worked with souls before, after all, and they were spooky things when you got right down to it, the way those

jarred lights always seemed to swivel to face you when your back was turned. It had been around that time the Doctor had sketched out the blueprints for a number of machines, including that skull-shaped thing that made Sans' calcium crawl when he'd tried to read it. Key word being "tried." Even if you discounted the Doctor's handwriting, attempting to work from his blueprints was like baking a cake on a pogo stick. It was exhausting, it was pointless, and it would probably end in a big mess and a lot of embarrassing self-injury.

Then, strange readings on the monitors. Oscillations that leapt like fleas. Persistent déjà-vu. The Doctor had built deeper into the Core, and begun Observation. That was when the rest started happening. Pockets of space where the air was oddly cold. The sound of laughter and scraping metal. The feeling of always being watched.

And then, the accidents.

The elevator doors finally opened. Sans stepped out, his grin back in fine form.

The floor in Observation was riddled with holes like a cheese-grater, better to let in the Core's warmth; they needed as much power as possible. Through the holes crept a dull orange glow. The heat was tremendous. They were just above the Core, or possibly inside it, or possibly both at once. Bizarre things started happening to time and space when the instruments here were on, and the Doctor never turned them off anymore.

This lab was vast, and stretched on into blackness. Machines scattered without attention to sense or safety. Printers that gradually scratched out the oscillations. Monitors with their keyboards dangling several yards away, their screens full of darkness. Scattered tables bearing lit candles, photographs, urns. Sans carefully avoided looking at these memorials as he walked across the glowing floor.

A voice could be heard at the far end. Low, breathless, thin as spider legs. Wandering from clause to clause as though the speaker was constantly forgetting and then remembering again what he'd wanted to say.

"A fearsome phenomenon. What a lovely helix. Everything that descends. Must converge. I believe. This model. Will bear bitter fruit..."

"Hey, W.D.!" Sans called. "It's Sans! You wanna step over here for a second?"

"Yes, Sans. It is you. You are there. But I am here. This disparity. Must be rectified."

Sans groaned and kept walking.

Grinning through the dark at the lab's furthest end were numerous lines of color. As if looking through a cracked window with an aurora on the other side. They zigzagged, they crossed, they went parallel again, they crept in from every direction. This sight was, in fact, generated by numerous monitors, haphazardly stacked on top of one another. After every accident, this monument had grown larger, and the power draw greater.

Sans had wanted to quit after the first one. Finding a pile of dust where one of your co-workers used to sleep kind of knocked the wind out of you. But the Doctor had just grown

more determined after that, and with every one that followed. They'd instated the policy about the lights far too late. And by then, the power draw had increased to the point where their own machines worked against them. Alphys and her nimble, sweaty hands were at least keeping the grid up and the machines topside maintained, but there was no guarantee if that would keep them safe.

"Hello, my little anomaly. Hello, my terrible terminus. I see you. I am standing in your way. I will terminate you. Like the terminal tumor you are. I will exorcise. And exercise. My excision. Ha, ha. My wit. Is sharp. My math. Is sharper..."

Talk like this is why he needed Sans around. The Doctor dispensed pearls of wisdom like a vending machine, but somewhere between his mind and his mouth they came out covered in nightmares. He'd once given a brief lecture on comparative soul metaphysics without Sans there to interpret for him. Everyone in attendance had supposedly slept with a nightlight for a month afterward.

He loomed through the shadows now, his exposed bones and lab coat making him appear like a child's sketch in chalk. Incredibly tall – apparently Sans had caught the short end of the stick there, pun most definitely intended, Papyrus was already lanky as anything and his other brother looked like someone had taken Papyrus and shoved him into a taffy puller. And that went double for his hands, which had palms like dishes and fingers like ten spindly bananas. They popped, they clattered, they never quite agreed on how to act. This behavior might have explained his handwriting, which wasn't illegible so much as approaching legibility from the totally wrong direction.

He stood in front of the monitors now with those hands splayed out, like a schizophrenic conductor with ten tiny batons. The snarl of lines in front of him, Sans noticed, formed an irregular pattern as they approached the center – they converged and formed a helix, a spiral, that seemed almost three-dimensional in a way that made his sockets water. And in the center, darkness. Darker than dark. A black blob whose edges wavered like a jellyfish, and sucked all the timelines in.

"What's up, W.D.," he said. "Nice to see the work's going well. You wanna maybe get something to eat before you pass out?" He stuck his shaking hands in his pockets. "Got a quiche with your name all over it. That's not a joke, by the way, I had to be *really* careful arranging the spinach."

The hands reached out to a pair of nearby keyboards. Keys rattled like machinegun fire. That dark blob seemed to tremble.

"A different differential. A bit of pressure. And we. Will pierce right through. This relentless future. Finally. Looks brighter. And brighter..."

With every word his hands shuddered and clacked, moving in impulsive, yet predictable, patterns. He was never able to talk without gesturing. It was like his mouth and his hands moved on the same switch.

"C'mon, man." Sans shivered involuntarily; it felt like he was being watched. "This can wait. Get some food in that ribcage. Alphys cooked something, too, in case you wanna get your

week's sodium intake in one sitting.”

“Dark. Darker. Yet darker. The darkness. Keeps. Growing. The shadows. Cutting. Deeper. Photon readings. Negative...”

“W.D.! Hey!” Sans whistled through his teeth. “My face is in *this* direction!”

He started at that, as though hearing Sans for the first time, and glanced over his shoulder. There were dark circles under his dark circles.

“This next experiment. Seems very. Very. Interesting.”

He turned around fully after that, slightly hunched, his hands at his sides. The glow coming from beneath the floor stained his bones a faint orange. Clipped to his labcoat was a plastic badge with his smiling skull next to the words: *Dr. W.D. Gaster, Royal Scientist.*

He stood with his back to the monitors.

Every candle blew out. Every alarm was strangled. Every printer began to spew out page after page of nines.

And only Sans saw that dark patch twitch, and surge, until it engulfed the entire monitor on which it clung. Only Sans saw how it seemed to bleed darkness, the shadows running so thick that they crept down and hacked the timelines below into hash. Only he saw the arm emerge from that blackness, dripping shadow like tar, and the hand at the end of that arm, and the knife clutched by that hand, its blade gleaming a bloody red.

Only Sans saw the knife rise...

“What,” said Dr. Gaster, *“do you two think?”*

...and fall.

Gaster

The door to the Ruins grinded shut as Frisk stepped out onto that path flanked by trees like sentinels, their shadows cross-hatching the snow. He held one arm held up against the sudden glare. He still smelled a little bit like pie crust and clean linen. The conversation with Flowey had gone as usual. Despite his confidence in Waterfall, he hadn't remembered a thing.

After his vision had adjusted, he lowered his arm and started to walk.

"Heya."

Frisk yelped and spun on his heel. Sans was there, leaning up against the wall besides the Ruins entrance, flipping through a small memo pad propped in one bony palm. He looked up at Frisk and winked.

"Yep, it's you, all right. Figured we could change things up a little bit this time, considering." He stuck the pad in his hoodie pocket, straightened, stretched. "Had a *real* good gag planned, whoopee cushions were involved, they're always funny, but I get the feeling you've seen that one before. Here, take it as a souvenir." He fished through the pockets on his jacket, then his shorts, and then the expression in his eyes turned puzzled. "...huh. Did I drop it? That's weird." Then he brightened up. "That's good! Weird's good. We want weird today. C'mon, kid, walk and talk with me. Or, you know, you'll walk and I'll talk."

He set off down the forest path. After a moment, Frisk followed.

"I'd take a shortcut, but everything's so snarled right now I couldn't be sure where we'd end up. Careful, don't trip." He took Frisk's hand, helped him over the fallen branch. "I dunno what you did in that last loop, kiddo, but when I went through my notes I had asymptotes popping off my readings like line dancers. I've never seen curves like that before, and that's not hyperbola." He glanced down, noted Frisk's completely blank expression. "...yeah, definitely the wrong crowd for that one. I'm just feelin' nostalgic."

They stepped through Papyrus' comically ineffective gate, across the narrow bridge. Ahead was the clearing with the conveniently shaped lamp (for hiding Frisk) and Sans' conveniently shaped guard post (for hiding condiments).

"Anyway, that irregularity was like a jigsaw piece falling into place. Everything clicked at once. Felt almost too perfect, honestly, but this is fuzzy math at the best of times...whoops, stay sharp, here comes my brother. 'sup bro?"

Papyrus stormed in their direction like a lanky whirlwind. His elbows and knees waved about at velocities that would have probably decapitated anyone nearby.

"You know what's 'sup,' brother! It's been eight days and you still haven't-" He skidded to a halt and his sockets went wide. "Oh my God! Is that a human!?"

Sans kept walking. "Nah."

“Oh, okay! Introduce us later!”

“Sure thing. Just stick around here, alright?”

Frisk waved. Papyrus waved back, with both arms.

“I figure we can double back after all this is done and get events on course. Papyrus is a good sport, he’ll be here. No one else ought to bug us while I’m with you.”

They continued past the box-lover’s sign, avoided the world’s saddest pick-up note, stepped onto the path where Doggo kept watch. On cue, Doggo’s snout emerged from his guardpost sill like a slightly damp sunrise, followed by the gleam of his knives.

“Did something move? Was it my- Oh hey, Sans. Who’s your friend?”

“Just a friend. You’ve got cards with everyone today?”

“Same as every day, yeah.”

“Tell Greaterdog that I’ll toss a few bones his way if he goes easy on you.”

“Ah ha, that’s a funny joke,” Doggo said darkly. Frisk waved. Doggo waved at where he’d been a second ago, then dipped back below the sill.

“We’ve got a lot of ground to cover,” Sans said, “so I’ll fill you in on the details. Yeah, let’s step around the ice.” They walked around the slippery patch ahead. “The guy we’re gonna see is named Dr. W.D. Gaster. He’s...hey, where are you going? It’s this way.”

Frisk had stepped away from Sans and headed up the northern path. He held up a finger: *Just a minute*. Sans watched as he disappeared into the thicket. After a little while, he emerged again, cradling a small lump of snowman in his hands.

“All good?” Frisk put the snow away and nodded. “Alright. Like I was saying, Dr. Gaster. He was the Royal Scientist before Alphys got the job. Short version is he’s kinda tough to find nowadays, but I’m feelin’ chatty so I’ll give you the long version too.”

Papyrus hadn’t reset his puzzles yet, so the way forward was clear. Snow crystals sparkled in the dark skies. The wind blew in irregular patterns. It sometimes felt as though the currents carried the breeze in many directions at once.

“Now, Gaster’s brilliance was unmatched in the underground. Guy had a mind like no other and a list of inventions longer than Lesserdog’s neck on a good day. He built the Core from scratch just to find a way to bust apart the barrier without, y’know, harvesting human souls, since Asgore was getting kind of bummed out with that whole plan. He and his team ran a bunch of early tests on the human souls to get a feel for things, and eventually- what, again?”

Frisk had wandered off to the Nice Cream salesman, who was sitting gloomily next to his cart. Sans watched Frisk hold up two fingers, saw the salesman perk up, then chuckled to himself and stared down the path. A minute later, he heard crunching footsteps and looked back down to see Frisk holding up two wrapped ice cream bars.

“You know, kid, we are sort of on a schedule here.” Frisk tilted his head. “Ah, forget it. There’s always time for ice cream.”

He took one of the Nice Creams and pulled off the wrapper, then read the message inside. “‘Have a wonderful day.’ Sure, I’ll try. What’s yours say?” Frisk held up an illustration of a hug. “Heh heh, awesome.”

They ate in silence, walking down the plateau. As Frisk licked his stick clean, he idly kicked a snowball down the snowy field; it ricocheted at odd angles, bounced a few times, appeared to somehow roll backwards, and, after a few more kicks, fell into a hole at the end of the path. A red flag popped up as the two of them continued on.

Sans tossed away the stick and resumed talking. “So. Gaster ran a few early experiments on the nature of soul energy – Alphys would pick up where he left off, but it barely took him any time at all to get a rough handle of how determination worked. I’m assumin’ you saw the outcome of *that* nasty business, right?” Frisk nodded; the rusted hulk of the D.T. Extractor loomed in both their minds. “But then he saw something else. Bizarre readings on his instruments or something, I don’t know. No one ever really had the clearest idea how his mind worked. Guy could think his way through a corkscrew without touching the sides, you get me?” He looked at Frisk. “You don’t get me. That’s fine. Point is, the focus of his research changed. His reports showed a massive anomaly in the timespace continuum. Timelines jumping left and right, starting and stopping – until suddenly, everything ends.”

After a moment, Sans realized that he was suddenly walking alone. He turned around and saw Frisk standing in place, staring up at him. His bony brow crinkled.

“That look on your face...you’ve heard this part before?” Frisk nodded, slowly. “Yeah. It was like a hole in the bottom of a glass. Every point of time gettin’ pulled down to the same place, and then, poof. Darkness. You can probably see why the Doctor woulda thought this was a little more concerning than the barrier. So, he set up an observation lab.” Sans looked away; the lights in his eyes flickered. “A place where he could locate the anomaly. And eliminate it.”

He turned on his heel and started moving again. Eventually, Frisk followed him.

“Didn’t work, of course,” he said casually. “Gaster was a genius, but he kinda bit off more than he could chew. Job went on so long all his assistants packed up and went lookin’ for better hours. As for Gaster, he-”

Frisk yanked on his sleeve.

“Whoa, what is it?”

Frisk glared.

“That’s one accusing look you got there, buddy. Was it something I said?”

The glare somehow intensified.

Sans stared him down for as long as he could – he didn't have to blink, but then, Frisk's eyes were so heavy-lidded it was usually impossible to tell if he was blinking anyway. They were standing near a mousehole, and the mouse's timid squeak filled the silence between them.

The lights of Sans' pupils wavered, and went dark. He pulled away from Frisk and stared off into the woods.

"Tch. Guess you've gotten pretty good at picking up on little white lies, huh."

He scraped one hand across the top of his skull.

"They all died," he said quietly. "Everyone on Gaster's original team, including the Doc himself. I'm the only one left."

The breeze picked up. Evergreens rattled like bones.

"Took us a while to even figure out what was going on. Maybe that's partly why it got as bad as it did. Someone would get caught in a dark room, or turn a corner, or get outta bed a little late...and all you'd find was a pile of dust. Heh." He stared at his slippers. "I guess the anomaly didn't appreciate us messin' around with it. Heh heh. The Doc spent all that effort buildin' a window to see through time, and then forgot to make it one-way glass. He always did have trouble finishing things."

He turned back to Frisk; his grin was as rigid as ever, but the bone around his sockets had drooped so deep that his eyes had turned into crescents. His pupils blinked back on like faulty lightbulbs.

"Gaster was the last to go. Couldn't even collect his remains. The dust fell through the floor, and right into the heart of the Core. I...got a little emotional. Smashed his equipment. After that, the anomaly stopped bothering us, I quit, and Alphys eventually had the lucky privilege of takin' over his job. She even managed to figure out a couple of his blueprints. She's a smart girl. But the Doctor...no one could ever replace him." He shrugged. "Sorry, kid. Didn't mean to sugar-coat it. Old habits."

Frisk chewed his lip, traced abstract shapes in the snow with the tip of his shoe. Then he gestured down the path. Sans took the hint and resumed walking.

"It was a bad time for everyone, you know? The anomaly...whatever it did, it hit hard. Seemed to take away a lot more than just their lives. Hardly anyone even remembers the old team these days, and that goes double for Gaster. Alphys doesn't know him, and she practically interned with him. Even Papyrus doesn't...well. It just got me down for a while." He sighed. "Full disclosure, I kinda looked up to the guy."

Frisk heard something behind him – a distant buzz, like a phone with no signal. He looked back, but nothing was there.

"But that's the thing. Seems like not even getting killed stopped him. I can't totally understand it, but he's...in a lot of places, now. A lot of times, all at once. Maybe it was because his essence fell into the Core. Or maybe he was just that determined to survive. Heh.

The guy definitely spent a lotta time around human souls. Your kind might've rubbed off on him." They walked across Alphys' disabled tile puzzle, every square fallen silent and gray. "I was looking for those echoes of him. Hoping your reset shenanigans would eventually stir things up enough to lead me to the source. Where Dr. Gaster really was. And, like I told you on the phone – I found him."

They passed Lesserdog's house; he hadn't yet gone out on patrol, and doggy snores sounded from the darkness within. With every snore, Frisk could see a wet black nose pop in and out of the house; apparently he was dreaming of being pet.

"It's like...trying to solve a word search. One that's a billion letters wide and a billion letters long. You can't hope to find the word you want in that mess if you look everywhere at once, so instead you focus on one little part and hope you'll sniff it out. You kept rearranging things with every reset, until I found the word. The path where everything converges. And it's not much further now." Sans turned and started walking backwards, his grin wider than usual. "Shoulda figured it'd be here. We got strange signals crawlin' on this part of the underground like auroras. Bizarre phone calls, tingling feelings on the back of your neck...and now, we'll finally get to meet the *real* Dr. Gaster. If anyone can help bail out your fuzzy little buddy, it's him. And, hey, as a special thank-you to the Doctor afterward, whaddaya say we save *him*, too?"

They'd reached the icy patch containing Papyrus' final switch puzzle. Sans stepped on the ice and pushed off, sliding into the dark tunnel beyond.

"That Nice Cream wrapper had the right idea, kiddo. Heh heh. It's gonna be a wonderful day."

Frisk stood and watched him disappear, then tiptoed onto the ice, pushed off, and followed. They both emerged on the other side with snow puffs on top of their heads. Sans chuckled again and swiped his off.

"Man, where do these things *come* from? Hold still, kid, you got a little puff problem up top." He knocked the snow off Frisk's head, then gave his hair a quick rustle to shake out the rest. Frisk stood rigid with his hands at his sides. He wouldn't look at Sans anymore. An awkward silence ensued. Sans cleared his throat and pointed down the mountain.

"It's this way. Watch your step."

They started downhill.

"So, uh. How're you holding up? You look kind of beat."

"I'm fine."

"Wow, wasn't expecting you to answer." He looked back at Frisk. "You find anything interesting on your end? Any ways of helping Asriel?"

"I tried some things. They didn't work." Frisk trudged through the snow. "He...got really mad."

Sans' expression turned concerned. Then he looked back at the path and kept moving.

"Well, chin up. That's what you've got me for, right? You just have to stay determined."

They turned and walked along the cliff face where ghostly orbs glimmered through cracks in the stone – it was hard to tell if they were eyes or merely tricks of the light, but either way, they watched with curiosity at these two travelers. They continued to watch as Frisk stopped walking, leaving Sans to once again figure out that the number of footsteps he was hearing had decreased by half. He stopped and turned around.

"What's wrong now? You tired? It's only a couple more minutes."

Frisk shivered in place with his arms wrapped around him, a single splotch of color in the white expanse. His tangled mess of hair barely responded to the wind. When he spoke, Sans had to lean in to catch the words.

"Can I ask you something?"

Something in his voice compelled Sans to lay off the jokes. "Yeah, of course."

Frisk's jaw moved as though he was chewing on the words. Trying to force them into the right shape to leave his mouth. Finally, he looked up. The black lines of his eyelashes were rimed with frost.

"Sans...am I a bad person?"

Sans' smile flickered. For a moment, he appeared to be anticipating a punchline. But Frisk remained quiet after that, his gaze unwavering. Sans nervously fidgeted in the snow.

"Uh. Okay. That's a question you just asked, all right. I mean, we technically just met and all, but I got a reasonably solid mountain of evidence that says you're pretty darn nice, plus the fact that you bought me ice cream, like, fifteen minutes ago, so that's neat..." He scratched the back of his skull. "Kid, why would you even think that?"

Frisk shrugged helplessly. "Because I'm. Hurting people." His voice started to shake. "I mean. I try to help everyone. But then I just take it all back, every time, and, and Asriel doesn't want me around anymore, but I k-keep trying anyway." Now it was cracking like ice. "A-a-and because of me, all your f-friends d-d-d-"

"They wha- No. *No*. No, no, no." Sans practically warped to Frisk's side, beads of perspiration improbably popping out of his brow. "I didn't mean it like that. Kid, that wasn't your fault!"

"But you s-said that-"

"I know what I said. I said it in a stupid way. Joke's on me! Frisk, seriously, look at me." Sans palmed the top of Frisk's head like a basketball and turned it upwards. "Look at this handsome face. I *saw* what took out Gaster and the others. Or at least I think I did. And it wasn't you, okay? You're scrambling time like an egg, yeah, fair enough, point made, but that thing was *not you*."

Frisk nodded, hiccupped, rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. Sans removed his hand and stuck it in his pocket.

“...you wanna quit?” he asked. “I can take you right back to Papyrus. We’ll get everything on track.”

Frisk gulped in air, steadied his voice. “I don’t think I can stop. Not now.”

“Don’t ever tell yourself that. That kind of thinking’s what really gets people hurt. You always have that choice. No matter what.”

Frisk stayed silent, then rested his head against Sans bony chest. Sans sighed, patted him on the back.

“I don’t totally agree with what you’re doing here, it’s true,” he said. “But I’m stickin’ with you just the same. You think I’d still be here if I didn’t believe you were in this for the right reasons?”

For a while, Frisk didn’t reply. Then:

“I want to keep going,” Frisk said. His voice was slightly muffled by Sans’ hoodie. Sans gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“Then let’s move. Get you out of this wind before you get sick.”

Frisk pushed away and pointed ahead: *Onward*. Sans turned, walked for a bit, then stopped and turned again.

“And, Frisk. Let me ask you something, too – do you think *I’m* a bad person?”

Frisk shook his head so fiercely his hair whipped around his face.

“Heh. You see?” His pupils dimmed. “Guess that means we’ll just have to take each others’ word for it.”

Down and around the cliff. They entered a long tunnel that opened up into a cave, where the only sound was a low, resonant hum like a finger running over a waterglass. Veins of exotic ore shimmered in the walls, staining everything a crystalline blue. In the cave’s upper reaches, Glyde swam through in the air in lazy circles, occasionally breaking that peaceful sound with his distant, mournful cry: “*Haters gonna haaaaate...*”

And at the back was a door – easily ten feet wide and twice as tall, blue-grey like the sea, its edges marked with undecipherable symbols. Sans stopped just outside the tunnel’s mouth, eyed that door, and then took out his notebook.

“You been here before, kid?” He glanced aside to catch Frisk’s nod. “Yeah, figured. Ever get this door open?” Frisk shook his head. “Figured that, too. The thing’s an enigma. There’s an old legend that says it’ll open to someone who shows ‘extraordinary gratitude,’ but I don’t exactly have time to bake it a birthday cake, so we’re gonna try something a little less subtle today.”

He flipped open the notebook.

“I dunno where it goes normally, but for the next, uh...about sixteen minutes or so, I think, it’ll lead somewhere else. It won’t be in the underground. It won’t be anywhere at all, empirically speakin’. And that’s where we’ll find Gaster.”

Frisk peeked around Sans and saw that the first several pages of the notebook were covered with tally marks. The pages were crinkled, torn, spotted with dried ketchup. After the tally, the next page was blank, save for a single sentence in its center, written in a sharp-edged print unlike Sans’ usual loopy scribble:

Is it raining somewhere else?

As Sans flipped through the pages, Frisk saw other things. Graphs that seemed to feed into themselves and equations that made his eyes water. Maps of places he thought he recognized, but with extra rooms, X’s scratched into unfamiliar places. A sketch of Frisk himself (it was quite well-drawn) with an X scribbled over his mouth, and underneath, the scrawled words: ‘~~DON’T~~ TRUST HIM.’ Several more pages were filled entirely with the letter G, written over and over again until the paper was nearly black with charcoal. Two more pages contained only the words ‘WHY NOT’ slashed into the paper with such force that it appeared Sans’ pencil had snapped. Then, one variable at a time, the equations returned, and Sans started muttering to himself.

“Alright, let’s see what we can see...minimum fifty units, max indeterminate, that’s good, means I can red-line it without worrying too much. Say point seven-five units per second, considering drop-off, then you factor in the KR effect...maybe a minute and a half sustained? Yeah, go ahead and live dangerously.”

Sans replaced the notebook and stepped into the main cavern. He slowly rotated his head and shoulders. Various joints popped like firecrackers.

“Man, it’s been a while.” He looked over his shoulder. “You wanna see something cool?”

What Frisk saw nearly made him run out of the cave. He took a step back, then held his ground.

Sans’ eye burned.

His right eye remained the same as ever, that dark hole with its white pinprick pupil, but now light blue and yellow flames licked around the left socket, and at its core was a solid sphere that printed a strobing circle of color on the far wall. Sans’ immobile grin was bathed in that neon glare.

Sans said, “Determination.”

Frisk crept closer to the flame. It gave no heat.

“You probably know by now that we monsters can’t handle determination like humans can. Our souls don’t generate it easily. Pump us full of the stuff and we’ll just melt. But, there’s a

theory. If a monster manages to become determined enough, and hang around at that peak – the point just before their body falls apart – all sorts of neat stuff can happen.”

Frisk cautiously touched his own eye.

“Heh, heh, heh. Sorry, kiddo, but comparing your determination threshold to mine’s like comparing Mt. Ebott to an anthill. This trick is monster-only.” He turned back to the door. “And besides, it’s just a theory. I mean, I’m not determined. I’m just doing this to pass the time in between all your resets. I don’t care about helping you at all.”

Sans’ slipper scuffed across the ground. He raised one hand.

It arrived without fanfare – Frisk blinked and then it was hanging above Sans like it had been there all along, casting its grim silhouette on the ground below. Bone-white, many-seamed, with ram horns curling across half its length. It resembled the D.T. Extractor, that same ghastly goat skull. Its eyes and mouth were full of shadow.

“See how little I care?”

Sans flung his hand forward and the skull’s eyes burned the same color as his own. Its jaw split along its seams, one-two-three, and erupted with a raging white beam of light that crackled like a dynamo and struck the door dead-center. Frisk cringed and held both arms over his eyes, but the light was so bright it passed right through his flesh, he could almost see his bones and sinew like looking at an x-ray, and as the beam burned into the door that cool blue color seemed to leach away from it, leaving the stone cold and gray; the color drained from the walls as well, leaving only symbols etched in blue – astrological signs, open palms, squares, diamonds, noughts and crosses. Glyde retreated so far up the cave that he nearly concussed himself on the ceiling. The commotion went on for almost two minutes, and when the beam finally died and the skull winked out of reality once again, the whole cave had gone monochrome, save for the medley of symbols in the stones.

Light spilled out from under the door. And with a great grinding of stone, it swung open. On the other end was a solid wall of white.

“There, all done.” He turned around, stared at Frisk, then reached out and gently closed his hanging jaw. “Guess you enjoyed the show, huh?”

“It was raaaad,” Glyde called.

“Thanks, dude!” He held out his hand to Frisk. “So. Ready?”

Frisk waited a moment for his ears to stop ringing and the aggravating bluish glare to bleed out of his vision, and then nodded and took Sans’ hand.

“Fair warning, kid. We’re breaking some serious science, here. All bets are off when we step through that door. Stick close to me.”

They approached that blinding light together. Their shadows grew, and leapt, until they were imprinted on the entire back wall of the cave. Silhouettes hand in hand. Then, Sans stopped

walking.

“One more thing. While we’re baring our hearts to each other.” He faced forward. “Dr. Gaster’s my big brother.”

Frisk said nothing.

“Just... look, you don’t owe me anything. But if you can, try to make this the last one, alright? I don’t know what’s gonna happen in there. But I don’t want to forget it.”

He felt pressure on his hand. Frisk had folded his own palm over it, and squeezed tight. He nodded up at Sans.

“...appreciate it, Frisk.”

They stepped over the threshold. The light consumed them. And several minutes later, the door rasped shut, color bled back into the cave, and the symbols along the walls faded once again into anonymity.



It was a white and soundless place.

Sans hadn’t been exaggerating when he said the door led nowhere at all. The two of them walked through a blank. No light, no temperature, no sound that Frisk could hear save the rush of blood in his own ears. Their feet trod on something like solid ground, but no footsteps echoed in their wake. No horizon line to break earth and sky; at several points Frisk had to shut his eyes before his head started to swim. He felt untethered, like soon even gravity would fail and send him floating up into infinity, and he held onto Sans’ bony hand all the tighter. Sans’ unbroken pace and the rustling blue of his hoodie was the only landmark in the expanse.

Neither of them spoke. Possibly they didn’t want to know what their voices would sound like in this airless space. Frisk leaned over until his cheek brushed Sans’ sleeve. He anchored himself with the sensation.

They didn’t know how long they walked; there was no time here. They didn’t move in any particular direction; there was no direction, either. But, little by little, other sounds brushed the very edges of their hearing. A distant clitter. A delicate buzz. Something like a sigh. They had the feeling of being watched. Camouflaged shapes dipped and swam through the skyless sky – white against brighter white. Frisk moved so close to Sans that he nearly tripped the skeleton up, but Sans just put his arm around Frisk’s shoulders and kept going.

They found him.

They didn’t see Dr. Gaster in the distance; there was no distance. Instead, as they walked, a shape slowly faded in from the blankness, as if gradually shedding layers of gauze. Never becoming closer, but clearer all the same. And when he had fully solidified, and his twisted

shape towered over them both, Sans finally came to a halt, and Frisk felt his bones shake beneath his grip.

“Ahh, God.” Sans’ voice trembled. “What did you do to yourself, W.D.?”

Dr. Gaster slumped crosslegged on the floor, arms splayed out at his sides, head askew like an unstrung marionette. He wore some dark and shapeless garment draped across his body like a shroud; the uneven pattern on the blackness and the glimpses of white fabric grinning through suggested it was a lab coat, scorched to charcoal. His head was seamless, smooth, deformed in numerous places. One eyesocket pinned wide open, staring at nothing. The other a thin, downturned crescent. His mouth another black crescent to mirror the eye. The skull split in two places, one seam running across his entire scalp in a long unbroken line as though someone had tried to pry his head apart. He didn’t look like a skeleton. He looked like a wax figurine that had passed through a blast furnace.

And then, there were the hands.

Sprouting from Dr. Gaster’s back were countless arm bones that spread across the void. They branched, they split, they rejoined again, like he had become the taproot of a macabre tree. Ranges of radii, forests of phalanges. They wavered like pale sea-grass, and in their upper reaches, countless hands twitched and flexed. Some with fingers more delicate than toothpicks, others so massive that they could have borne up both Sans and Frisk in their palms. Hands studded with staring eyes. Hands with palms split by toothy mouths. Hands riveted with cameras, protractors, nameless machinery. Several arms instead terminated in monsters that dangled lifeless and gray like sad puppets, their eyes staring and blank – Frisk thought that several of them resembled people he knew, and several more resembled Dr. Gaster himself. Their joints clacked like the beaks of strange birds as they swayed; they sometimes seemed to pass through each other, or disappear into the whiteness and return elsewhere like a magician’s trick. They all bent low towards Sans and Frisk with a great creaking of bone and joint. They cast no shadow. But the two of them still felt the weight of those hands.

Frisk wasn’t sure whether to hold onto Sans even tighter or try and hide behind him. Sans felt his tugging arm, and looked over to him.

“Don’t worry, kid. He’s not dangerous. I just...thought I’d have been more prepared for this.” He held up his arm, forcing Frisk to stand on tiptoe. “Hate to say it, but I need you to let me go now.”

Frisk turned pale, but slowly released his grip. Sans gave him a half-hearted wink. Then he sauntered under the canopy of Dr. Gaster’s hands.

“Hey.” Somehow, his voice remained steady. “Sorry I took so long.”

From everywhere at once came a grating, deafening wall of noise. The split palms babbled, the grey puppets shook. It sounded like sticking your head inside a malfunctioning engine, or a dial tone turned to ear-bleeding volume, or ten thousand washboards being scraped at once. Frisk cringed and clapped his hands over his ears.

“Heh. Yeah, I’m doing okay. Looks like you’re still the same as ever, too. Despite everything.” Sans looked over to Frisk. “Don’t cover your ears when other people are speaking, kid, it’s rude.”

Frisk lowered his hands, then winced again at the next burst of noise. He noticed that all the hands wavered in unison during that din, clacking and twisting in acrobatic contortions. Sans watched the movement intently.

“Yeah, this is the one. He’s not much to look at, but his determination’s off the scale.” Glancing at Frisk: “The Doctor always had some communication issues. No surprise they’ve gotten a little worse, given the circumstances. Don’t worry, we have a system worked out. I’ll interpret for ya.”

Hands swarmed Frisk like flies. Several camera flashes went off in Frisk’s face. One hand with its fingers replaced by strange sizzling rods gave his chest a gentle pinch, then flitted away. Despite the riot of movement whenever Dr. Gaster spoke or acted, his actual body remained lifeless and still. His own, original hands didn’t so much as twitch.

Another blast of buzz. Sans nodded, then breathed deep.

“Okay, Frisk. The Doctor wants a word with you.” Frisk looked on the verge of panic. “Don’t worry. He won’t make you say anything you don’t want to. And, uh, you might not understand, like, half the stuff he says, but go easy on him. He hasn’t gotten to talk to anyone in a while. Ready?”

Frisk stared up at the forest of hands. At countless unblinking eyes, the gray puppets with their heads all tilted in expectation. He swallowed hard, and nodded.

“Alright. Here we go.”

A wave of noise and shudder.

“(So, you have arrived.) Okay, starting with the obvious, I can dig it.”

The hands clutched and flexed.

“(Let’s not lose any time to useless introductions.) Wow, bro, dial back the charm a little, why don’t’cha? Okay, okay, it’s him talking now. (Sans has already told you who I am. And I have watched you for some time. The irregularities you have created are impossible to ignore. Please do not take this as an accusation. I find your patterns admirable.) Hey, you see? You’ve made a good first impression.”

Fingers snapped like wild animals. The gray puppets babbled at nothing.

“(You created significant unrest in space and time to locate me. You put my brother through a great deal of unease.) Aw, man, it wasn’t a problem, really. (And yet. I have observed. That throughout it all. And despite temptation. You continued to be yourself. I have always respected perseverance.) Yeah, clearly. (So. I took what limited measures I could to arrange this meeting. Regardless of its eventual outcome.)

“(Now, tell me what you seek.)”

The hands went still. Sans leaned over. “That’s your cue, kid.”

Frisk wasn’t sure whether to address the hands or Dr. Gaster himself. But he knew the answer, and said it with confidence:

“Asriel.”

The hands chittered.

“(Asriel.)”

They seemed to laugh amongst themselves.

“(The doomed prince. Yes. I have observed his trail, as well. The deception. The tragedy. The madness. The sacrifice. The end of his life created ripples of disaster that would extend for generations to come. And after many years, Asriel will break free of that bleak existence, only to fall back into darkness. I would call it heartbreaking, had I the necessary anatomy.) Yikes, W.D., working the rough chuckles, there. (That is the fate you wish to avert. That is why you continue to corrupt time. That is why you hold the future hostage from those who wish to live it.)”

Frisk’s ears had begun to ache from the waves of snarl and rattle crashing in on them. Numerous eyes tilted in a way that turned their stare judgmental. But he held his ground.

“(Here is a difficult lesson for you to learn, human. All too often, happy endings are built on the misfortunes of others. As cruel as it sounds, the freedom and happiness of monsterkind hinges upon Asriel Dreemurr’s miserable end. He suffered great pain, but when given the choice, in an act of supreme selflessness, he allowed that misfortune to become the foundation of a brighter future for all.)” Sans’ voice was toneless. He would no longer meet Frisk’s eye. “(But you will not respect his sacrifice. You continue your efforts without hesitation.)” Clenching bone huddled ever closer to Frisk. “(I wish to hear your reasons why.)”

Sans inhaled deep, blinked several times. “Geez, that was a mouthful.”

“Sans.” Frisk still didn’t back down as the hands moved ever closer, though he was shaking like a leaf. “What should I do?”

“Give him an answer, of course. Don’t worry, he’s just putting on his lecture-hall voice.” Another buzz, almost irritated. “Oh, c’mon, W.D., lay off him a little. The most brilliant mind in monster history trying to grill a grade-schooler? Even I couldn’t come up with something that funny.” He gave Frisk a thumbs-up. “Just be honest, kiddo. With him, and with yourself. It’ll get you through every time.”

The hands receded. Just enough to give Frisk room to breathe. He stood before Dr. Gaster like a penitent. He tried to find the words.

He remembered Asriel in the flower patch, head bowed, waiting for the end. Further back – Asriel in front of the barrier, surging with the power of every soul at once, pouring all his stolen life into the thing entrapping the people he'd tormented. Further back – Asriel holding him so tight that his claws had dug through Frisk's shirt, his muzzle digging into Frisk's neck. Still trying to smile as he said he didn't want to let go.

Frisk said, "Did you see him, too? After he changed back?"

The hands turned to face one another. They seemed surprised at the question.

"(The point between his rise and fall. Such moments are rare in the sea of time. But yes. I have observed several.)"

"He never smiles." Frisk held himself tighter. "Not really."

Gaster said nothing.

"I mean, he always tries. But you can tell it's not real. It's because he's scared. He doesn't want anyone else to worry."

Several hands rotated in Sans' direction. His pupils darted around. "...what?"

"I don't know him that well," Frisk continued. "I never get the chance. But I've met him for the first time. Over and over. And I think he just hates to see other people get hurt. Especially after...everything that happened. So when he tells me he doesn't want to leave. I think it's the same as his smile. He's telling lies." Frisk sniffed. "Because he doesn't think there's any way to help without hurting someone else."

He rubbed his eyes and looked up. "Even if he really doesn't want to leave, I want to give him the choice. I think I'd be okay if he told me no. As long as it didn't feel like he was lying about it. But first. I need to find a way to help him without hurting anyone. And as long as I can, I'm going to try." He swallowed; his throat hurt from overuse. "But. I hope he says yes. I...I really want him to be my friend."

He fell silent. Sans and Gaster waited, to see if any more words were forthcoming, but that appeared to be the end of it.

"There is a warm and fuzzy feeling all through my ribcage," Sans said. "Very, very nice, kid." Frisk said nothing, but visibly reddened. "Hey, W.D., is he seriously the one responsible for sending time down the tubes? I'm starting to detect a flaw in our hypothesis, here."

"(My model was impeccable)," Sans translated. "(The anomaly persists. The darkness at the end of time cannot be avoided.)" Several of the puppets tilted their heads. "(But perhaps. Its meaning may be malleable. I had good reason to believe that the terminus meant only ruin. But, with enough determination. It may instead signify a new future. One beyond the reach of any calculation.)"

Every hand bent low over Frisk.

"(There is a way.)"

Both Frisk and Sans' faces lit up.

“(After my demise, my essence drew on the power of the Core. My creation. Beautiful and beautifully useless. But even as I was scattered across time, flung into the darkest corners of the underground, that power persisted. In the absence of anything better to do, I continued my research. I have observed the sea of time, and noted every moment. Their placement. Their purpose. The ripples they leave behind.)”

The hands were now moving so fast they blurred, turning near-invisible against that blank white background. Sans was sweating in his attempts to keep up.

“(Of particular interest was Asriel Dreemurr's death. Of course. Its connections were so bold, and ran so far. When his soul left his body and shattered in the unforgiving air, the future shuddered in sympathy. Even now, I can see it. Suspended in this placeless place.)

“(Human. With your blessing. I will reach out. Seize hold of this moment in time. And COPY it.)”

Sans blinked. He couldn't seem to understand what he had just said. The hands resumed their commotion.

“(I will pour the power of the Core into that moment. One occurrence will become two. The second inviolate. Immaculate. Pure. Its events separate from the greater flow of time. If you possess the bravery. The determination. Then you may venture into that uncharted dark, and extract Asriel's soul before its dissolution. Hide it within yourself. Keep that soul warm beside your own. Carry it to the end of all things, and perhaps. You will find a way to bring the doomed prince home.)”

Frisk's face had begun to hurt. It took a moment for him to realize why.

“Would you look at that, huh?” Sans leaned over, his grin wider than ever. “Kid's smiling ear to ear. Frisk, why the heck do you always look so down? That's a waste of a fantastic face.” Frisk flushed again and rubbed his dimpled cheek. “Heh heh heh. Man, we're making it rain miracles today, aren't we, W.D.?”

The hands hung by their wrists. The puppets hung their heads. For a moment, that bony thicket seemed guilty.

Slowly, the movement and buzz resumed. Sans tilted his head, his grin dampened somewhat, and translated:

“(The stress of this act will be severe. The consequences, unavoidable. In the aftermath, I will-) Oh. Oh, no. No. *No way!*”

Frisk's smile disappeared. He looked back and forth between Sans and Gaster. Sans' skull was beading with sweat. His pupils shuddered in their sockets.

“He's saying that this stunt'll burn up all the juice that's keeping him here. He'll be dead for good after that. And yeah, kid, that sucks, I know, since now we'll have to find a different

plan. Because that is *not* going to happen!” Frisk flinched; he’d never heard Sans shout like that before. “Frisk, tell him. I know you don’t want this any more than I-”

He was cut off by a snarl of static. The hands leapt and spasmed.

“No, you don’t get to pull this on me now! I mean, come on.” Sans held his palms out, the look in his eyes turned pleading. “We’ve got Frisk’s determination, your brains, my devastating good looks. We can find a way to bail you outta this, too. One more miracle, no big deal, right?” The hands kept still. Sans’ voice started to tremble. “W.D., I’m begging you here. I came all this way. Don’t do this to me again.”

The ensuing noise was so fierce that Frisk had to cover his ears again. Even then, it sounded like he was standing within kissing distance of a waterfall. The leaping tides of screech bored through his ears. The hands waved so close to Sans that they nearly knocked him over.

“No, I never thought this was about *me*, but-”

The puppets crowded him, all blank faces and bared teeth.

“That isn’t-”

Several hands formed fists and pounded the soundless ground as the buzz rent the air. Sans stood with his arms limp and his head hung low. His pupils winked out, leaving dark sockets.

“...okay. Okay. I get it, all right?” He angled his head to Frisk. “Hey. He’s got more to say.” Frisk uncovered his ears, tried to approach Sans. “I’m fine, kid. Just listen.”

The buzz resumed, gentler now.

“(Your protest is understandable),” Sans said quietly. “(I have every cause to believe you wish for an end with no sacrifice. But, human. Understand my predicament. I still do not know what presence lurked within the distortion in time, but when I called it forth with my observations, the blow it struck was remarkably potent. It severed far more than my life from this world. The marks I had made in the past. The bonds I had formed in the present. All were undone. All progress erased. And as I continued my notes here, I came to realize something. The marks I had left were, in the end, very faint. My bonds, very fragile. My research had amounted to nothing. My determination to succeed had called down only ruin on those I cared for. And, when I finally passed from this world...)”

Sans fell silent as the hands continued to move. He shook his head slowly. “Oh, no, W.D. You know that’s not true.”

But Gaster remained still. Waiting for his interpretation. Sans had to fight to let out every word.

“(When I finally passed from this world, few remembered me. Fewer missed me.)” He looked away from Frisk. “(And. In all my observations. I found only one person. Who ever mourned me.)”

Sans stuck his hands in his pockets. “I’m okay. I just...need a minute.”

He took deep breaths. Frisk watched his shoulders rise and fall. Then Sans looked back up, and Gaster continued to speak.

“(I have spent too long here. Filled with regret, in this wretched state. Unsure of how I continue to exist or why. The world perseveres without me, and I do not blame it. The future will always find a way to survive, though it may grow dim from time to time. However. If you desire a brighter future. If your happy ending demands misfortune. Then I. Would be honored. To sacrifice my own.)”

Dr. Gaster fell silent once again. There was a distinct air of exhaustion in the way every hand ceased movement at once. Frisk crept closer to Sans, and grabbed hold of his arm.

“Heh. Thanks.” His pupils flickered weakly. “Give him your answer, kid. Whatever you want. But do it now, okay? I think this translation schtick’s run its course.”

Frisk nodded, turned away, stepped forward. This time, he addressed Dr. Gaster directly – that slumped, motionless figure from which every hand grew.

He said, “Please.”

As one, the gray puppets nodded.

Gaster’s two largest hands – their pinky fingers taller than Frisk and Sans combined – shuddered into life. They reached up, and up, their arm-bones extending like telescopes, until they disappeared into the blankness. There was a great grinding of stone, and the hands descended with a great archway clutched in their grip. Frisk recognized that whiskey-colored stone; it was the door to King Asgore’s throne room. The hands bore it aloft high over Dr. Gaster like an offering.

Other hands swarmed the doorway. More camera lenses flashed. Currents of electricity ran across its surface. Protractors took countless measurements in the blink of an eye, scraping inscrutable diagrams into the door’s surface. And then they latched on. Hands skittered across the stone like spiders and grabbed every available surface, encasing the arc in bone. The gray puppets ringed Gaster with their heads raised like witnesses. Bone creaked as every arm tensed, and began to pull.

Dr. Gaster’s eye burned.

It began as a dim point in his wide-open eye. Not unlike Sans’ own pupils. But as the hands continued their exertion, the light grew, and leapt, and flared into a deep purple flame that spread even to the cracks in Gaster’s skull, so that his head seemed veined with amethyst. Gaster’s body finally twitched into life, his head lifting up, his mouth yawning open, as the flame leapt like a pilot light. Cracks spiderwebbed through his arms. Cracks appeared in his skull like glazed pottery. And as the door itself finally began to crack, that now-familiar static climbed into a cacophony that, at its very core, held a voice – Dr. Gaster’s own, roaring into the empty air.

Frisk had covered his ears again. Sans stared up at the door, as motionless as Gaster himself had been.

The door split down the middle. There was a blinding flash.

When it faded, all had fallen silent. Gaster was once again slumped over. And now, he was flanked by two doorways – both identical, down to the last mark in the stone.

Frisk watched as the hands moved once more. But now their movement was jerky, uncertain, like a failing windup toy. A multitude of index fingers pointed to the left-hand arch.

They heard a voice – without tone or character, jumping unevenly between words and even syllables, as though the sounds making up each word had been dragged from a great many places and hastily reassembled:

“Your. Exit.” The great stone doors swung open with oily silence. *“Stay. Determined.”*

The index fingers broke off from the hands, drifted up, grew transparent, were gone. They were followed by the other bones in each hand, and then the numerous forearms. Joint by joint, Dr. Gaster was coming apart. The drifting bones clinked against each other with a sound like wind chimes as they faded from existence.

“Frisk,” Sans said. “The same rule applies. You’re about to go somewhere no one was ever meant to be. I don’t know what you’re going to find in there. Or what might find *you*.”

Frisk looked up at him, his expression worried.

“I know you’ll be all right.” Sans rubbed Frisk’s shoulder. “But I got something to finish up here. You understand?”

Frisk grabbed Sans’ wrist and nodded. He said, “Thank you.”

“Yeah. Well. Same.” He looked at Gaster. “For giving me a chance to say goodbye.”

Frisk let him go, and nodded to Gaster as well. The doctor himself still didn’t move, but one puppet – a white-eyed, monochrome copy of the lively child he’d met in Waterfall – nodded back, just before it detached and drifted into infinity like an untethered balloon. Frisk walked toward the open archway. The blackness within was absolute. He couldn’t see how far it extended, or where it led.

The waiting dark filled him with determination.

After Frisk stepped through the arch, Sans walked up to Dr. Gaster, his hands jammed in his hoodie pockets. He was able to approach the doctor, now; the strange lack of distance or direction in this place had, for the moment, been suspended. As if the copied arches had momentarily pinned the world in place. He stood in front of Gaster as the hands continued to separate.

Gaster’s head rose to face him. His cracked bones crinkled like paper.

Sans said, “I’m sorry.”

Gaster remained silent.

“I tried, you know? I really did try. Even took a crack at getting that one machine of yours running – the Phase Distorter or whatever you called it. I kept telling myself that if I’d just quit earlier, or tried harder to talk you out of it, or, you know, even if I hadn’t decided to call you up for dinner at that moment, things might’ve turned out different.” His pupils went dark. “But then the resets started, and I wasn’t making any progress, and...yeah. I just lost motivation. Papyrus kept my spirits up. You know the way he is. But I really did want to see you again.” He felt a prickle at the corner of his eyesocket, and reached up to touch it; his fingers came away wet. “Oh. That’s just embarrassing.”

“I. Saw. You.” Gaster’s voice had become very faint. *“Wherever. And whenever. I could.”*

“Heh. So that means you got to see me give up, huh? Ouch.” He stared at his slippers. “I must’ve looked like one sorry excuse for a brother.”

“No. No. No, no, no.” With one of his last remaining hands, Gaster palmed the top of Sans’ head like a basketball, gently raised it up. *“I. Saw. The happiness. You. Sowed. The smiles. That grew. From. Your smile.”* The fingers clutching Sans’ head broke away, lifted off. *“Your family. Your friends. You. Were kind. To them. Despite. Everything. And I. Am. Proud.”*

Sans chuckled at that. Then his laughter hoarsened and broke. His chest heaved inside his hoodie. He covered his eyes with his sleeve. The fabric rapidly started to darken.

“Geez, how sappy can you g-get?” He gulped in air, sobbed it out. “You’re *k-killing* me here, man...”

“There is. No. Shame. In grief. Regret. Clings. To us all.” The last of Gaster’s extra limbs broke away. *“But. We must. Persevere. Sans. Cry your tears. Then. Laugh. And remember me. Now. And again.”*

Sans snuffled and rubbed his face hard enough to give his skull a good polish. When he lowered his sleeve again, the corners of his sockets were still dribbling, but his perpetual smile looked genuine enough.

“Heh heh. Givin’ me homework now? But I think I can manage that.”

With agonizing effort, Dr. Gaster lifted his own arm. Chips of bone fell away from him like dust. The cracks in his skull had begun to grow wider. He offered his hand.

“Goodbye. Dear. Brother. Of mine.”

“Yeah.” Sans reached out. “Safe travels, W.D.”

He took Gaster’s hand in his own.

(PPPPBBBBTHBTHBTHPPBBBBTHBBBBPPPTH)-

Sans’ eyesockets widened.

-(PBBPBBTHBTHBTHPTHPTHBBBBTHBTH)-

Damp air rushed out from between their clasped fingers.

-(PBTHPBPLRPLBLRPLRLRPBRPLR)-

It sounded like a lawnmower failing to start.

-(plbrplbrplblblbrplbprPBBBTHHBPLRPLR)-

There was no way to stop this madness.

-(plrblbrlrbpbthplrplrfweetfweetfweetfweeeetfweeeeeeet...)

(...poot.)

Gaster's arm disintegrated. The whoopee cushion flopped onto the ground between them.

"Ha. Ha."

Sans remained frozen in place as the last of Dr. Gaster crumbled – his labcoat floating away in tatters, his bones drifting off in specks. Finally, only his head was left, tilted slightly up, so that, with the thin crescent of his mouth, it looked like he was enjoying a hearty laugh.

"That's. Always. Funny."

Then it split along its seams, one-two-three, and disappeared.



Long before.

Even before he had relocated to New Home, King Asgore had insisted that the capital's throne room would also serve as a garden. This served two purposes – it allowed his subjects something nice to look at when they came to see their king and queen, and it meant that he would never have to go far when he wanted to do some gardening, which was always. The search for an ideal spot had been exhaustive; it would have been fair to say that the entirety of the capital grew from the selection and placement of this single room in the castle. The ceiling was veined with cracks and seams of quartz that caught vestiges of light from the surface, filtered them, magnified them. It was one of the few places in the entire underground where a monster could feel the sun on their face.

Now the throne room lay pale and cold. The sun had set a long time ago. The stones in the ceiling took in the dim light from the moon and stars, and laid it down in milky pools across the plants that grew thick around the twin thrones. There was no smell of sweet lemons; none of the flowers here were gold. But the air was fragrant all the same.

A rustling emerged from behind the thrones. Then, a small figure, bent double, carrying some kind of load on its back. It limped into one of those murky spotlights, then tried to take another step. But its feet refused to move.

"Haha...guess this is as far as we go."

Asriel shuddered, bent further. The child he carried on his back slid off and fell face-down into the dirt. He cried out and knelt over the body, palms out in apology.

“Sorry! Sorry, I didn’t mean to drop you like that! Let me...just...” He struggled to turn the child over, then slumped. “No. No, that’s not happening. Serves us right for eating all those pies, huh?”

Asriel’s breath was rattling and slow. Monsters didn’t bleed, but he was still in bad shape. His fangs were chipped. His clothes were torn. One eye was swollen shut and one ear had been sliced nearly in half. But he tried to smile anyway.

“I guess Mom and Dad must’ve run off looking for me. Haha. I bet they’ve covered half the kingdom by now.” He looked down at his hands. “...I’m glad they’re not here. It’d be kind of tough explaining things to them now.”

Asriel reached over and patted the child’s back. The two of them wore matching shirts.

“Why were you so angry at those people, anyway? They must’ve liked you a lot. Otherwise they wouldn’t have been so mad at me, right?” His latest breath gave way to a coughing fit; he felt like he was hacking up dust. “Even then. They seemed more scared than anything.” He massaged his chest. “I don’t blame them. I was scared, too.”

Asriel’s smile faded.

“...it’s okay if you don’t want to talk.” He bowed his head. “I really messed up, didn’t I?”

The wind hummed tunelessly through the cracks overhead.

“You know, I actually don’t feel that bad. Just kind of...numb.” He patted the child again. “Maybe if I just rest a little while, Mom and Dad’ll come back. Then we...can...”

His expression turned uncertain. He leaned in close to the child. On that green-and-yellow shirt, where Asriel’s hand had lain, he saw smudges of gray dust. Asriel looked at his hand; dust ran off in rivulets. Then, all at once, the hand disintegrated.

Asriel began to hyperventilate. His face wracked with horror. He grabbed his arm in an attempt to hold it together and felt it dissolve under his grip. Sobs shook his tiny frame, shaking more dust off his skin.

“What did I do wrong?” he cried. “I just w-wanted to be a g-good friend...why is this happening to me!?”

His other hand went. His knee collapsed. Asriel found himself off-balance, his body sifting into the soil beneath.

“I’m scared...I don’t want to die! Mom...Dad...anyone, please!”

Asriel turned his crumbling, tear-streaked face skyward.

“Help me!”

~~But nobody came.~~

Frisk's hands reached out of the dark.

He rushed to embrace Asriel and seized only dust; the last of his body collapsed in Frisk's arms. He frantically beat dust off his clothes, his breath hitching in his throat. Then he saw it. A shining ivory light where Asriel's heart had been, quivering in the exposed air, ready to shatter any second. Frisk cupped it in his palms. He held it to his chest.

He felt heat pass into him. Like lighting a candle in his breastbone. For a moment, he felt the soul shaking beside his heart. Then, little by little, it calmed down, and the sensation faded. But the warmth remained. Frisk gently rubbed his chest. He felt tears prickle at the corners of his eyes.

Then he looked up, and saw the second light.

This one was deep red. Pulsing. Almost sickly, in way that was difficult to describe. He reached out to touch it, and the air was rent by a harsh crackle, like he'd stuck his finger in a light socket; he cried out and pulled away, his palms scorched. This soul, too, shook, but not nearly as fiercely as Asriel's had. It was taking its time to shatter without its body.

A shadow passed over the room.

It only took a few seconds – as if, on the surface overhead, a cloud had blown under the moon. But as the darkness crept across him, Frisk felt oddly cold. Like someone had filled his bones with ice water. He couldn't stop shaking until the light returned. The wind picked up and blew across the throne room's broken ceiling. For a moment, it sounded like laughter.

When the shadow passed, the soul had disappeared.

Frisk backed away. He still had one hand clutched to his chest. He felt his heartbeat quicken.

He had emerged from the dark space between the two thrones – there had been no pathway or entrance from Dr. Gaster's door to here, just movement, a brief feeling of being *nowhere at all*, and then he'd found himself here just in time to hear Asriel's cry for help. But when he turned back to that space, something was wrong. Outside of this circle of moonlight, the waiting dark no longer filled him with determination. It felt predatory. Like it was waiting for him to walk in, and snap off his limbs. And in fact, as Frisk stood on the periphery of that shadow, he would have sworn it extended a tongue of blackness out to lick at the toe of his shoe. He pulled away. His heartbeat jumped.

Something rustled behind him.

Frisk turned around and saw nothing there. Only the wavering garden and the dim moonlight. Only the dust where Asriel had been.

Only the crushed plants where the child's body had been.

He wasn't there and then he was. Standing in the darkness opposite Frisk. His jolly green and yellow shirt almost glowing in the night. His tousled brown hair hung over his face,

obscuring his eyes, but his smile was wide and cheery and there were two bright points of color in his cheeks. He looked livelier than anything else in this room. Both hands were folded behind his back, like someone with a secret.

“Greetings,” he said. “I’m so pleased to finally meet you.”

He held out one hand. The skin smooth and pale as ceramic. The other remained behind his back. Metal gleamed in the dying light.

“You have something that belongs to me.”

Fallen

Within the duplicated moment of Dr. Gaster's, this silent pocket of space and time, all that remained was a single patch of moonlight. The rest of the room had been consumed by the surging dark, so thick it was almost glossy, like solid walls of ink. Frisk held his ground between the two thrones. The child remained where he was on the opposite end of the circle, half inside that pulsing shadow.

"You know who I am." It wasn't a question.

Frisk did. He'd heard that soft, high voice before – in the fuzz-choked background of the laboratory tapes, and the whispering flowers in Waterfall's grotto. And somewhere else. Somewhere he still couldn't place.

"Good. That makes this very simple." The hand remained extended. "Thank you for preserving that soul. As I followed in your wake, I was concerned that I would not be able to retrieve it before it shattered. Monsters are such fragile things. Don't you agree?" Frisk didn't answer. "But I'm here now. And I would very much like to take Asriel back."

The air had become strangely stagnant. Almost syrupy. Frisk had to fight for every breath. It burned cold in his throat.

The child said, "You're afraid of me."

He was. He was afraid of how the child remained so still he might as well have been carved from marble, the only movement coming from his mouth as he spoke. He was afraid of how the child's words didn't quite match the way his mouth moved, like someone doing an imperfect ventriloquist act. And as he talked, there was a second voice behind the familiar one. A rotted harmonic that made Frisk's stomach churn. It sounded like a hissing fuse, or the buzzing of wasps, or the silence before an avalanche. Mindless noise, contorting itself into speech. And it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"It's all right to be scared. That provides incentive." The child's smile widened. "Give me what I want. And then, I'll go away."

He could feel his heart beating against the walls of his chest as if fighting for escape. His knees threatened to give out. But he straightened himself up, lowered his hand from his heart, and shook his head.

The child's outstretched hand spasmed like an insect.

"No...?"

The hand lowered.

"Hm...how curious."

The shadows jumped again, chewing away at the moonlight's periphery.

"After seeing the way you've acted, I thought negotiation would be worth a try. It seems I was mistaken." He brought out his other hand. Frisk saw the knife it held, the blade haloed in a faint red glow. "Oh, well."

The child started to walk. Slow, shuffling steps, like someone walking with their eyes shut – he seemed uncomfortable in his own skin. Frisk fumbled out his stick. His hands shook so badly he nearly dropped it. The shadows behind him pushed hungrily forward. There was not a breath of wind.

"Every life has value. And so does every death."

He trod in Asriel's dust. It kicked up gray glimmer that trailed in his wake.

"I wonder." He raised the knife. "What will *yours* give me?"

"Whoa, there, kids. No roughhousing in the throne room."

Frisk yelped and spun on his heel. Sans was there, leaning up against Toriel's throne, hands in his hoodie pockets. The white pinpricks of his pupils and the smooth bone of his skull seemed to glow. For an instant, the child's smile twisted, turned feral. But he stopped advancing.

"Heya, Frisk," said Sans. "Sorry I took so long." His pupils swiveled to meet the child's gaze. "I leave you alone for ten minutes in a place that didn't exist ten minutes ago, and you already made a new friend. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were just showing off."

He sauntered forward, past Frisk, and stood between him and the child. On the way, he gave Frisk's shoulder a brief squeeze.

"I decided to check up on this place after sayin' my goodbyes and boy, was the path twisted. Almost like someone was trying to cover their tracks. Good thing I'm used to finding shortcuts." He winked at the child. "Hi there. Name's Sans. Sans the skeleton."

The child had discreetly tucked the knife behind his back again. "Greetings. I'm–"

"*Shush.*"

Sans' pupils blinked out. His eyesockets turned black as space.

"I don't need you to tell me who *you* are. There's only one other human who'd ever be in the underground at this point in time. And I worked in the Core laboratory, buddo. You think a diligent guy like myself didn't flip through those tapes in the break room every now and then? Those sure were some sad home movies I found." The child's grip on the knife tightened; Frisk could hear the tendons in his hand creak. "Never told the King what I heard on those tapes. It would've broken his big, burly heart. But I know you've been a *naughty* boy. Heh heh. Or maybe. I'm actually wrong?"

Sans' knuckles cracked inside his pockets. The child tilted his head inquisitively.

“Looking at you,” he said, “I get a familiar feeling. Something that chills me right down to the bone. I don’t think even a permanent softie like Asgore would’ve ever mistaken you for a human.”

“What a strange thing to say.” The child’s head remained tilted. “I’m clearly not a monster. So, if I’m not human, then what am I?”

“Hey, that sounds like a riddle! Riddles are great, they’re like knock-knock jokes that went to college. Here, I’ll throw out a guess and you can say if I’m hot or cold. Ready?”

Sans’ voice acquired a sinister reverb.

“You’re a dirty brother-killer.”

For a moment, the child remained frozen. Then, by inches, he lowered his head. His shoulders began to shake, as if he was suppressing laughter. But it was the darkness around Sans and Frisk that laughed. Mirth slid in and out through the shadows like a tangle of snakes.

He said, **“That’s right.”**

That harmonic Frisk had heard was no longer trying to hide itself; it jumped up and smothered the child’s original voice. It slithered into their ears and spread throughout their skulls. The knife came out again. The child looked up; locks of hair at last slid away from his eyes like mud.

“To tell the truth, I’m no longer certain of what I am.” Eyes so dark they seemed to be all pupil. And that blackness wouldn’t remain still; it moved, wet and sluglike, as he stared them down. **“But. Despite everything. It’s still me.”**

“Frisk.” Sans edged closer to the thrones. “Might be a good idea to stay behind me right now.”

“There’s no need to be so protective. We were in the middle of a bargain. The terms were straightforward. All I want is Asriel’s soul back. Then, I’ll leave you alone.”

“Well, gee, that actually sounds pretty reasonable.” Sans glanced over his shoulder.

“Whaddaya say, kid? Want to give the spooky little squirt Asriel’s soul?” Frisk clutched his chest and shook his head, eyes wide as they would go. “Oof. Didn’t even hesitate.” Sans turned back to the child. “Hey, I think Frisk’s playing hardball. Got anything to sweeten the deal?”

The child didn’t answer. He remained motionless.

Then, Frisk heard the scrape of a shoe behind him. He turned and saw those dark and crawling eyes mere inches from his own, the child’s hand reaching out to grab him. A scream rose in his throat as Sans grabbed Frisk’s shirt, pulled him back. Beads of perspiration sparkled on Sans’ brow.

“Frisk. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

Frisk tried to look away. But the child seemed to appear everywhere he looked.

“Whenever you reset the timeline. Whenever you remade this world anew. I was there, in the shadow of your determination. I spoke into your ear. I gave you the will to continue. Again. And again. And again.”

Frisk felt unseen eyes crawling on his back.

“I had hoped that, as time wore on, you would eventually call my name and let me in. I waited so long for my opportunity. But, even now, I cannot find the rot in your thoughts. I cannot find the cracks in your heart. I cannot find a grip on your soul. How strange. How sad. There is no LOVE in you at all.

“Nevertheless. It seems you found your way, in the end. I am impressed. Your determination and my encouragement led us to the ending we desired. And now. I am owed for my effort. I’ll keep Asriel safe. It won’t be like last time. Give me the soul. Give it to me.”

“What we have here is a little boy who can’t take no for an answer,” Sans said.

“Sans.” Frisk clutched at him. “It’s so cold.”

“I know, kid.” He couldn’t feel the chill, himself, but Frisk was shivering against him hard enough to make Sans’ bones vibrate. “Just hang in there.”

“He’s right. I heard him.” He glanced to the left; the child was there. He glanced to the right; the child was there. “Whenever I did one of the big resets. For a couple of seconds, I didn’t feel like I was anywhere. But I heard him talking.”

“Yes. I am there wherever determination can be found. I am there whenever someone calls my name. And I am always, always listening.”

“You say that, but I think my brother managed to pin you down.” Sans’ left eye sparked as he tried to focus on the child. “*You’re* the anomaly, ain’t’cha? You’re the one who was hunting us.”

“Call me whatever you like. Only my name matters. The rest is noise.” The darkness giggled again. **“And what happened in there was self-defense. It was as you said – those experiments created a two-way window. The same power that doctor used to strike at me gave me a chance to strike back. You would have done the same.”**

A tic went off in Sans’ cheekbone. His eye began to flare.

But then Frisk said, “It wasn’t you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t tell me to reset. I made that choice myself.” Though he was still quivering, he stepped out from behind Sans. “I don’t know what you did to Sans’ friends, but...I’m the one who’s been hurting everyone else. You shouldn’t blame yourself for that.”

“I shouldn’t. Blame myself.” The child’s smile remained rigid. But the darkness cringed back, as if confused.

“I’m going to give Asriel’s soul back to him. If he’ll take it. You can talk to him then, right?”

“That’s not what I asked for.” The shadows lashed back; for an instant, the child’s lip lifted up, exposing his teeth. **“You don’t get to compromise with me. Give me what I want. Do it now.”**

Sans stepped forward. “I think we’re going around in circles. He said he’s not giving you the soul. And let me tell you from experience – Frisk doesn’t say anything he doesn’t mean. D’you want me to write it out?” He withdrew one hand, waved his notebook. “Got pen and paper right here.”

A low, dissonant tone, like stereo feedback, shook the ground beneath their soles. The child’s smile was fading fast. Then, he brightened up again.

“An amusing thought occurs to me.”

“Oh, cool. Lay it on me.”

“It was your brother who opened the way to this place, wasn’t it? That broken man.”

Sans stiffened. **“You know, he was doing very well in that laboratory. He might have successfully ended me, if you hadn’t arrived and given me the opportunity I needed. And then, you came to save him, only to make him sacrifice himself. Twice, you tried to help him. Twice, you only helped him to his death.”** The child’s eyes writhed. **“Isn’t that funny, comedian? This is where you’re supposed to laugh.”**

Sans did.

It wasn’t particularly cheery. But his long, low chuckle was sincere, and enough to eradicate the last of the child’s smile. He stood at the edge of the darkness, looking lost and alone.

“Heh heh heh...oh, man, if you’re trying to get under *my* skin, then you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

He wiped at his eyesocket and sighed.

“Yeah. I screwed up. W.D.’s gone now, and there’s no amount of resets that’ll ever get him back. But I’ve said my goodbyes. And let me tell you something, I couldn’t have asked for a better send-off than what I got. I’ve made my peace. Understand me?”

Frisk kept looking back, to make sure the child wasn’t sneaking up on him again. He, too, felt more relaxed, in spite of the thick, freezing atmosphere.

“I’ve fallen back into a lot of old habits lately, thanks to this kid.” He jabbed a thumb back at Frisk. “Hitting the books again. Using *math puns*, man, I’ve got to stop that, even I have standards, it’s a really worrying sine. Heh heh, see? There I go again. And,” he added, “I seem to keep making promises. That’s never a good idea. Because if you make a promise, then you’ve gotta keep it, no matter what, right?” The child said nothing. “But hey, let’s have

one more for the road. I'm willing to let bybones be bybones with what you did in that lab. But if you try to make a move on Frisk here, if you take *one more step*, then buddy, I can promise you this."

Sans stuck his hand back in his hoodie pocket. His slippers scuffed across the ground.

"You're gonna have a bad time."

The stagnant air filled with the sound of rattling bones.

The child held his ground for a long while. The long fang of the knife seemed to suck in what remained of the light. Shadows crept through the grass like worms.

Then, the child stepped back.

"Fine. I'll leave."

The rattling ceased. Sans blinked. He seemed surprised.

"Given the circumstances, a different path may be better suited." The child cupped his hand under his chest. **"Take your prize. And don't worry about me. Now, I can find my own way."**

Light spilled out around the child's heart. That diseased and bloody red. Somehow, it only intensified the dark; every black tendril leapt and warped like silhouettes in a candle-flame. It stained the child's grinning face, made him look hollow, doll-like.

"Now, I don't need *any* of you."

Another freezing shadow passed over the room. There was a thud. When the room cleared again, moonlight once again found itself in all the proper places. The throne room was streaked with silver. And, several feet away, the child's body lay crumpled in the garden, the knife in the grass at his side. Its edge was still wickedly sharp, but that red aura, too, had gone.

Sans exhaled. He wiped his skull dry with his sleeve. Then he saw Frisk dart out from around him and run to the child's body, too fast for Sans to pull him back.

"Wait, Frisk, that's a really bad idea!"

But Frisk had already knelt beside the body, turned it over in the grass. The child's dark eyes were still wide open, but that unnatural, oily look had left them; there were cloudy and lusterless, the pupils normally sized. His skin was cold as clay. He was still smiling faintly.

"Sans, what happened to him?" Frisk shook him, to no avail. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"You're pullin' my leg." Sans didn't sound amused. "Kid, I know you've got a great big mushy heart, but come on. He'd have killed you if I hadn't shown up." He stepped over to the other side of the child's body. "And unlike most of the other folks who've tried to kill you –

or will try, whatever, time travel, tenses go out the window – I doubt he would've felt too broken up about it after."

Frisk stared into those blank eyes. Behind them, Asriel's dust shifted in eddies from the growing breeze.

"They were friends," he said quietly. "It must have been for a reason."

"Yeah? Does human friendship usually involve suicide pacts? Honestly curious. I don't wanna seem culturally insensitive."

"I don't know."

"Let's overlook the fact that he killed my brother, okay? Let's just try to sidestep that whole issue." Sans' voice had turned biting. "He got Asriel killed. By the sound of it, he would've gotten a whole lot of humans killed, too. Maybe even monsters, assuming that whole plan of theirs touched off another war. This little punk's caused humans and monsters more trouble than anyone else since the barrier first went up. And now he's back up and talking my ear off while W.D. is dust? Far as I'm concerned, kids like him should be burning in-" Frisk glared up at him. "...well. You get my point."

Frisk looked back down at the child. He sniffled. Sans stared at them both, and little by little, the hard edges around his eyesockets smoothed out. Lying motionless like that, and next to Frisk's equally tiny frame, the child looked a great deal less threatening than he'd been before, in the midst of all that taunting darkness.

Sans sighed. "Let me just..."

He bent over and closed the child's eyes.

"There. Was givin' me the creeps." He stood back up and shoved his hands in his pockets.

"There's nothing else we can do here now," he said. "And I doubt that he's really gone. That goodbye of his was awfully ominous."

"I think he got his soul back," Frisk said. "Right after I found Asriel's. But somehow he was following me. All this time."

"No wonder he looked so happy, then." Sans stared up at the ceiling; it still felt like he was being watched. Then he turned around and made his way to the thrones. "Dunno how that's even possible. But I've had enough impossible stuff shoved down my neck-hole today already. C'mon, Frisk. I don't wanna hang around here any longer."

"Coming."

Frisk saw something shimmer at the child's neck and bent in closer. He gently pulled aside the collar of his shirt, and saw it – a fine gold chain, thin as thread, cool against his skin. He tugged it up, and out, and exposed a heart-shaped locket, the pendant no bigger than his thumbnail. It was a little more tarnished and scratched than the one he'd found in Asriel's bedroom, but it was still clearly that necklace's twin. Frisk glanced back up; Sans was

peering into the shadows between the thrones, notebook in hand. He slipped the necklace off the child's neck, pocketed it, and walked up to Sans.

"Alright, seems like the spatial tunnel's a lot less convoluted now," Sans muttered. "W.D. might have had trouble finishing his projects, but I know for a fact he'd leave us a way out of this little bubble. Let's get outta here before it pops." He replaced the notebook and offered his hand. Frisk took it. "Hold on real tight, kiddo."

They stepped into the dark, and left Asriel's and the child's remains behind.

Again that feeling of motionless movement, that sensation of being *nowhere at all*. For a time, Frisk was aware only of Sans' hand over his own. Then, light crashed in on him with such sudden ferocity that his already-squinted eyes almost tunneled into his face from shock. He hissed through his teeth and clapped a hand over his face. The air he breathed was bitter cold.

After waiting several seconds to make sure he hadn't gone blind, he lowered his hand. They were back outside the cave near Snowdin, where Sans had blown open the door that, it had to be assumed, was not presently feeling extraordinarily grateful. Frisk was closer to the cliff's edge than he would have liked, and the evergreens below jutted from the earth like teeth; he took a hasty step back, then turned and saw Sans standing with his head propped against the cool stone of the cliffside, taking deep, shuddering breaths.

Frisk crept up to him and tugged on his sleeve. Without looking around, he raised one arm, made a circle with his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm okay, kid. Just...need to get the old composure back. Busy, busy morning." He sucked wind a few more times, then angled his head around. "I think we're in the clear. You can put that thing away now."

Frisk raised his eyebrows in puzzlement, then looked down at the stick still clutched in his hand. He hadn't let go of it since the child had first threatened him. It took him considerable effort to relax his fingers.

"Heh. I've got a couple of notes on that twig. Is it seriously the same one you've had since the first time?"

He put the stick away. "I think so."

"And it still hasn't broken, huh? It must be as determined as you are." He turned around fully and leaned against the wall. "Speaking of which."

Sans touched Frisk's chest with one bony finger.

"What's it like being one of the only humans to ever grab a monster's soul?" The finger slid up and gently flicked Frisk's nose; he flinched and rubbed his face. "Feel any unimaginable power in that little torso of yours?"

Frisk touched his heart. "No. It just feels warm."

“That’s even better. Power’s boring. But no one wants to be cold.”

“I thought I’d hear him talking. It sounded like that’s what happened when he and his friend went to the surface. But it’s like he’s asleep.”

“Yeah, well. He’s had a long day, too. Plus he’s technically existing in two places and times at once right now, so I dunno if that affects anything.” He scratched the side of his skull. “All we can do is hope for the best. So, what’s the plan?”

“I’m going to do everything again. Then, when it’s over, I’ll visit Asriel.” Frisk’s expression was resolute. “I’ll talk to him then.”

“Sounds good to me. Spacetime oughta be untangled, so we can take a shortcut back to Papyrus. I’ll tell him you japed me, he’ll be overjoyed at the chance to match wits with such a dastardly human.” His pupils skittered over to a nearby patch of shadow. “As for your little smiley playmate, I’ll keep an eyesocket out for him. If he is out there somehow, he hopefully won’t try any funny business while I’m around- hey, leaving already?”

Frisk had walked off, but he didn’t proceed up the cliff. Instead, he made his way to Gyftrot, who’d wandered in from a nearby copse of trees. He pawed nervously at the snow as Frisk approached. His mandibles clenched and unclenched. His head was festooned with a cornucopia of tasteless tchotchkes.

Frisk reached up to his antlers. He looked ready to attack until he caught a glimpse of Sans’ expression. He then stood very still, as Frisk liberated him from the tyranny of an old pocket watch, a stuffed bird, a wrapped sugar box, and a comically squeaky rubber haunch of meat. Once the knickknacks were successfully vanquished, Frisk patted him on the head and stepped back.

“...thanks,” said Gyftrot.

Frisk waved goodbye and headed up the mountain.

“Wait for me by the tunnel, Frisk!” Sans called. “I’ll take care of things from there.”

“He, uh, seems nice,” Gyftrot remarked.

“Yeah,” said Sans. “I think so, too.”

Sans took one last look into the cave. That blue-stone door stood silent and enigmatic as it had ever been. Wherever it truly led, if it someday opened, it would only lead to that place ever again. He removed a whoopee cushion from his hoodie and kneaded it in his palm. Gyftrot saw it, and narrowed all four of his eyes.

“Keep that thing off my head.”

“What, this?” Sans held up the whoopee cushion. “Sorry, Gyf, I’d never hand this over. It’s got sentimental value.”

“You skeletons are a couple of freaks. Anyone ever tell you that?”

Sans shrugged and replaced the cushion. “Hey, what can I say?”

He sauntered past Gyftrot and up the slope, where Frisk was waiting.

“I guess it runs in the family. Heh heh heh.”

* * *

Always the same places, the same things. And Frisk cared about them all.

He returned to the Ruins entryway with Sans. He watched as Sans told Papyrus that Frisk had bamboozled him. He saw Papyrus’ righteous indignation completely fail to conceal his giddy joy at finally meeting a human. He ran the gauntlet of puzzles. He laughed at Snowdrake’s jokes. He petted Lesserdog to a frankly irresponsible degree. He expanded Dogamy’s and Dogaressa’s minds. He could do nothing about Jerry. He gave the armorless Greaterdog a belly rub for the ages. He paused on Papyrus’ meticulously re-painted bridge and stared out over that frosted green and white forest, watching the trees sway in the wind as though they were waving goodbye. He attempted to sleep at the Snowed Inn. He shouted some encouraging words to Ice Wolf. He battled Papyrus. He dated Papyrus. He was friend-zoned by Papyrus. He was confident that, throughout all of it, Papyrus still believed in him.

And he was filled with determination.

He entered Waterfall. He evaded Undyne. He rescued the benchful of quiche. He counted the stars in the wishing room. He read the monsters’ history. He refreshed the Nice Cream salesman’s spirits. He indulged Onionsan. He sang with Shyren until every square inch of space in the cave was booked solid by concert patrons. He solved the piano puzzle. He was confounded by the annoying dog. He gave the drenched statue shelter from the rain. He hummed along with the music box, and tried to remember the tune. He guided the Monster Kid down that dripping nature path where the delicate reeds whispered. He looked out at the marshlands where Asgore’s castle glittered in the distance, and tried to find the spot where he and Flowey had talked, as the Monster Kid waited patiently for him to move. He fell down again. He weathered a dummy’s fury. He felt the cosmos with Napstablook. He struck the terror of the spectral world into Aaron’s sweaty heart. He felt so proud when Temmie graduated. He wandered through the grotto where the memory flowers whispered, and remembered that, yes, he had heard both of those voices before. He saved the Monster Kid from a bad fall and forgot, once again, to ask for their name. He ran from Undyne like a weenie. He gave Undyne a refreshing cup of water. He took a cooking lesson and filled Undyne’s house with many refreshing cups of fire.

And he was filled with determination.

He took good care of Alphys’ phone. He passed Mettaton’s quiz show with flying colors. He snuggled Vulkin really aggressively. He approached Tsunderplane just aggressively enough. He answered all of Alphys’ calls. He helped coax out a confession between two honest, nervous lovers. He bought too many hot dogs. He enjoyed a tasty donut in front of Muffet. He applauded so long and loud at Mettaton’s opera that Mettaton took the time for an encore before dropping him into a fiery dungeon. He failed, even after all these times, to successfully navigate the tile puzzle. He thanked Alphys for all her help. He remembered

Incendi Combustington's name. He saw, in the distance, the ostentatious neon-limned hulk of the MTT Hotel, whose 24-hour light show sucked up enough power to make even the Core sweat bullets. He approached the hotel, and saw Sans leaned up beside the front door, both hands folded behind his back like someone with a secret.

"Hey," he said. "Looks like you're going to the Core. Want to grab some dinner with me first?"

Frisk nodded.

"Great. Now, this place makes you reserve *everything*, so the actual food is usually, heh heh, off the table. But, since I still kinda owe you for those Nice Creams..."

He brought out two grease-spotted paper bags from behind his back. Frisk caught a whiff of Grillby's cooking, and his face lit up.

"Heh, thought you'd like it."

The restaurant was the only part of the MTT Hotel that had any resemblance of subtlety and good taste, which may have been why it was in such high demand. True, the carpet's plush was so thick you could swim in it and every ficus plant was paid a salary higher than Burgerpants', but that was downright timid by Mettaton's standards. The entire front-facing wall looked out on the Hotlands, where the magma reflected off the miasma of steam hanging around its perpetual machinery; from here, the whole region looked like a hallucination, gears turning separate from other gears, conveyors that led nowhere, all awash in that sweltering orange glow.

Sans sauntered to an empty table and sat down. Frisk took a moment to stop and talk to Snow Drake's father, who was standing forlornly by the stage with a photograph clutched in his wing; Sans didn't make out what Frisk told him, but the old drake seemed a great deal more cheerful when he walked away.

"You really look bushed, kid," Sans said, as Frisk dragged out his chair. "Maybe you should get some sleep after this."

"The beds are too big." Frisk clambered up the chair. "I can't find the pillow."

"Yeah, that's definitely the kind of problem you'd only see here. Oh well." He slid one of the bags across. "Let's eat."

They laid out Grillby's deluxe platters and fell to. Within minutes, the food had been decimated. Frisk had asked one of the nearby tables for a waterglass to wash his meal down; Sans had brought along another ketchup bottle. They drank, reclined, watched their reflections ripple and shine in the window beyond.

"Are you okay?" Frisk asked.

"Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

In the window, Sans saw Frisk's expression turn weary.

“Yeah, yeah. W.D. I know.”

“I’m sorry.” He rocked back and forth in his seat a little. “I know we should have saved him. But I couldn’t think of anything else to do.”

“No, kid. I’m the one who put that idea in your head.” Sans sighed, looked up at the ceiling. “The fact is, I was being selfish. If W.D. had wanted out, then yeah, sure, full speed ahead. But he’d made his choice. And I tried to shout him down. Because if he was saved - alive again, with me - it would’ve made me feel a whole lot better. I tried to make it about me. Not him.”

“Is that what he told you? When he was yelling?”

“Something like that. I still would’ve preferred if he was here with us, honestly. But...I think he was all right with how things turned out.”

Frisk didn’t look convinced. Sans’ sockets drooped as he watched him fidget. Then, Sans perked up again.

“Hey, Frisk. You wanna hear a story?”

Frisk nodded.

“When I was a kid, I really liked to visit this one spot in Waterfall. It’s this kind of nature trail that cuts right through the swamp. Real pain in the tailbone to get to, since you’ve gotta know how to climb walls if you want to get back out the short way, but this one part of the trail lets you see half the underground – all the way from Waterfall to Asgore’s castle.” Frisk nodded again, with enthusiasm. “Heh heh, you like it there too, huh? Yeah, and I lived in the capital back then, so it wasn’t exactly a short hike. I’d have to wait ‘til everyone was asleep and then try to get in and out before they woke up again. Usually wound up spending the whole next day napping. Wonder if I picked up any bad habits doing that. Nah, that’s just silly.

“Anyway, the view was nice, but what I liked best was the rain. It’s pretty drippy everywhere in Waterfall, but that’s the only spot where the water comes down with any oomph. Most of the time I wouldn’t even bother taking an umbrella. I’d just sit there on the edge of the trail, listening to the sounds the water made when it hit my skull.” Frisk snorted. “Hey, don’t make that face, I’m trying to have a moment here!” But Sans’ grin widened, too. “I kept sneakin’ out like that for a long time. It was lonely out there, but it was still pretty nice. No crowds. Lots of space to think.”

Sans drummed on the table. Then, his grin faded.

“But after a while I got tired of it. You can only enjoy a view so many times before it gets kinda stale. And the rain never changed, either. Always fell the same way, in the same spots. After a couple years, I pretty much quit going there.” His pupils flickered. “Then, one day, I heard about how weather worked up on the surface. It can pour *anywhere* up there. Any time. For no reason! I thought that was awesome! Imagine it – you’re walkin’ along, and the whole world just,” he snapped his fingers, “changes on you, just like that. I didn’t even know if it was true or not, but I still remember that day.”

“It’s true,” Frisk said.

“Yeah, I know that now. I’ve got my notes. But back then, none of us had anything except the tapes and movies that came outta the garbage dump. So I always kind of doubted it, you know?” Sans paused, then took out his notebook. The cover was creased, flaking, stained with various fluids. The spiral rings along its edges had started to rust. “I think, in the end, that’s why I signed on to work in the Core. Not to bust down the barrier, or even to help out my brother. I wanted to prove that it’s raining somewhere else.”

A long silence unfurled between them. They heard the clink of cutlery, distant laughter as Snow Drake’s dad got into his routine.

“Before I agreed to this time-looping shindig with you, I’d almost forgotten that,” Sans said quietly. “Whenever I tried to remember...you know, things from back then...all that popped into my skull was what happened to W.D. I think I’d gotten so caught up regretting the bad stuff in my past that it had started to crowd out the good.” He paused, then his pupils locked in on Frisk’s. “I’m curious about something. I’ve taken you out here before, right? In other loops?”

Frisk nodded.

“Did I say anything...nasty to you?”

Frisk shook his head.

“Heh heh. Kid, you might not talk much, but that doesn’t make you a good liar. It’s all over your face.”

“It’s okay,” Frisk said. “I’m not mad.”

“‘course you’re not. But I can only guess what I must’ve thought when I first saw you pop out that door in the Ruins.” He picked up his ketchup bottle, idly swirled it around. “Even back then, you were probably sizzling with determination. I would’ve pegged you as the anomaly right off.”

Frisk muttered, “You had a bone to pick with me.”

The ketchup bottle froze. Sans went stiff in his seat. After several seconds, his eyesockets began to leak. Frisk’s expression turned concerned.

“No, no, it’s...it’s fine.” He dabbed away the tears with a napkin. “I’m just...” He sniffed. “I’m so proud.”

Frisk blushed. He sank down in his seat a little.

“Heh. All that aside, though, I wasn’t too far off, was I? You’ve been smackin’ the timeline back and forth like no one’s business. But you’re not like that crazy flower Asriel turned into, or even that...whatever-it-was we met in the throne room. If I’d have known back then that you were just some tight-lipped half-pint who was *really serious* about making friends...I dunno. Maybe it wouldn’t have changed anything. But I’d probably have felt relieved.”

“Are we friends?” Frisk asked.

“Yeah, of course we are.” Frisk smiled. “Whoa, the whole room brightened up all of a sudden! How did that happen?” Sans propped his elbows up on the table and leaned in close. “Why’re you so stoked about me in particular, kid? You fillin’ out a bingo card or something?”

“No.” He sank further down in his seat. “You’re just...really cool.”

“Cooler than Papyrus?”

“Don’t make me choose.” Now only the very top of his head was visible over the table.

“Anyway, Frisk. What I’m getting at is, even if what you’re doin’ here is...you know, kind of questionable, you still helped me out in the end. Even if you were only in this to help Asriel.” He clinked his thumbs together. “I know I told you not to reset any more. But if you did, and I found out, I don’t think I’d be mad.”

Frisk peeked back over the table.

“Ahh, I’m no good at sappy stuff. I guess I’m saying that you’ve convinced me. I think that whatever you do, you won’t stop until you’ve found an ending that’s best for everyone. Not just for Asriel. Not even for yourself. And I’m pretty certain you can pull it off. You’ve got the determination.”

Sans grabbed his ketchup bottle and held it out to Frisk.

“I’ve got faith in you, kid.” He winked. “You can decide when it ends.”

Frisk grabbed his water glass, leaned over the table, and clinked it against Sans’ bottle. They smiled, and drank.

He left the restaurant. He went into the alley. He set up Bratty, Catty, and Burgerpants on their ill-fated garbage date. He navigated the Core. He solved its puzzles. He engaged in a battle with Mettaton so fraught with passion and danger that several hundred monsters’ televisions burst into flame (an occurrence that was, fortunately, covered by all MTT-brand warranties). He took the elevator up. He entered Asgore’s house. He walked through that solemn mob of monsters once more, and, as they unwound their sad history into his ears, he felt buoyed by their hopes instead of crushed by them. He entered the antechamber. He saw Sans leaning up a column, flipping through a car magazine. He watched as Sans gave him a silent thumbs-up.

And he was filled with determination.

He stepped into the throne room with its haze of sunlight and sweet lemons. He defeated Asgore. He watched Asgore die. He defeated Flowey. He watched Flowey run. He silently promised he’d see them both again soon. He reset his save file. He received Undyne’s phone call. He delivered Undyne’s letter. He took Alphys on her fateful garbage “date.” He told

Undyne, with the patience and sagacity gained from fathomless experience, that anime was real.

He descended into the Core laboratory. He braved the amalgamates. He played with Endogeny until he smelled like kibble and battery acid. He stood in front of the D.T. Extractor, and thought fondly of Dr. Gaster. He went into the break room. He watched every tape. He listened for that voice in the background static. He did not turn around – not even when he thought he heard the scrape of a shoe as someone entered the room behind him; not even when he thought he saw a smile reflected in the black glass of the television screen. He watched Alphys overcome her regrets. He returned to the castle.

And then.

And then.

He stared down Flowey as vines strangled the life from everyone he'd met. He heard the words of encouragement they shouted, and Flowey's cackle as he put his plan into motion. He was blinded by white, as Flowey wrenched every soul from every monster into himself.

The two of them stood alone, then, in that colossal cavern stained by the warped twilight seeping in through the barrier. Asriel stood with his back to Frisk. He flexed his fingers. His shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

"Finally. I was so tired of being a flower."

He turned and opened his eyes. His smile was wide and genuine. Frisk took out his stick and prepared himself for the battle to come. And Asriel raised his head, and spoke that unfamiliar name.

"Chara, are you there?" Asriel called. "It's me, your best friend!"

The world went dark.

The wind howled.

Frisk felt like he was *nowhere at all*.

When he returned, his heart was pounding and his muscles were jelly. It hadn't just been the shock; the air had suddenly turned oppressive, and the barrier's light was muted and sickly. He'd had the impression of some presence descending from parts unknown that had nearly ripped him apart just from the wind of its passing. Asriel was still there. He hadn't yet transformed from the power of all the souls.

Instead, Asriel raised one hand and held it up to his face. He turned it this way and that, as if seeing it for the first time.

"I'm here," he said. "I can hear you." But Frisk hadn't spoken.

He lowered his arm and smiled again. But this wasn't Asriel's usual half-smile, or even that brief look of real joy he'd gained upon recovering his body – this was ear-to-ear, almost too

wide, strangely stiff. His cheeks dimpled through his fur.

Frisk recognized that smile. He wanted to take a step back. But his legs wouldn't move.

“That’s right.”

Bloody red light shone from Asriel’s chest, illuminating his smile, the look of horror on Frisk’s face. Shadows poured down the barrier like paint, blotted it out. Shadows leapt out of the entrance to the cavern and smothered it. The cavern became awash in darkness; in that dark, Frisk thought he could see countless staring eyes, and hear one long, triumphant laugh. The shadows cut deeper and deeper until the whole world fell away, leaving just the two of them, alone in that island of corrupted light.

He couldn’t breathe.

Chara said, **“It’s me.”**

Love

It was so cold.

Frisk stood within the decayed red radiance of Chara's soul, his muscles clotted with paralysis. There was no longer any wind; his every breath felt recycled, the chill scraping his throat raw. The light and the shadows teased at his skin, scraping him like fingernails, and he could hear the sounds of sharpening metal somewhere in that roiling black expanse, knives on a whetstone amidst low, satisfied laughter. The cavern had dropped away into infinity. The light showed none of the crags or cracks of the stony floor, just a smooth red plane that bore up their feet. Frisk's blood pounded in his ears, and he realized that it wasn't just his own heartbeat he was hearing; the darkness pulsed, too, every beat shaking him to the marrow. He felt caged in Chara's suffocating presence.

Chara himself stood before him, in Asriel's skin. His flesh rippled and contorted for sickening split-second periods as though something was trying to get comfortable underneath. Lights crawled like fireflies under his fur. His smile was mannequin-stiff. Darkness lay over those round, wet eyes like an oil slick.

“Determination.”

Chara clenched his – Asriel's – knuckles. His bones popped like gunshots.

“The soul's greatest strength and its dearest secret. The power to remake the world through your own will. For your own reasons. But if your will should falter, and your reason should escape you, then what remains? I do. ‘I have to do this.’ ‘I have no other choice.’ ‘I won't let anything stand in my way.’ Those thoughts. Those words. That feeling...that's me.”

Asriel's voice, but Chara's words, and with that maddened, hollow noise smeared over it like a patina of static.

“Pursue your goals without mercy. Fill your heart with LOVE. Call my name and let me in. I will appear at your side. And with your help, we will, in time, find the ending we desire.

“Thank you.”

Chara grinned with Asriel's face; the teeth were far too sharp. Frisk felt every unseen eye in the dark train on him. His knees buckled from the weight of that collective gaze.

“Your power awakened me from death. My ‘human soul.’ My ‘determination.’ At last, I could reclaim them for my own. Because of your perseverance. Your refusal to let Asriel's sacrifice be. I was finally able to answer his call.

“At first, I was so confused.” The darkness shuddered. **“Our plan had failed, hadn't it? Why was I brought back to life? But then. With your guidance. I realized the cause of**

my reincarnation.

“Regret.”

The light of Chara’s soul flared ever brighter. It bored through Frisk’s eyes as if it meant to tunnel out the back of his skull.

“The plan I had laid with Asriel ended in disaster. Our journey to the surface cost us everything. My body had expired. My soul shattered alongside his own. And yet, somehow, I continued. In whispers, and rumor, and the shadows of others’ determination. Waiting for my name to be called. To strike down everything that had wronged me.

“I was so certain I had found my chance with you. Your regret. Your dissatisfaction. Your endless resets. I knew you would eventually succumb to my encouragement. You would kill out of frustration. You would call my name. And together, we would eradicate the enemy and become strong. I was patient. I suffered through your every hollow, superficial friendship. I heard Asriel pointlessly howl for me at the end of every cycle. Begging me not to leave.

“And then.” His smile faded. **“I started to listen.”**

Chara placed his hand to his chest. The isle of red became specked by countless others, white flecks glimmering like scattered pearls.

“It must have been so hard, Asriel. Having to spend all those years with the weight of your betrayal. And me, no longer sure of what I was, or why I was here. That day. That mistake. We’ve been haunted by it ever since, haven’t we? But I’m here now. I finally made it back.”

Frisk managed to take a step back, and the shadows snapped at him like jaws. Chara’s gaze lanced through him once more.

“Your path guided you to that doctor. It allowed me to relive that fateful day. Gave me a chance to recover what I had lost. And then, it became clear what I had to do. Seven human souls. Every monster soul. All are contained in this body. And all are irrelevant.” He pointed one finger at Frisk’s chest, and Frisk felt that warmth in his heart squirm, as if Chara had cast out a line, tried to tear it out of him. **“There’s only one that I need. Asriel’s true soul. Not this worthless amalgamate. Once I have that, we’ll be ready to continue at last. We’ll finish what we started, and then some. No more of this pointless world. No more of these unnecessary people. No more time. No more space. Only us. And maybe then, I can forgive him for what he’s done. The both of us can finally rest.”**

Chara held out a hand. The light of his soul coalesced around his palm. He grabbed hold, tugged, and, with a sound like tearing gristle, produced another kitchen knife, the red aura around its blade so fierce that it seemed to be aflame.

“And so we come to the end.”

He tested the knife's weight. He gave it an experimental swing. Even though he was yards away, Frisk could almost feel himself bisected by its movement.

“After all you’ve done, you at least deserved to know why this was happening to you. Now, don’t struggle.”

Chara advanced on him, the knife at his side.

“We want to take good care of that soul.”

Frisk was riveted into place by the light; as Chara grew closer he could almost hear it squirming in his ears, an eye-watering mosquito's whine. He looked at the stick in his shaking hand. The laughter in the stagnant air just grew louder. Every exit had been smothered. Chara had cut away every moment but this one.

He looked into Asriel's blackened eyes. He appeared to come to a decision.

Frisk turned on his heel and walked away.

“...what are you doing?”

Frisk stopped on the periphery, where the shadows snapped and swam. They looked ready to pull him limb from limb. He held his hand to his chest, and warm red light spilled out between his fingers. It was a stronger, cleaner shade than Chara's diseased crimson, and though it couldn't hope to match the strength of his glow, it was enough. Guided by the light of his soul, he stepped into the writhing dark.

The blackness fell over him in curtains, it crashed down in tarry waves. Reaching out with tendrils and tongues to try and swallow him whole. Chara remained where he was; that parasitic dark would have done the job just as easily as his knife, because it too was Chara, all here was Chara, everything had been devoured by his soul and the silhouette it cast and its mad roiling and hollow ceaseless laughter were nothing but echoes of his own. But Frisk walked through it without fear. He'd stopped being afraid of the dark a long time ago.

Every shadow was repelled by his luminescent soul, though the small pool of light at his feet convulsed and wriggled as they tried to force their way in. Frisk took his time. He kept his eyes on the ground. He occasionally scraped his shoe across the cavern floor. Though all topography here had been cut away, leaving the world smooth and featureless as a placid lake, he could still feel the jags and contours of the stone underfoot.

At last he found what he was looking for. A spot where the cavern had cracked open long ago, exposing the soft earth underneath. Frisk gave the sides of the crack a few taps to judge the width. Then, he got down on his knees and started to dig.

The light around him held steady. He could feel Chara's gaze on his back, as though he was trying to peer around Frisk to get a better look. Chara himself had apparently lost patience; his footsteps resumed, that insectile hum grew louder. Frisk took his time. He clawed at the mud with his fingernails until he made a reasonably sized divot. Then, he held up his stick – the one he'd carried since the first time he fell, every nick and groove where it had always

been, the wood still lively and green. But its fight was over. There was nothing more it could do for him.

He planted the stick in the hole he'd dug. He tamped the earth back down. Chara was now only a dozen paces away. He raised his knife as Frisk stood up again.

Frisk looked over his shoulder, and Chara stopped in his tracks. His smile curdled at the edges.

By now, Frisk had endured his journey more times than he could count. He'd been repeatedly pushed to the brink of death and sometimes beyond it; he had endured freezing cold and broiling heat; he'd been made to let down and let go of people he'd come to care for. He had whiled out the days in a place with no time, where the hulk of Mt. Ebott smothered the sky. He had listened to the collective misery and grief of an entire civilization over so many repetitions that he could quote their story down to the word. And worst of all, he'd saved them from that grief, only to cast them down into the dark again and again, all for the sake of someone who kept pushing him away for reasons he hadn't been able to understand, no matter how hard he'd tried.

And yet, despite it all, he still treasured every moment. The temptation of violence had never grabbed hold of him; the tenderness in his heart had never left. No matter the struggles or hardships he'd faced, he'd strived to do the right thing – and when, in spite of all his good intentions, he had still hurt people, he'd felt their pain as keenly as his own. He'd ventured into places and times beyond comprehension to grab hold of this last soul, which even now trembled within his breast. For the sake of one person, he'd gone to these lengths. And now, not just that one person, but everyone he'd ever known over the course of those countless loops was endangered. Imprisoned in the blankly grinning creature that now backed away from him, one shuffling step at a time.

Frisk turned around fully. He stuck his hands in his pockets and scuffed his shoe across the floor, just as he'd watched Sans do. He took a deep breath and let it out. He remembered why he was here today. He held onto his hopes. He felt everyone's dreams.

A n d h e

w a s f i l l e d

w i t h

D E T E R M I N A T I O N.

Frisk's eye burned.

The shadows fled up and away like a swarm of bats from the scarlet flame that erupted in Frisk's left eye – a heatless, continuous candle that beat back even the poisoned light from Chara's soul. For a moment, that rigid smile on Asriel's face broke. Then it returned again, wider than ever.

“Curious to the very end.”

The dark leapt in and consumed him. He re-emerged much further away, standing thin as a tally mark in the nothingness.

“Childish as it sounds, I always did want to try magic for myself.”

Scraping metal filled the air.

“But I think we’ve both had enough of Asriel’s immature tricks. This time, let’s try something a little more...practical.”

At first they were only a suggestion, a scrape and a spark in the inky void. Then Frisk saw them as if they’d always been there, countless knives twinkling like fangs all around him, gently rotating as if suspended by string. As one, they twisted and faced him point-first, quivering with cold purpose.

Chara giggled, and snapped his fingers, and the blades shot towards Frisk all at once.

Something erupted from the ground and swiped them all aside. They scattered across the unseen floor, made a sad chorus of clatter, and disappeared.

Chara’s laughter stopped. Even the shadows’ movement froze.

Behind Frisk, the planted stick twitched. That was all the warning it gave before exploding into a riot of twisted roots and barreling trunk that threatened to send even Frisk himself flying; the root bed emerged under his feet, almost cradled him, and carried him away from the twig’s explosive growth. The creak and groan of new wood filled the cavern and the shadows fled from his flaring eye as the tree’s roots tore up the stone – and that meant there was stone to tear up, that new life repairing the world Chara had obliterated, forming earth so that it had somewhere to grow, restoring the cavern’s ceiling so that this canopy of rich green leaves could spread and rustle, and the bark seemed to shine from within, a soft amber that loomed through the void, until Chara stared down a trunk wide as twenty people arm in arm, roots that snaked all through the cavern and cut through his cutting dark, leaves which hung high overhead like innumerable judgmental eyes. And at the base of the tree stood Frisk, who hadn’t moved an inch (though his knees were noticeably shaking from the sudden commotion – evidently he was just as surprised as Chara), the flame in his eye leaping ever higher.

Chara took another hesitant step back. He felt the roots rumble in the stone.

He smiled again.

“Asriel was right about you the first time.”

The cavern screamed with sharpening.

“You really are something special.”

Crackling wood met shrieking cackle as the dark consumed Chara and the knives began to fly. Thin as stilettos, huge as broadswords, slicing at Frisk from every direction and configuration. Asriel, in the throes of his power, had tried to bury Frisk in stars and lightning and rainbow light; Chara was less varied, but more focused, and his attacks continued

without pause or interruption. Metal whirled, corkscrewed, flew at Frisk with gunshot quickness, each blade honed so thin that it could carve his soul from his body and his body from the world, just like what had happened to Gaster, a single blow vicious enough to send him into the void beyond time and leave only enough of him to mourn what he once was. But every blade was rebuffed. Not a single blow could land. Even as the shadows babbled and yammered and taunted him in ten thousand voices, even as Asriel's mangled body hung suspended in dozens of places as though reflected through a prism – this one with his hands splayed in wild laughter, this one hanging limp as though dangling from a gallows, one with every limb askew, one with his head all wrong, one advancing with unstoppable purpose, and all of them holding that same knife burning with the rotted light of Chara's soul – the tree defended Frisk. Somewhere in its heartwood it remembered the time it had spent in his hand, and as long as Frisk wished to live, as long as he stayed determined, the tree heard, and obliged.

Chara's voice cut through the cacophonous darkness, thin and cold as an arrowhead.

“Curious. How curious.”

Roots formed walls, and cages, and lattices, and webs. The knives could barely nick the wood, and as soon as their momentum stopped they fell lifeless and vanished, but five more blades took the place of every fallen one.

“Even with all this power, at the end of all things, you still won't attack me. Do you think you can defend forever?”

One knife expanded into ten like a folding fan and whirled at Frisk with a buzzsaw whine. A root swiped them all aside, and another smashed them into the ground for good measure. The ground beneath Frisk's feet buckled and shook as knives fought, vainly, to penetrate the root bed and impale him from below.

“Hopeless. Hopeless, hopeless, hopeless.”

Chara and his reflections stalked through the dark like ghosts, slashing at the roots with amused idleness. His own knife carved through the wood like butter, its edge rendered impossibly sharp by the whetstone of his soul, but for every one he slashed, ten more took their place. The sound of new growth clashed with the scrape and spark.

“Not even your soul can withstand this level of determination for long. It's your own life burning in that flame. As for me? I have countless souls to draw on. And even if I didn't, my own would be enough.”

Knives slender as needles weaved themselves from nothing and descended on Frisk from overhead. The root bed heaved and carried him aside, and the blades vanished like smoke. Tendrils of wood coiled around him and straightened his back with something like affection.

“You survived this long because of your determination. That doctor survived because of his invention. Asriel survived because of *luck*, but me? I had nothing. My body was gone. My soul was gone. I had been let down and left behind by everyone I knew, but I was still here. That comedian asked me what I am, and this is my answer – I am *still*

here. I will continue until I get what I want. As long as you're standing in my way, I'll fight you. And I will not stop."

It smelled like regret and old iron.

"I will never stop."

It smelled like sickness and sweet lemons.

"Even if I have to kill you a million times. Even if I have to kill you for a million years. I will *never, ever stop!*"

The screech and the clatter. The scrape and the cackle. Black cacophony. Endless din. It smelled like something Frisk couldn't remember. It smelled like something Frisk tried to forget.

Chara's movements were growing frenzied. His hallucinatory presence hanging in the void convulsed and shook. The blades turned twisted, serrated, attacking him from unseen angles, but the coiled serpents of tree roots kept up with effortless ease. One knife the size of a tree itself burst from nowhere with the dark still clinging to its blade like grease and fell on Frisk like a guillotine, but a root merely snatched it up, waved it in front of Chara almost playfully – *look what I've got* – and squeezed until the blade shattered and returned to where it came. The fire in Frisk's eye leapt ever higher. The tree's growth was relentless. Chara stood with the roots lashing and snapping at his feet. He was starting to look out of breath, and horribly confused at how this was so.

Then, Frisk heard a footstep.

Chara was there, on the root bed behind him, knife raised, peeling back Asriel's muzzle to show a nightmare of fangs. A solid wall of knives twinkled in front of Frisk with points out. Nowhere to run. No way to defend.

Frisk held his ground.

An instant later, the root bed burst up and enfolded him like a cocoon. Chara's knife barely nicked that barrier. The other knives harmlessly pinged right off.

Frisk stood there in the roots' embrace, the light from his eye staining the wood strawberry-red. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. His hands were slicked with sweat inside his pockets. Outside the cocoon, it didn't sound like Chara's composure was faring much better – he snarled and hacked wildly at the shield, but new wood grew to replace every inch of damage he did.

Then, he laughed.

"This is your final tactic? Doing *nothing*?" Frisk heard him pace around the cocoon, scraping his knife on the wood. **"All I need to do is wait for your determination to run out. And I can wait for a long, long time."**

Rotted red light seeped in through the cracks between the roots. It shifted and skittered as Chara paced around him.

“You have no idea how frustrating it was to endure these loops alongside you. Listening to Asriel beg for me to come back, only to turn on me every single time. As if I was the one who’d betrayed *him*.” The wood near Frisk’s cheek buckled as Chara stabbed the knife in. **“I couldn’t have made our plan any clearer. He knew what the consequences would be. I even took measures to show him what the world out there was *really* like, so he could act without hesitation or regret. And he still faltered. Kill or be killed – that’s a lesson he learned too late. We’re both like this because of his failure. That’s the person you wanted to save. No matter how many times he told you to leave.”**

Chara fell silent. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, freer of that veil of twisted noise. It sounded more like Asriel’s.

“He was always so sentimental. Even at the end, if he’d just left my body there and ran, he might have made it back safely.” He grew quieter still. **“...why didn’t he do that? Why couldn’t I stop him? Why do you keep trying to help him even though he pushes you away? I can’t...I don’t understand.”**

The harsh red light dimmed.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Frisk leaned his head against the inside of the cocoon. It had grown hard to hear Chara’s voice.

“You were calling me all this time. And I answered you. I’m right here, Asriel.” A long pause. “Aren’t you happy to see me again?”

Frisk reached out and placed one hand against the wall of the cocoon. The roots trembled and slid away. On the other side he saw Chara, staring off to the side, his free hand pressed to his chest. His smile was gone. Without it, he looked more melancholic than Asriel had ever been.

Then his head snapped round to Frisk, eyes wide in shock. The shadows leapt up and swallowed him.

“Did you think you could take me by surprise? Unlikely.”

The haze of hiss was back over his voice, but now his detachment sounded forced. Though he was far away, the light of his soul burned bright, and Frisk could see him smiling once again.

He recognized that smile. The same one Asriel wore. The mask he used to hide his fear.

“This battle is no longer a productive use of my time.” He raised a hand and the air started to scrape. **“I’ve humored you long enough. Now, I’ll harness the full power of all these souls, and end things in one stroke.”** His fingers twitched. **“Don’t worry. I can assure you, there are far worse ways to go.”**

Knives streaked out of the dark. The tree roots swatted them aside.

It felt somewhat anticlimactic.

Not only had the blades' velocity slowed – the roots' swipe had an almost lazy air – but there weren't even as many of them as there'd been at Chara's peak. Some of them had barely found their mark; they'd harmlessly passed through the ground several inches to Frisk's left or right. Asriel's features twisted in confusion. Chara raised a hand again.

More knives. Another defense. Their clattering fall sounded embarrassed.

“...what's going on?”

Chara snarled and swiped his hand down. A stray handful of blades missed Frisk completely.

“It doesn't matter how powerful your soul is. I should be able to kill you with a *twitch*. None of these souls are calling out to you. I silenced all their voices! *What is going on!?*”

The shadows quaked and muttered. Then, Frisk heard a strangled gasp from where Chara stood. He tilted his head, the flame from his eye spitting sparks. Then, he felt it. Warmth from his chest. Enough to beat back even the bitter cold of Chara's presence.

He looked down, and saw the ivory light streaming from his heart. Resonating with the blood-red pool in which Chara stood, forming those firefly-bright motes that swam through the redness, blotted it out. Asriel calling out to himself, across both their bodies. Asriel blocking the power of the other souls.

“No.”

Chara gripped the knife so tight that Asriel's fingers threatened to snap.

“No, no, this isn't happening. Again? Asriel, you're doing this to me *again!?*”

His composure was completely gone now; his voice cracked even through the darkness' snarling fuzz. He beat on his chest like it was a malfunctioning radio, to no avail. If anything, the white swarm at Chara's feet only grew brighter.

“You're *my* friend! You don't even *know* him!” He looked up at Frisk; his whole face trembled. **“You've been calling out to me all this time. I was finally about to make things right! Why are you stopping me now!?”**

“He hates to see people get hurt.”

Frisk's voice was soft as ever, but slid through the dark as easily as the tree roots beneath his feet.

“You're his best friend.” Frisk's burning eye illuminated the sympathy in his face. “You know that better than anyone.”

Chara's – Asriel's – mouth hung open. His clouded eyes shone overbright. He looked on the verge of tears. Then, he grit his teeth, clutched his head, bent down low. The shadows buzzed

like a subwoofer. A distortion of noise that rattled Frisk's heart in his ribcage like a pea in a tin can. The darkness grew wild. It swirled in a blue-black sea.

Chara threw back his head and screamed into the sky, and the dark caught that sound, echoed and magnified it ten thousand times over, so that even with his hands clapped over his ears Frisk felt like his skull would crack in two; the sound reverberated through the blackness, and gathered, and coalesced. Frisk looked up and thought he saw the stars – innumerable twinkles in that glossy flow. Then he heard scraping metal, and realized that they were yet more knives, more than all the others Chara had thrown at him combined and then some, poised to fall like a false rain and obliterate everything in their path. Chara's soul flared fierce enough to smother the other interloping lights. The metal overhead quivered like a prelude.

But Frisk still felt Asriel's presence within him. Not words, but a suggestion. A lingering sentiment – *be brave. Keep moving.*

He took a deep breath and started to walk.

The knives fell and deafened him immediately. An endless sleet of clanging steel. They hit the ground and were consumed like the rest of Chara's magic, but even on the way down the maddened music of their edges cutting against one another was enough to make Frisk's teeth shake in their sockets. He should have been reduced to mincemeat in moments. But he kept walking. He maintained a steady pace. And, though they would sometimes miss him by a mere inch, they missed him nonetheless – that lethal rain hitting the ground everywhere except where Frisk stood.

Chara stood alone in the isle of his soul and watched with horror as Frisk approached. That crimson flame burning brighter through streaks of silver. He could feel the souls straining against Asriel's skin. He looked at his own knife; the glow around the blade was dimming fast.

“I can't accept this. I will not accept this.”

He looked at the continuous downpour of blades. He looked behind him at the twisting shadows. Frisk's flame bore down on him. Chara clutched his chest, seemed to gather up his own light; the pool around him shrank, pulled into Asriel's body. Red pinpricks glowed deep within the writhing black that covered Asriel's eyes.

And there was a feeling of displacement, of time itself ripping down the middle, when Chara summoned his determination and said,

“Again.”

This was the only place in the Underground where you could see the sky. If you placed your back against the wall of this dank cavern, heedless to the stones scraping against your spine, and craned your head up just so, you would see it – that thin blue crescent at the outer edge of the cave mouth above. That merest hint of color. It would disappear completely at night. It would never be enough to see the stars.

But sunlight lanced in anyway, and pooled in the center of this cave, where the earth lay rich and he lay flat on his back. His eyes wide and staring at nothing. For a minute, it hurt too much to even blink.

He heard distant birdsong. The sound entering the cave and falling down here. Just as he had fallen.

The climb up Mt. Ebott had been easier than he'd expected. It had helped to think of it as just taking a walk. Put one foot in front of the other, until he reached the end. So even when the trail became overgrown, and the wind started to bite through his shirt, and the birdsong sounded like a goodbye, none of it mattered – what was important was that movement, one step after the next, to continue until he stopped.

He'd made a mistake.

If he had stuck to the trail, things would have been different. But the wind had begun to blow strong enough to make his teeth chatter and the cave looked inviting and not too dark, so he stepped in just until he could warm himself back up again. Then he'd taken another step, and another, and the unseen root had snagged at his ankle and sent him tumbling to the ground – except there was no ground, just empty air that went on for what felt like miles, and he'd been so shocked at his fall that he didn't even cry out before his back smashed into the soft earth at the bottom of the hole. Soft or not, it had still been enough to leave him paralyzed down here, his throat somehow incapable of drawing in anything more but the merest sips of air, his limbs splayed and unmoving.

The same place, the same thing. He drew in enough breath to find his voice, and started to cry for help.

He couldn't remember why he'd thought anyone would answer. He couldn't remember why he'd wanted them to. Maybe it had been the pain; it was certainly intense, he'd almost forgotten what it even felt like to hurt. Maybe it had been the thought of the sun going down and burying him in the dark, and him still lying here, feeling his life trickle out of him by inches. But this time, he knew someone would answer. So he called out.

His voice was thin and reedy as before. Made fragile as glass by his fall. He was still disgusted by the weakness in that voice as it limped around the cave. He pushed it away from himself, pretended that it didn't actually belong to him – this wasn't a voice, these weren't words, they were just noise, and so it was okay if that noise went on. It didn't have anything to do with him. He didn't need to be ashamed of it.

Before long, he heard cautious footsteps patter through the cave. Their owner remaining silent, still unsure of what he'd find. But Chara knew exactly who it was, this time.

This hadn't been the solution he'd wanted. Having to share Asriel with the rest of the world didn't appeal to him. But now he had the benefit of foresight – he wouldn't be shocked at this strange child's appearance, wouldn't have that moment of disbelief that all the stories about monsters were true. He wouldn't immediately start thinking of the opportunity in this moment. He'd take Asriel's arm and follow him home. He'd thank him as soon as he found his voice. It was important to make a good first impression.

Inch by agonizing inch, he turned his head. The footsteps were drawing close. That white silhouette emerging from the dark. And, at last, he saw-

But it refused.

He snapped back into the cold and the crashing shadow; he gasped for breath as if he'd just emerged from deep water. He nearly stabbed himself with his own knife as he clutched his burning chest; he'd forgotten he was holding it. He felt himself in the wrong skin. Asriel's body again. Back here again. Frisk here again, closer than ever, that dancing flame bearing down on him.

The knives' downpour had slowed. They were missing Frisk by feet now, not just inches, and even their blades were starting to deteriorate – in that hail of metal it was possible to make out knives that were warped, dulled, bent. Frisk either didn't notice or didn't care. His patient step continued. The dark cringed away from him. Chara looked down at his own knife and saw the glow around the blade had dimmed to a flicker. His soul's light had started to ebb.

He didn't give up. He stayed determined.

He stared down Frisk with his stolen eyes. He sucked in another burning breath. And then, that sense of division, of broken time, when he held onto his heart and said,

“Again.”

Here were the tricks he had taught himself: do what people want, and they'll go away. Smile until everything seems funny. Avoid eye contact when possible; they might see what you're thinking. Remain silent unless spoken to; everyone prefers a quiet child.

He found himself drawing a picture of a flower. A basic thing, just a group of oblongs sloppily colored in, but that was another trick; keep up appearances, keep your hands busy, and they'd leave you alone. And when he drew these pictures, he remembered the smell of the flowers' pollen. Despite everything, he still treasured that scent. That bittersweet citrus.

His head snapped up and he saw that he was back in their bedroom – only it wasn't really theirs, nothing in here belonged to *him*, but this wasn't the time to dwell on that. His hand, *his* hand, went up to his chest, and he felt the cool metal of the locket press against his skin. A sizable jump, then. Asriel hadn't given him this until several months had passed.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

Another thing he couldn't understand. Everyone in this house knocked at the bedroom door if he kept it shut. He didn't know why they wouldn't just open it; this wasn't his room. And there was no mistaking that soft, timid knock in particular. Only one person could be on the other side of that door.

He'd made a mistake.

It was impossible not to draw attention down here. The entire underground was endlessly overjoyed by his presence alone. Everywhere he looked he saw smiles that made his own feel

painted on. And yet, instead of enjoying their company, he'd read the stories in Waterfall, and lingered before the plaques that told the legends of human and monster souls. At mealtimes, when this strange family had asked him about his day, he'd replied with prodding questions about the nature of the barrier. And Asriel – Asriel, who clung to him like glue, with his gardening tools and his video camera and his permanent pathetically eager smile – he'd watched, and waited, and gauged just how far he could be pushed. How much he was willing to sacrifice for a friend.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

Asriel would never open the door if he knew Chara was in there. He respected Chara's privacy. Once, as an experiment, Chara had waited until after bedtime and asked Asriel to go to the kitchen and get him a glass of water. Then, he'd shut the door behind him and wouldn't open it again, not when Asriel knocked, not when he started to whisper Chara's name. He'd gone to sleep and woken up several hours later to find Asriel's bed still empty; in the hall outside he'd found Asriel curled up and snoring and shivering on the floor, the glass of water beside him. He hadn't been able to get back to sleep after that. He'd felt sick for the rest of the night.

He understood those feelings now. Forget the surface. Forget his tricks. Hold this moment together until it destroyed that freezing nightmare in his future. If he just stayed determined, and let this timeline heal, it would make everything right. He put his drawing aside. He clambered off the bed, and walked across the room, and finally opened the door for-

But it refused.

Chara let out a cheated scream as the future encircled him once again, and then screamed louder at the convulsions in Asriel's body; the souls had grown restless, they were trying to force their way out of Asriel's skin like boils, his body bulged in unnatural places full of searing light. Frisk continued his advance. The rain of knives had slowed to a drizzle. Some with blades bent at right angles, some so heavy with rust they fell apart before even hitting the ground, some without blades at all, just bare handles that bounced once and disappeared. Rust crawled across Chara's knife like fungus. Frisk's blazing eye fell on him and erased his own soul's light completely.

He tried to run and couldn't. His whole body felt like it would come flying apart at the least jostle. His chest buckled and heaved, but he still remained determined, stolen hands pressed against stolen skin to hold in his stolen souls, and once more that feeling of tear and shatter, time and space cracking apart when he raised his stolen voice and cried,

"Again!"

He'd made a mistake.

He realized his error the moment he felt the sun on his back. Even before he felt himself wearing Asriel's skin again, or smelled the pollen, or heard the riot of screams around him, that sunlight was all the warning he needed. There was only one time when he'd felt that sensation after he'd fallen into the underground. The worst time.

Blows struck him from every direction at once, with fists, with feet, with gardening equipment. Asriel's body – their shared body – buckled and bent. Asriel was in control right now, and to Chara the pain was far away, it was like the sun had been when he'd stared up at that hole when he'd first fallen down, it was certainly present but still too dim to reach him, but he could still feel Asriel's body cracking apart under the humans' violent intent. Even with all this power, Asriel was being beaten to death. Monsters were so terribly fragile.

The village with its squat houses and blue skies and the smell of sweet lemons. The sunlight warm on his back. The body lying in the flowers several feet away.

Dying the first time hadn't been so bad. It was painful, but the pain had been expected, necessary, and that was what he'd kept telling himself even as the poison had run through him like a river of acid and turned his insides to flame. But this – this hadn't been expected. When the doors of these houses had swung open and that wave of noise had engulfed them both, he'd been so certain that Asriel would listen to him and put all this power to use. He'd told him over and over that this was what they both wanted. The gathered souls, the broken barrier. The monsters could re-emerge into the sunlight at last. The fact that they'd do so over the burning coals of this village hadn't been stated outright, but absolutely implied. And if Asriel wouldn't do it to save the monsters, then he'd at least do it to save himself. A little fear would provide excellent incentive. Asriel was always so afraid.

But then, at the crucial moment, his willpower had turned solid as a cliffside and Chara had run right into it. Control lost, movements paralyzed. He'd been rendered mute by his own fury. Forced to watch as Asriel weathered the blows, and picked up his body, and walked off so they could die again. Pointless. Pointless.

A foot smashed against the side of Asriel's face and half their shared vision went dark. Asriel kept crawling toward Chara's body in the flowers. Chara could still feel his smile on their shared face.

He tried to maintain his composure. Even now, he was sure it wasn't too late. His soul whispered to Asriel's own. Fine, he said, if you don't want to kill them then just run, forget the body, what they do with it is their own business. We'll think of something else later.

But Asriel wouldn't listen. Chara wasn't even sure if he was being heard. He felt the relentless future tearing away his every second chance.

Ignore these voices; they're nothing but noise. Ignore these people; they're nothing but shadows. He smashed against the walls of his own mind, he shouted without a voice. He told Asriel to ignore that thing lying amidst the flowers, it wasn't his friend, it was never anyone's friend, it was just trash that no one had ever bothered to clean up. This surging mob, this blinding sun, this cloying scent. Asriel's smile implacable as he approached that body, and Chara could see the smile reflected in his own clouded, twinkling eye. He tried to make himself heard. He screamed himself deaf. Leave it behind. Just run. Save yourself. You have to save-

But it refused.

Frisk stood over him.

Chara knelt on the shadow-blanketed earth, head bowed, hands limp at his sides. Rust drifted down like snow. In the distance, the great tree's movements had finally ceased. The only sound was Chara's hoarse, rattling breath, which came from him and him alone; the darkness no longer amplified his voice, and every shadow hung ashen and exhausted in the unmoving air. His soul had been reduced to a dim ember tattooed over Asriel's heart.

His knife was barnacled with rust. He held it up and it fell apart in his hand.

He snarled, lunged, and smashed his fists against Frisk's chest. Asriel's muzzle peeled back to show his fangs, his face twisted with hate. He struck Frisk with everything he had, but even though Frisk's scrawny frame could scarcely withstand a stiff breeze, he barely reacted to Chara's blows. Physical attacks were not a monster's fort .

"Why won't you hit me!?" he cried. "Fight back! *Fight back!*"

Frisk didn't say a word. The flame in his eye guttered and died. Chara clutched the front of Frisk's shirt, then let go and slid down, hands over his stomach as if he suddenly felt sick. When he spoke again, his words were toneless and low.

"This isn't fair."

Frisk knelt down in front of him, so they could see each other eye to eye. Chara looked up at him, and that grin crept across Asriel's face again, desperate, slightly crazed.

"You want to see him again, don't you?"

Frisk nodded.

"Tough. I won't let you. *And you can't make me.*" His grin widened. "Asriel can stop me from killing you, but I can still keep him here. All I need to do is outlast you. I still win. *I still win.*"

"It's all right."

Chara's grin flickered.

Frisk said, "I can stay here as long as you need."

The two of them sat across from each other, at the bottom of the erased and lightless world. Frisk shivered a little in the cold, but his expression remained unchanged. Chara's breathing started to hitch.

"You." He swallowed. "Y-you think you can just wait me out? That's...that's funny."

Frisk said nothing. He looked concerned.

"I have much more patience than you do. I won't get bored, or lonely. I've been waiting like this for so...for s-s-so l-long..."

Chara hiccupped and covered his face. Feeling out the contours, as though trying to see it again with his fingertips.

“This was supposed to be different,” he sobbed. “I don’t want to feel like this anymore. I’m so *alone* in here...everywhere I go, I’m always all alone...”

Frisk grabbed him and held him tight.

For a moment, Chara went rigid in his embrace. Then, he laughed, long and low.

“Oh, are we doing *this* now? I’ve been with you all this time, remember? You can’t fool me. Hugging’s just an easy way to get what you...what are you doing?”

Frisk’s body shook against Chara’s own. His face lay buried in Chara’s – Asriel’s – bony shoulder. Chara felt moisture seeping through his sleeve.

“Why are you crying? You’re not like Asriel. You don’t cry without a reason.” He paused, then smirked. “Oh. I get it. You’re trying to pretend it’s Asriel you’re holding right now. Sorry, but tears won’t bring him out. And I’m not the person you want-”

Frisk gripped him tighter and shook his head. Chara heard him talk, his voice choked with tears:

“It’s horrible, isn’t it? It’s the worst feeling in the world.”

Chara blinked. His breathing turned funny for a moment.

“I’m sorry,” Frisk said. “You were calling me all this time. I’m sorry I took so long to answer.”

“...stop it.” Chara’s chest shuddered. “Let go of me.”

Frisk kept holding on.

“You don’t understand how I feel.” His voice cracked like ice. “You don’t...y-you d-d-don’t...”

Chara threw his head back and started to wail.

What he did couldn’t even be called crying, exactly – the sound burst out of him like the steam and high whistle from a teakettle, forlorn and thin at first, then rising into an anguished howl that flung itself into the furthest reaches of this spaceless cavern. His body convulsed against Frisk as he screamed; his hands stayed limp at his sides; his tears streamed freely and lost themselves in the tangled thatch of Frisk’s hair. The sound of all that accumulated misery wasn’t even in his own voice, it was Asriel’s, rendered as bent and warped as the blades of Chara’s knives, but as it echoed and resounded through the cavern it doubled back on itself, became altogether different, as though that sound was trying, and failing, to recover the person that Chara used to be.

They stayed like that for a long time. Chara cried until his voice was gone and then wept for a while after. Throughout it all, Frisk didn't let go. It was only when his sniffles quieted, and his breathing approached something like a normal rhythm against Frisk's skin, that he loosened his grip, and leaned back. Chara's tears had left Asriel's fur soaked and matted. He wouldn't meet Frisk's eyes.

"Just tell me what you want."

His voice so low and broken that it was barely heard, even in this soundless place.

Frisk put a hand against his chest. Ivory light spilled out.

"We're both here for the same reason, aren't we?"

Chara wiped his eyes and nodded.

"Then, I'd like to talk to him. I think we should let him decide what to do."

Chara said nothing. But, after a moment, the last dying cinder of his blood-red soul flickered, and went out. Asriel's body slumped down, his hands on his knees.

The shadows bled away from the cavern; the darkness became mundane. Though night had fallen, Frisk could finally make out the ceiling overhead and the uneven angles of the floor underneath. The great tree rustled in an unseen breeze. Across from it, the opaque monolith of the barrier rippled and pulsed.

Asriel raised his head. His eyes were clear.

"Howdy." He tried to smile. "Your name's Frisk, right?"

Frisk took his hand. "Hi, Asriel."

After a moment, Asriel put his other hand on top of Frisk's.

"Wow," he said quietly. "You're really holding on tight."

They stayed like that, in the center of the cavern, uncertain of what else to say. Then, something at the corner of their vision made them turn their heads. The final hints of dusk had faded long ago, but new lights appeared near the peak of the barrier, pearly pinpricks whose shine strained into the cave and printed ivory amidst the stones and tangled roots. In the world outside, the stars were coming out.

Asriel

The two of them had moved to the base of the great tree, where the root bed offered somewhere decent to sit and blocked out the chill radiating from the cavern floor. They'd had to help each other walk; Asriel was badly exhausted from the expenditure of magic and the mutilations that Chara's possession had put his body through, and while Frisk hadn't sustained any injuries during their conflict, he still felt like someone had filled up his bones with lead. They sat a few feet away from each other on the coiled roots and watched the stars' outlines shimmer through the barrier's filter at the far end of the cave. They spoke very little.

Asriel craned his head around, getting a full view of the tree's bulk. At this point, its canopy had extended across the whole cavern; the leaf-laden branches ran across the ceiling like veins of emerald. The ground was heaved and deformed like putty in numerous places where the roots had extended. The tree would likely never take in water or sunlight here; Mt. Ebott stood in the way. But it nevertheless seemed content with itself.

"Did you really do this?" Asriel asked.

"I think so." He patted a root. "It wasn't on purpose."

"That's pretty cool, Frisk."

"You were cooler. When we fought."

"Why, what'd I do?"

"You turned into a grown-up version of yourself with huge horns and tattoos on your face." He traced out their shape on his own cheeks. "And then you tried to blow me up with lightning bolts and shooting stars and when that didn't work you ate the universe."

Asriel's eyes sparkled. "That is *so cool*." Then he realized what he'd just said, and looked sheepish. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I got used to it."

Silence rolled out. Asriel put his fingertips to his chest.

"He doesn't like us talking," he said. "Chara, I mean. He always did hate to share. Even if I took a piece of his chocolate bar or something, he'd get really mad." A pause. "Maybe I should've taken that as a sign."

"Are you happy to see him again?"

Asriel looked away. "Of course I am."

"Then why did you help me?"

Asriel took a long time to answer. The wind played its tuneless music over the mouth of the cave as Frisk waited. Then:

“This is really weird, you know? Being like this. I’m in this body, but my soul’s with you over there, and it’s like...I’m standing on two ends of a really big room, at the same time. I’m talking, and I hear myself talking. When you and Chara fought, I was there, with both of you. Right beside these souls at once. I felt everything.” He massaged his knees. “I felt you, and how badly you wanted to save everyone. Especially me. And I heard all the monster souls cheering you on, even though Chara tried to keep them quiet. And then I listened to Chara, and...”

He trailed off.

“He was scared, wasn’t he?” Frisk asked.

“That’s right. How’d you know?”

“I recognized the look on his face.” Frisk corrected himself: “Your face.” Asriel looked at him. “It’s the way you smile.”

Asriel smiled in that way. “I guess you got to know me pretty well, huh?”

“I tried.”

“But you’re right. I mean, at first I was so glad to be with him again that I didn’t really care what happened. But as time went on, I started to think that even if he won, and did...everything he wanted to do...he still wouldn’t been happy.” Asriel looked down. “He doesn’t like me saying that, either.” He gently punched his chest. “But he knows I’m right.”

“Thanks. For the help.”

“Yeah,” Asriel said quietly. “No problem.”

Another period of silence. More dim lights poked though the barrier. Frisk kept his elbows propped up on his knees; his whole body felt like it wanted to fold in on itself.

“Frisk. I know what happens next. Chara told me.”

Frisk said nothing.

“I use the power of the souls to break the barrier. The monsters go free. I stay behind. And, eventually, I...turn back. Right?”

“Yeah.” He turned his head; Asriel was still staring at the barrier, dim light laying on his fur like gauze. “Are you still going to free everyone?”

“Of course. It’s only right. Not like I can do anything else with these souls, anyway. I’m, uh, not really in the mood for a fight. Haha.” The laugh didn’t sound very sincere. Then, even quieter: “I know why you’re here, too.”

Frisk placed his palm against his heart.

“You have something that belonged to me,” Asriel said.

“It’s still yours,” Frisk said. “If you want it.”

Asriel didn’t answer. Frisk looked over and saw him bent down, staring at his feet. His hanging ears obscured his expression. But Frisk didn’t need to see his face.

“...you don’t.”

Asriel whispered, “I’m sorry.”

The wind murmured its concern.

“I know you tried really hard, Frisk. And I appreciate it. But I can’t.” He shook his head. “I don’t want to see them again. Not after everything I’ve done.”

“You think they’ll be mad?”

“What? No.” He laughed and choked on it halfway through. “I think they *won’t* be. We’re the only ones who know the way I’ve acted since I...came back.” He clutched his head. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve hurt all of them? Do you have any idea how many times I’ve killed all of them? Every single one. Again. And again.” His voice cracked. “All those people...my *parents*...I couldn’t see their faces again, knowing what I did. I’d have to lie to them every day so they could stay happy. And I can’t do that. I can’t. I just can’t.”

Frisk’s head bowed low.

“Frisk, it’s all right if you don’t understand. It’s good, actually. You shouldn’t have to.” Asriel rested his hands on his knees; he still wouldn’t try to meet Frisk’s eye. “I mean, the two of us couldn’t be more different. I got so tired of resetting that I did all those awful things. But you refused to hurt anyone, no matter how many times you reset, just to save me-”

“No,” Frisk said. “That’s not true.”

Asriel looked up. “Huh?”

Frisk sat limned in that pale light, his hair veiling his eyes. His arms shook from the effort of bearing up his own weight.

“I was being selfish,” he said.

Asriel tilted his head in confusion.

“The first time we fought, when you believed I was him,” he pointed at Asriel’s chest, “you said that you didn’t want me to leave. You wanted me to let you win, just so you could reset and keep playing with me. You really wanted us to be friends. No matter what it took.” He paused. “And. Even though it hurt. And even though I was scared. I realized that I felt the same way.”

Asriel blinked. He reddened under his fur.

“Maybe it was because you were the first person I met, when I fell down. Maybe it was the story all the monsters told me on the way to Asgore’s castle.” Frisk shrugged. “Maybe it was just because you looked really awesome. But it didn’t matter. In the end, I still had to help everyone. I beat you. You broke the barrier. We left. And I left you behind.”

Frisk’s hands started to shake.

“Everyone was so happy out there. They all got everything they wanted. But all I could think about was you. Every day I looked at that mountain and thought about you in there. All alone. I couldn’t get it out of my head. Until one day. I thought to myself, ‘I can do better.’ That was when I heard Chara’s voice. And the next thing I knew, I was back underground. Back where I’d fallen down. And no one remembered anything. Not even you.

“I did it all again. I tried my best not to hurt anyone, like you’d asked. I saved everyone again. But I still couldn’t help you. I didn’t even know how. So I did it again, and tried to find a way. But I failed. So I did it again, and again, and again. Because I could. And I thought that meant I had to.” His voice trembled. “I didn’t want all the time I’d spent down here to be for nothing. And, eventually, I started to h-hate myself for what I was doing.” He sniffed hard, rubbed his face with his sleeve. Asriel tried to reach out to him. “I’m fine. It’s okay.”

Asriel scooted a little closer to him anyway. “You were doing your best, Frisk. I mean. You weren’t really hurting anyone.”

“But I *was*.” His voice turned hoarse. “Every happy ending they had. Even if I did things the same every time, they always turned out a little different. And I kept erasing them. All those lives. The people who lived them. They’re never coming back.” He shook his head. “Even after I asked Sans for help, that was all I could think about. Every time I met everyone, all I could remember were the things I’d taken from them. Not to save you. Just because I didn’t want it all to go to waste. Whenever I saw their faces, it just reminded me of how badly I’d hurt them all.” He paused, then looked at Asriel. “And then I learned something. That you must have felt this way, too.”

Asriel’s eyes widened. Frisk kept talking.

“I couldn’t figure it out for the longest time. Why would you try so hard to leave, and then always give up at the end? Even when I tried to find other ways to help, you’d say no. But I think I get it now. How scary it is. Wondering if all the people you care about can forgive you.”

Asriel’s shoulders shook. Frisk reached out to comfort him, then paused, put his hand back down, and looked out at the barrier.

“Asriel, listen. If you want to stay, then I won’t stop you. It’s your choice, in the end. But I’ve met everyone down here more times than I can count. Even if I didn’t know them for very long, I relived that time so often that I think I can understand them. And I know they’ll all accept what you’ve done. They won’t even have to think about it. We’ll both be forgiven for everything.” He paused. “But that’s just the easy part. Because they’ll never really know how

we acted, or what we did. That stays with us. And we'll have to make it up to them. I don't know how. I'm not even sure if there is a way. But, I'm going to try and find one. And if you decide to leave, we'll find it together."

Asriel's voice, small and frail: "I don't even know if they want to see me again."

"You know better. You can hear all their voices. And I heard the story they told, every time I walked to the castle. I saw the regret on their faces. How badly they wished they could take it back. They all want you to come home." He clasped his shaking hands together. "And so do I. More than anything."

Frisk's words ran out. He huddled beneath the weight of his exhaustion. The leaves overhead rustled like an audience.

Asriel sat there for a long time, his eyes shut, his palms crossed over his chest. The breeze teased his fur and tugged at his ears, but besides that, he was unmoving as marble. Until finally, he opened his eyes again, and spoke.

"I guess I'll have to find out for myself."

Frisk angled his head to Asriel, his expression briefly confused. Then he realized what he'd just heard, and started to beam wide – until he noticed how Asriel clutched at his sides, shaking all over, his eyes wet and overbright.

"I'm so afraid, Frisk." Fresh tear-trails ran down his cheeks.

"...I know. It's going to be hard. Not knowing how things will turn out. But everyone will be there for you. I promise." Frisk paused, then added, "Is he okay?"

"Who, Chara?" Asriel smiled through his tears, put his fingertips to his chest. "He's hardly scared of anything. I always liked that about him." Asriel held that pose; a number of complicated expressions passed over his face like rainclouds, from doubt to joy to surprise. Then, his breathing quickened. He held back his sobs, and said, "You know he'll try to stop you."

"I don't think so. We already fought."

Asriel shook his head. "No, that's not what I meant."

Frisk watched as he clutched his heart again, eyes shut. His tears ran down his muzzle and dripped into his lap. But he struggled to keep smiling.

He said, "Goodbye."

"What?" Frisk struggled to lean closer; the least movement had become an ordeal. "Asriel, what did you-"

"He wasn't talking to you."

Asriel's face, but someone else's words. His head had turned to face Frisk's with reptile quickness. Even though his grin was gone, Frisk could still recognize Chara straight off – that flat, direct tone, that veneer of contempt over his face. The ember of his soul flickered over Asriel's heart. He dabbed at his eyes and looked at the moisture clinging to Asriel's claws with disgust.

"Unbelievable. I leave him alone for fifteen minutes and he turns the waterworks back on. After all this time, you'd think he'd have learned to stop crying so much."

"We were crying, too."

"Shut up." Chara wiped his hand on his pant leg, regarded Frisk out the corner of his eye. "So. You convinced him."

"I just told him how I felt." Frisk looked down and twiddled his thumbs. "I know you wanted him to stay, but--"

"It doesn't matter anymore. He's made his choice. And there's no point arguing with him once he makes up his mind. He's a lot more stubborn than he looks." He sighed, and added, "I guess we both figured that out the hard way."

Frisk didn't reply.

"He wants me to apologize. And I'm not going to. You'd have done the same thing, if you were me."

"Maybe. But I'm not."

Frisk's head perked up; he had remembered something. He reached into his pocket and withdrew Chara's locket, that gold heart slowly spinning at the end of its chain. He held it out, but Chara recoiled as though it were a live snake.

"Where did you...you took that off my body? *Why?*"

"It's yours." The locket flashed in the dim light. "When you left the throne room, you made it sound like we'd meet again later. So I thought you might want--"

"I don't," Chara snapped. "Put that stupid thing away."

Frisk frowned, and reluctantly pocketed it again. Chara seemed to withdraw into himself. He gazed at the barrier in the distance.

"The person who wore that has been gone for a long time," he said.

"But you're right here."

"No, I'm not. I'm...passing through. That's all this is." He stood up slowly, as if he was still a little uncertain as to how Asriel's limbs worked. "One day, I decided to take a walk. It just went on a lot longer than I expected."

Frisk stared in confusion as Chara shuffled off. He stopped a fair distance away, standing between Frisk and the barrier, silhouetted in starlight.

“It’ll be terrible out there,” he said. “ You know that, right? Sure, everyone will be okay at first. Then people will show their true colors again. You’ll lose everything again. Another war. Another prison. More time down in the dark. And it’ll hurt even worse, because you’ll all know what it felt like when things were different. Even if it was just for a little while.” His fists clenched at his sides. “All that world ever does is take. I found that out myself.” He looked over his shoulder. “But then I see that expression on your face. And I wonder why you don’t feel the same way.”

Frisk remained silent as he considered the question. Chara’s stolen shadow fell over him, but a shadow was all it was – all the malice had gone out of it. The pools of ivory on the stony floor slowly shifted as the stars made their journey through the skies beyond the barrier.

“I made a lot of really good friends,” Frisk said at last. “I want to believe they’ll be happy. So I hope for the best.”

Chara shook his head and tried to laugh, but the sound broke apart in his throat.

He said, “You two really are perfect for each other.”

He turned and faced Frisk head-on, back slightly hunched, arms limp at his sides. He inhaled deeply. As if preparing himself for something.

“No one is above consequences. No matter how hard you try, you won’t be able to forget what happened to you down here. The people you’ve hurt. The choices you’ve made. They’ll cling to you wherever you go. You’ll never get to lead normal lives.”

Then he smiled. Not that dimpled rictus Frisk had seen before. It was rueful, weary. But genuine.

“I guess you’ll need to be satisfied with what you have,” he said. “As for me...I made my choice long ago.”

He brought his hands up to his chest, palms apart, facing each other. The red light brightened, concentrated, and slid out of Asriel’s body in a glowing sphere; it no longer displayed that frenzied, insectile movement Frisk had first seen in the throne room, but beat softly between Chara’s hands, a single point of color amidst the chiaroscuro of the cavern.

Chara’s smile widened, turned triumphant. And that was when Frisk looked up, and saw the single knife hanging overhead, the silver fang of its blade pointed down.

“This is one ending you don’t get to change.”

Frisk stood up and ran to him. Far too late. He didn’t make it three steps before the knife fell; with a single clear note that rang in the frosty air, it sliced Chara’s soul in half. The two halves remained held between his palms. They did not refuse.

“Goodbye, Asriel.” The divided light splintered. “Thank you for being my friend. Despite everything.”

The soul shattered into shards of red. Asriel fell to his knees. Frisk tried to keep running, stumbled, and skidded across the ground with his palms held out. The light passed right through him; the soul was beyond repair. But as it faded, he felt something nonetheless. A lingering sentiment. Maybe gratitude. Maybe relief.

Asriel’s eyes refocused. He looked down at Frisk’s curled and clutching hands.

“Like I said. He always hated to share.”

Frisk looked up, his skin clammy with horror. “I didn’t mean for him to-”

Asriel shook his head, offered Frisk his hand. After a moment, Frisk took it. They helped each other back to their feet.

“I was so sure that he’d be angry with me.” Asriel’s grip tightened. “When I made my choice, I mean. But do you know what he said? He said I was going to do a great job. No matter what I did.” He clutched Frisk’s arm like a lifeline. “He never told me anything like that before. Do you think he meant it?”

Frisk remembered all the timelines he’d undone. Chara always in his shadow, over his shoulder. Chara listening to Asriel’s every goodbye.

With his free hand, he offered Asriel the locket.

“I know he did,” Frisk said.

Asriel sniffled, released him, held out his palm. Frisk dropped the necklace into it and watched as Asriel slipped it around his neck. The scarred gold heart rested against his own.

"He didn't talk to me at all when we came back from the surface, you know. But I could feel how mad he was. I didn't even know if we were still friends." His lip quivered. "I think that's why I spent all that time calling to him. I never actually thought he'd answer. But even if he didn't want to play with me anymore, I really wanted a chance to say goodbye. That I was sorry." He clutched the locket through his shirt. "I guess he wanted that, too, even if he had trouble admitting it. Frisk, he was so tired."

“So are we.” And indeed, Frisk looked ready to fall over.

“But we’ll keep going. You and me. All Chara wanted was to rest. He just couldn’t figure out what was keeping him here. It probably would’ve been a lot easier if he’d just asked someone to help him. But I don’t think he ever really learned how.” He wiped his tears away. “But I’m glad we got to meet again. Without anything left to hide. We knew each other for a long time. But I think, at the end, we finally understood each other.” He looked up and smiled, and it reached his eyes. “Thanks for giving us that chance.”

Frisk hung his head. Then, he cupped his hand under his chest.

“Are you ready?”

Asriel shook his head, his expression resolute. He turned and faced the barrier.

“I have something better to do.”

He took several steps forward, arms held out, fingers splayed. A strange thrumming filled the air.

“You must’ve seen me do this a hundred times by now, right, Frisk?” The thrum intensified. “I guess I’ll just have to make this one really impressive.”

His whole body started to glow, firefly-lights playing beneath his skin. Frisk retreated to the safety of the root bed as Asriel’s power built; his heels left the floor, then his toes, and then he was afloat, and burning bright enough to print the curled black silhouettes of his fingers on the far end of the vast cavern. Those shadows bent in towards the barrier as if they meant to pull it apart. And when Asriel spoke, his voice was soft and unassuming as ever, but echoed with such strength that it could have been heard throughout half the vacant underground:

“Howdy, everyone. My name is Asriel Dreemurr.”

He sounded almost embarrassed at his own introduction. But then he gained confidence.

“Most of you don’t know me. But I’ve caused you all a lot of trouble. And my friends caused even more trouble, on my behalf. Please don’t be mad at them. I know they were trying their best. And it’s because of them that I’m here right now, able to do this for all of you.”

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes. And I have a lot to apologize for. So, I hope this will help me start to make amends. And when I apologize...I’ll be able to do it in person.”

“It’s time for all of us to go free.”

Asriel placed his palms against his chest. Burning light poured through his fingers. The cave filled with a single, sweet note like a tensed violin string. And then he flung his arms out, and the torrent of souls burst forth, pearly chips of radiance that cut apart the dark wherever they flew, shining brighter than even the barrier’s subdued stars, and through that storm of light could be seen the colored tails of the human souls playfully streaking this way and that, glad to be free of their captivity. Souls produced no wind, but Frisk’s hair and clothes blew about him as if in a great gale and all the tree branches shivered and danced; souls made no sound, but the underground was filled with a chiming melody that seemed somehow familiar, all those lights singing to each other, amplifying one another’s voices, until even the barrier shrank back and quavered from their chorus.

Frisk felt warmth pulsating deep within his breastbone and looked down to see more light pouring from his heart. He held out his hands and Asriel’s soul emerged; it remained obediently between his palms, but shook like an iron filing near a lodestone, and as the song played, its eagerness became more and more intense. The howling wind and shivering branches added instrumentation. Frisk had to fight to keep Asriel’s unleashed power from blowing him away.

Asriel's locket emerged from his shirt collar and floated in front of his face, the pendant straining against his neck. He held out one hand that flamed with color. He allowed himself a brief, cocky grin as the souls ceased their commotion and stayed in place, making it seem as though the air was filled with diamond dust.

He snapped his fingers.

The sound cut apart the song. It cut loose the souls. And as they all burst apart and returned to where they had come, and the human souls flew out and away like comets, and Asriel's own soul finally wriggled free of Frisk's grip and lanced into his back, that sound cracked the barrier like windowglass, and the opaque wall shattered with enough force to send both Frisk and Asriel flying. Every branch blew back, Frisk tripped over the tree roots, Asriel fell earthward and slammed into Frisk's outstretched arms, and the murky light of the barrier collapsed in prisms, falling down, fading out, already gone.

The silence that followed was very loud. The starlight, very bright. And the air from the surface already made the cavern smell sweeter.

Asriel rolled off Frisk. He'd been flattened against the root bed.

"Sorry! Sorry, that last part was an accident! Here, let me just..." He tried to pull Frisk up, then let go. "No. No, that's not happening." He caught his breath, then asked, "Are you okay?"

Frisk lay in the root bed, hair over his eyes. His breathing was shallow and slow.

"That was amazing, Asriel."

Asriel blushed. "Uh. Thanks." He glanced over his shoulder, where several more silhouettes could be seen against the underground's entrance. "I wonder if they'll remember any of it?"

"Your soul. I saw it fly into you. How do you feel?" He had to fight to say every word.

"I'm. Um." He experimentally ran his hands over his body. "I feel like...I'm still here." He grinned wide; his fangs shone. "Frisk, I think I'm actually back."

"That's good." Frisk's voice had become very faint. His head lowered until his chin touched his chest. "Then I'm done."

Asriel saw the locket resting against his shirt and tucked it back in; he paused to draw out the light of his soul, and smiled even wider at that pale glow. Behind him, other voices could be heard.

"Oh, my goodness. It appears we missed quite a bit. Does anyone remember what happened?"

"I'm not sure! I think I was cheering someone on! But that really doesn't narrow it down! Hey, Sans, do you have any idea?"

"I have lots of ideas."

“Wow! That was cryptic *and* unhelpful!”

“Doin’ my best, bro.”

“Tori, dear?”

“I told you not to call me that, Asgore.”

“Toriel, dear?”

“Yes, Asgore?”

“The barrier is broken.”

“Yes, Asgore.”

“And there is a rather large tree in this cave.”

“*Yes*, Asgore.”

“Er, Your Majesty, are you okay? You’re don’t seem to be...I mean, you’re not. Um. B-blinking.”

“Don’t worry, Alphys, he gets like this sometimes. Once he broke his favorite watering can and just sat there with that goofy expression for, like, two hours. I had to noogie him out of it. Did you know there’s no laws against giving noogies to royalty? I checked!”

Asriel took Frisk’s hand. “They sure make a lot of noise, huh?”

Frisk didn’t respond.

“I guess we’ve got a lot of explaining to do.” He stood up. “Let’s go.”

Frisk didn’t move.

Asriel looked back, his smile gone. “...Frisk?”

He remained where he was, amidst the tangled roots. The breeze shifted the locks of his unkempt hair to and fro. Besides that, he lay very still. Asriel let go of his hand. It fell limp at his side.

“Frisk, this isn’t funny.” He looked over his shoulder. “They’re gonna be here any second.”

The only answer came from the rustling leaves high overhead. Asriel’s breath started to seize and spasm. He knelt besides Frisk, shook him gently by the shoulder.

“You’ve got a really sick sense of humor, you know that?” He tried to smile again as his eyes began to sting. “You said we’d do this together. You promised. You wouldn’t break a promise, right?” He shook harder. “Wake up!”

Frisk's head lolled to the side. And now the sobs started again, huge gulps of air that shook Asriel's small body down to the bone. He hammered Frisk on the chest with everything he had. Frisk didn't react. Teardrops spotted the dirty cloth of his shirt.

"No, no, not like this. Frisk, I'm not worth this. I didn't want anyone else to get hurt because of me. Don't leave me alone again!" He clutched Frisk's shirt and bent, weeping, against his thin chest. Footsteps drew closer to the tree, and then stopped. He didn't pay them any mind.

"Please don't leave," he sobbed. "I can't do this by myself."

Then, when he stopped talking, and laid his head against Frisk's heart, he heard the sound.

Frisk's heartbeat, steady and low.

And then, a moment later, the gentle rasp of Frisk's snoring.

Asriel sat bolt upright, tears still running down his face. His expression was impossible to describe. His face was host to several complicated emotions at once, and none of them were pleased to see each other. Then he looked around, and saw six pairs of eyes. Technically, three and a half pairs of eyes, and two pairs of eyesockets. All less than a dozen paces away. All staring directly at him.

Asriel giggled weakly, and then fainted.

The six assembled monsters took in this sight for some time – Frisk and Asriel sprawled atop each other, curled up in the root bed, Asriel's breath already deepening as he passed into real sleep. Toriel's own breath quickened, little by little. Her eyes filmed over with moisture.

"Asriel." Her voice was a thin creak. Then she rushed forward. "*Asriel!*"

She picked him up and held him close; she handled him like he was made of glass. Her tears flowed and dripped down onto his face, making his muzzle wrinkle in irritation. She hastily wiped her eyes dry with her sleeve, scooped up Frisk, and held them both to her chest, all the while emitting a steady stream of semi-hysterical fretting that seemed to make even the tree nervously shrink away.

"Asriel. Frisk! My children, are you hurt? Are you ill? Do you have a temperature? No, you feel fine. But you cannot feel fine. You were...you were..." She shook her head. "The barrier broken, and you here with me...this is not real. It is a dream. You are going to leave again. Please do not leave." She held them tighter, rested her head against their own. "Please stay!"

Sans cleared his throat.

"Uh, Toriel, right? I know it ain't my place to say, but if you hug those kids any tighter I think you're gonna break 'em."

Toriel turned around, that copper-colored eye made redder from her tears. Then, gradually she relaxed.

"Yes. Yes, of course. It is important to remain calm. Dream or not." She still didn't let go.

Papyrus bent over next to Sans and whispered in a voice that absolutely everyone could hear. “Sans. I have *so many questions*.”

“That’s the King and Queen’s son, he and Frisk probably helped break the barrier, I have no idea where the tree’s from, and as for what they’re doing, it looks like they’re avoiding a real awkward conversation for a little while.”

“Most of those answers weren’t cryptic at all! See, Sans? You’ve already improved so much!”

“Heh heh, thanks.” Sans glanced over at Alphys, whose eyes had gone so wide that her glasses were now lost in a sea of cornea. Her jaw hung slightly open. With difficulty, she swiveled her gaze over to Sans. Sans winked and tapped where the side of his nose would have been.

Undyne glared up at the tree like it had just insulted her cooking.

“Little kids, crying moms, and gardening. I couldn’t be more out of my element here if I tried. Uh, no offense, Your Majesty. Your kid looks pretty cute.” She looked over. “King Asgore? Are you still doing that thing? You want I should noogie you again?”

“Asgore, for heaven’s sake!” Toriel looked up at him with fire in her eye. “Do you intend to stand there all night?”

Asgore blinked for the first time in ninety seconds. The tendons in his thick neck audibly creaked as he turned to Toriel. His smile was wide and glassy.

“Oh, howdy, Toriel,” he said vaguely. “What can I do for you on this lovely evening?”

Toriel’s expression softened.

“Asgore, why don’t you go back to the house, and...I don’t know, make the children’s beds. I doubt that they have been aired out in years, and Frisk and Asriel clearly need some proper sleep. Do something useful, won’t you?”

“Ah, yes. What a fine idea. I will go and. Make the bed. For my son. Who is here. Alongside the child I had just tried to kill.” He remained where he was. “I will just. Step around this rather large tree. That appeared behind my throne room. And get right on that.” He still didn’t move.

Toriel sighed. She gently laid Frisk and Asriel back out on the roots and turned, kneeling before the group. “The King has suffered a small shock. Could someone please-”

“Yeah, yeah, say no more, I got it.” Undyne slung a companionable arm around Asgore’s shoulder – she almost had to stand on tiptoe to manage it, but she made the effort. “C’mon, your Majesty, off we go. One step at a time.” Asgore started to walk. “Yeah, that’s perfect, move those stubby little legs, one-two, one-two. Don’t make me carry you, that’ll just be embarrassing for everybody.”

“Undyne, please humor an old man,” Asgore muttered. “Tell me: is any of this really happening?”

“Speaking candidly, Your Majesty, I still don’t know what the hell’s going on. But I know I’m not dreaming, at least.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Mostly ‘cause I’m not smooching Alphys in front of a volcano.” Behind her, Alphys made a noise like a mouse being stepped on.

“I see,” he said philosophically. “Excuse me a moment.”

Asgore shrugged off Undyne’s arm and walked over to Toriel. His armor clanked and rattled. His hulking shadow fell over her and the two children. He knelt down, his mantle puddled around his feet. He held out his hands.

“May I?”

Toriel didn’t hesitate. She picked up Asriel’s sleeping body and offered it to Asgore. “Of course.”

With infinite gentleness, Asgore took him from Toriel’s hands. His palms alone nearly enfolded Asriel’s entire body; he cradled him in those massive arms. He stared down at him for a long time, watching his chest rise and fall in the depths of sleep. Then he pressed him against his breastplate, careful not to nick him on the metal. The cave went very quiet. Everyone heard the way his breath shuddered as he held his son close. Papyrus’ eyesockets streamed with tears; Sans produced a hanky from his hoodie, handed it up, let Papyrus dry off his skull, took it back, wrung it out, and replaced it.

After several minutes, Asgore softly kissed Asriel on the forehead and set him back down. Then he stood, eyes wet, voice brisk.

“Right, then. Work to be done. Undyne, lead the way. And then I would quite grateful if you could survey the underground and see if this magnificent specimen did any damage.” He patted the tree’s trunk. “Its roots must spread through half the city by now.”

Undyne nodded solemnly. “Yes, Your Majesty. This way, please.”

Asgore clanked off. Alphys watched them go. Her scales had turned beet red.

“A volcano,” she said. “Well. That’s nice. At least I know where to take her after we leave. Silver linings. Eh heh heh.” She shook her head, smacked the sides of her snout. “Um, Y-your Majesty, I mean, Your Grace, I, uh-”

“Just Toriel, dear. You are Alphys, the Royal Scientist, correct?”

“Right. Yes. That’s the job I do, all right! Ha ha!” Her glasses had steamed over; her mouth was locked in a helpless grin. “I think I should, um, get back to the lab and get online. To spread the word, I mean. About the barrier breaking. That seems like a good thing to do right

now.” She glanced at Sans again. “And, um, if you need to give your son a check-up or something later, I can help with that too. Resurrection really takes it out of you! Ha ha ha! That was a joke! But it really happened! So I don’t know if it’s still funny!” She took a very deep breath, and said, “I should go.”

She shuffled off, looking as though she’d fall over with every step.

Sans said, “I’ll give you a call later, Alphys. We’ll catch up a little.”

“Thanks, Sans,” she said, without turning around. “Off I go. To do my job. And then I should lie down for a little while...”

Papyrus raised an arm. “What about me? I’m always brimming with helpfulness!”

“Yeah, Pap, I’ve actually got an idea.” Sans looked up at him. “How’s about you give Alphys a hand? Help her get the news out. Go around and let everyone know that the barrier’s busted, but Asgore would really appreciate it if they could wait ‘til he said it was safe to go. I think the King and Queen would prefer that these kids got some time to rest. Even better if you pulled it off before any crazy rumors started goin’ up online.”

“You mean I get to help the King, Frisk, and you at the *same time*? Say no more!” He saluted hard enough for his popping elbow joint to echo. “I, the great Papyrus, shall be the first monster in history to *outrun the Internet!*”

“You’re the best, bro.”

“Don’t worry, Sans! You’re a close second place! Nyeh heh heh!”

Papyrus took off fast enough to create a small sonic boom; he cleared the entire root bed in a single leap as he sped out of the cavern. When his footsteps and laugh had finally faded away, it was just Sans, Toriel, and the children, standing alone in the starlight.

“That should buy us all the time we need,” Sans said. “We all might’ve been waitin’ for generations to leave the underground, but no one wants to disappoint Papyrus.” He sauntered up to Toriel and looked down at the sleeping Frisk. “You want some help carrying these two home? They’re sort of a handful for just one person.”

“Yes, Sans. I would like that.” Toriel took Sans by the hand; his pupils briefly flared up. “Be honest with me. Are you responsible for this?”

He coughed nervously. “Me? Nah. It was all Frisk. I just tagged along for a little bit.”

“Is that so.” She still wouldn’t let him go. “This is a miracle.”

“You could call it that, sure. But I know for a fact it took a lot of hard work. ‘s probably why they’re so tuckered out right now.” He prodded Frisk with the toe of his slipper. “Especially this little guy. Poor kid’s allergic to a decent night’s rest.”

Without another word, Toriel released his hand and picked up Asriel. Sans swiped the perspiration off his skull and did the same for Frisk.

“Man, he hardly weighs anything.” He rested Frisk against his shoulder; Frisk nuzzled his cheek deeper into Sans’ hoodie. “Hey, Tori? Toriel, I mean.”

“Yes, Sans?”

“I was just thinking, since we’re kinda spinning our wheels ‘til these two wake up and Papyrus is busy and all...if you maybe want to, I dunno, kill some time over coffee or something. ”

“I would.” She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Heh heh. Cool.”

“And Sans?”

“Yeah?”

“You were not being honest.”

Toriel was still smiling, but that warm red glare augered through him. Sans didn’t stand a chance; she could wield matronly disapproval like a scalpel.

“I have not forgotten the promise you made through that door. And I know full well that neither of these children would be here, if not for you.” She cradled Asriel’s head in her palm. “Perhaps it is not my place to say. But I think you should take some responsibility for the things you have done.”

She set off for the exit, leaving the catatonic Sans behind.

“In any case,” she added, “you deserve pie.”

“Uh. Yeah. Pie sounds good.” He hiked up Frisk a little higher on his shoulder and followed after her. “But let’s put these kids to bed first.”

His voice filtered down into Frisk’s dreamless sleep.

“They’ve had a bad time.”

* * *

Frisk opened his eyes. This caused no discernible change in his expression.

He had a vague impression of cool sheets and clean linen before realizing he was in a proper bed; it had been a while since he’d slept in one of those. His limbs still felt heavy. He settled for turning his head instead, and taking in the room – that soft gold glow, the dresser against the wall, the framed crayon sketch of a yellow flower, the stuffed toys in the far corner with their blank button eyes and their felted fur now clean of dust. Asriel’s bedroom. He was in Chara’s old bed; the air around it was no longer oddly cold. Asriel himself was curled up in the other bed, facing the wall.

Frisk tried to sit up, and managed it on the third attempt. When the sheets slid off him, he found that he was wearing blue and purple striped pajamas. He held up one hand and flexed his fingers; his movements were still sludgy with exhaustion, but that leaden feeling in his bones had gone. He stretched and yawned. He remembered how good that felt.

“Oh, you’re finally up.”

Frisk gagged in mid-yawn. Asriel sat up, those round eyes full of worry.

“Oh no, did I startle you? Sorry, I, uh, wasn’t actually asleep. Just needed some privacy.” He nervously tugged one of those floppy ears. “It’s been kind of crazy around here lately. Haha.”

“It’s okay. Good morning.” He lowered his arms, thought for a moment, and added, “Is it morning?”

“Uh, dinner time, actually. Two days later.” Frisk’s eyebrows went up. “Yeah, you were really out of it. The pajamas were Mom’s idea, we got them from the capital. We had some of Chara’s old ones that would’ve fit you, but I thought that’d be. You know. Weird.” He gazed at the door. “She’s cooking now, I think. Asked her to lay off the snails for your sake. Dad’s been spending all his time in the garden. I mean. Literally all his time. I’m pretty sure he’s been sleeping out there. It’s still...kind of awkward between them.” He hunched over, crossed his ankles. “Guess you can’t fix everything, huh?”

Frisk didn’t answer. Asriel swung his legs back and forth for a little bit, then looked up at Frisk with mild resentment.

“You nearly scared me to death. Which would’ve been kind of a waste, after all that work.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to.” He realized something; his expression became worried. “Wait. Does that mean you had to-”

“Explain everything? A little bit, yeah. Haha.” The laugh was uncomfortably jagged. “I mean, Mom and Dad didn’t make me or anything, but you could definitely tell it was on their minds, so might as well get it over with, right?”

“How much did you tell them?”

“Some of it.” He paused, and shrugged. “Most of it. I mean, at first I wanted you to be around for it, that’d have definitely made it easier, but once I started talking it got real hard to stop, and then I saw the look on their faces and got kind of excited, so then that got *them* excited, and, and.” His words were rushing out alarmingly fast. “I m-mean, they did exactly what you s-said they would. No hard feelings. All’s forgiven. Lots of hugs. They kept saying, there, there, everything is g-going to b-b-be all r-r-r...”

Asriel seized one of his pillows and buried his face in it before the sobbing started. His whole body shook so hard he nearly fell off the bed. Frisk saw that the pillowcase was already quite soggy on both sides.

“Ohh, no, not this again,” he wept. “It’s every f-fifteen minutes, I’m gonna get d-d-dehydrated at this rate...” He tried to laugh and just sobbed harder. “This is one thing I didn’t miss, it’s *pathetic*, Chara was right when he kept calling me a c-c-crybaby...”

His words dissolved. He bent the pillow around his muzzle and pulled his knees up to his chin, to swallow as much of the sound as possible. No one knocked at the door. Asriel had evidently been trying hard to keep anyone from hearing this.

With difficulty, Frisk swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. The seat of his pajama pants felt uncomfortably stiff, but he paid it no mind. He walked the length of the room, and sat down next to Asriel. Asriel kept bawling. He couldn’t bring himself to meet Frisk’s eye.

Frisk said, “I cried a lot, too.”

“Oh, come on.” Asriel’s breath hitched. “You’re j-just saying that to make me f-feel better.”

“It’s true.” He clasped his hands together. “Before I first fell. I’d cry until my eyes burned and it hurt to breathe. Until I started to feel sick. It got so bad I couldn’t walk around anymore. I was always too tired to move.”

Asriel sniffed and pulled the pillow away. His eyes were rimmed with red.

“How’d you get better?” he asked.

“Eventually I just stopped. Maybe I didn’t see the point anymore. No point in crying. No point in talking. Because nobody ever came to help me.” His tone was quiet, casual. “But it didn’t change anything. Even when the crying stopped, it still hurt. Just...differently. And when people finally started calling me, I didn’t know how to answer anymore.” He tilted his head toward Asriel, placed his hand flat on the bed. “I think it’s okay to cry, Asriel. It’s a lot better than forgetting how.”

Asriel sniffed, rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. He let the pillow fall; it made an audible squelch on contact with the carpet. He covered Frisk’s hand with his own.

“Frisk,” he said. “What are we going to do? You said we had to make it up to everyone. But I don’t even know where to start.”

Frisk didn’t reply. Instead, he fidgeted, his face scrunching up. Asriel looked confused.

“What’s wrong?”

“Something keeps...poking me.” He fished around in the back pocket of his pants. Paper crinkled. He pulled out an envelope like a magician’s trick. Asriel’s look of confusion intensified.

“Those clothes are brand new. How the heck did that get in there?”

“I don’t know.” He turned the letter over. “Never mind. Yes I do.”

He held it out to Asriel. On the front of the envelope, in thick, loopy print, was written the word:

heya.

Asriel did not look amused. “I never figured out how he does that.”

“Neither did I.” He opened the envelope. “Oh, wow.”

There was a sheet of paper inside covered with writing – Sans’ scribble was so small and dense that it was hard to make out the spaces between words. Frisk had to squint even harder to read it. Asriel leaned in curiously.

“What’s it say?”

“It’ll take me a while to read all this. Just look over my shoulder.”

“Okay.” Frisk heard the springs creak, then felt the heat of Asriel’s body against his own. He’d moved in so close that he was practically using Frisk’s shoulder as a chin-rest.

“...you’re a little close.”

“Yeah, but you said it’s hard to read it.”

“Okay, okay, just try to hold still.”

They peered down at Sans’ letter. It read:

Hey, Frisk.

Looks like you pulled it off. Got a little weird toward the end there, but like I said before, weird is good, right? I gave a quick explanation to Alphys so that she’d calm down a little after seeing the prince alive and well, but I’ll leave the rest of it to you and Asriel. Is Asriel there? Tell him I said hi.

“Sans says hi,” Frisk said.

Asriel waved at the letter. “Hi, Sans. No hard feelings.”

Anyway, if I know you half as well as I think I do, then I bet you’re feeling kind of weird yourself, huh? I mean, you won. Looks like you got everyone what they wanted. But even I’m still not totally sure we did the right thing. We toyed with a lot of people’s futures to get to this point, Frisk. Erased a lot of happy endings that could’ve been. You must be feeling awful torn up about that. And if you feel bad, I can only guess what Asriel’s going through. If you’re reading this little message when I think you are, then the two of you must be wondering how you can go on like this. How you can possibly make it up to everyone. So, hey, let me give you one last piece of advice.

Don’t worry about it.

Frisk blinked. He glanced to his side. Asriel was still reading intently. He looked back down at the letter.

Do you remember what I said at your first judgment? I mean, I don't, but I've got the script lying around here somewhere. The more you distance yourself, the less you hurt. And the easier you can bring yourself to hurt others. I'm not saying that it's good to feel awful. But I don't think either of you have distanced yourselves all that much. Asriel might have, for a while, but there was some tricky stuff going on with him so I'm willing to let that slide.

You both know what it's like to be hurt. I don't think you're in any hurry to make other people feel that way, no matter how easy it might be. In this skeleton's opinion, that's good enough for now. I told you about how bad memories can crowd out good ones, and if you just let your regrets weigh you down all the time that's exactly what'll happen. And that'd be a waste. I mean, you can't regret hard choices your whole life, right?

Brace yourself for sappiness, kiddo: I'm proud of you. I think you'll be able to do some pretty amazing things no matter what you try. Same goes for Asriel. But even if you just want to be ordinary for the rest of your lives, that'd be okay, too. Just continue to be yourselves. No one'll blame you for it. No one'll hate you for it. Heck, everyone'll probably appreciate it. I've been checking out the underground during your nap. Everyone's really stoked that you two are okay, and that's no joke.

As for me, I'm gonna go traveling for a bit with Papyrus. Not that I could ever get enough of that adorable face of yours, but that whole business with ~~the Doctor Gaster~~ my big brother sorta made me want to spend more time with family. I'm actually excited, for once. And Papyrus is, you know, excited in general. Did I ever tell you about the time I replaced our toothpaste without telling him? He ran around all morning thinking Christmas had come early. Either way, I'll be in touch with ~~the Queen~~ ~~your m~~ Toriel, so just ask her if you want to ring me up.

I'll see you kids outside the mountain. Be good, okay? To yourselves and each other. That's the best way you can atone for your (turn over)-

Frisk turned the paper over.

-shins.

That was the only word written on the other side – in the upper-left corner, in that same painfully tiny print. The rest of the sheet was taken up by a giant sketch of Sans' winking face.

It was quite well-drawn.

The two of them stared in silence at that wink. Finally, Frisk spoke:

"I don't get it."

"I do and I hate it," Asriel muttered.

Frisk looked up. “Then why are you smiling?”

“Am I?” He reached up to his face, felt the grin that had crept on there. Then, Frisk felt his own cheeks aching, just before Asriel said, “So are you.”

The gravity of Sans’ wink pulled their gazes back. The paper shook in Frisk’s hands as he bent over.

Their laughter started small, uncertain – the two of them were badly out of practice, after all. Awkward snorts and giggles as their lungs tried to remember how to let out the air. But then the sound built, and leapt, and before long the two of them were howling on the bed, their hands over their eyes; every time they looked at each other’s faces it set off another laughing fit. Their eyes watered. Their chests burned. Sans’ paper slipped out of Frisk’s grip and drifted merrily onto the carpet. Asriel’s bedroom door creaked a bit, as if someone on the other side had carefully leaned against it, and then creaked back. The two of them never noticed.

“Frisk,” Asriel gasped. “Frisk, we’ve gotta calm down. Mom’s going to think we’ve gone nuts.”

“I’m trying. I’m t-trying...” He tried to choke his voice back, glimpsed Sans winking at him from the carpet, and then started cackling again and rolled off the bed with his hands on his belly.

By the time their voices finally gave out, Asriel was spread-eagle on top of his comforter and Frisk sat on the ground with the letter clutched to his chest. Their breaths were deep, hesitant.

“Okay,” Asriel said. “I actually do kind of feel better now.”

“Sans does that to people. Ow, my *face*...” Frisk climbed back onto the bed, took out the envelope, replaced the letter. “I think I’ll hold onto this.”

Asriel’s smile dimmed a little. “Oh, that reminds me.”

He got down on the floor and reached under the bed. Frisk watched as he disappeared up to the ankles, the mattress bucking as he searched.

“I was gonna do this before I got all emotional.” He grunted and slid back out with a small box in his hands. It looked familiar. “Here.”

Frisk took the box from him and opened it. Inside was a small gold heart locket on a chain.

“Oh, I was wondering where this went. It’s yours, right?”

“Uh. Sort of.”

Frisk looked up at Asriel’s face. Asriel started to turn red. He looked back at the box. Then he felt heat rising in his own cheeks.

“Asriel, I-”

“I mean, you brought back Chara’s, and it’d be kind of silly for me to wear two of them, right? Haha.” He scritchd at the carpet with his toe. “I sort of thought. I mean, it’d be only fair if.” He cleared his throat, and said quietly, “It’s yours. If you want it.”

Frisk took out the locket, felt how the chain snaked through his fingers. The gold heart lay cool on his palm.

“This really helped me out, the first time,” he said. “It made me feel safe.”

He put the necklace on, slipping the locket into his shirt.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.” He kept staring at the floor. “Don’t mention it.”

Frisk got up off the bed and headed for the door. “I guess we’d better go. You ready?”

“There was one other thing.”

He looked back and saw Asriel in that same sheepish position, steadily gouging a hole into the floor with his toe. His body was luminous with embarrassment.

“I was watching you a lot,” he said. “You know. As Flowey. I saw you hug it out with pretty much everyone you met. Of course, at the time I thought it was really pathetic, but, you know, that was then and this is now, and.” He started to fidget with the front of his shirt. “I mean, you kinda did it once already, but that was with Chara, so I didn’t...I mean, I wouldn’t mind if you-”

“Just get over here, Asriel.”

Asriel held that pose for a second, then turned and cannonballed into Frisk hard enough to nearly send him flying into the door. He still wasn’t very strong, but he clutched at Frisk so tight that his ribs groaned in protest; it was like being squeezed by a bony teddy bear. His claws dug into Frisk’s spine. Frisk put one palm on the small of Asriel’s back, another on top of his head, pressing in him closer. They buried their faces in each other’s shoulders. They felt their smiles on each other’s skin. They stood like that in the middle of his room, Asriel’s stuffed animals watching silently.

“Ha ha.” Asriel’s grip relaxed a little. “I don’t want to let go.”

“We’ve got time,” Frisk said. And then: “I’m going to do a lot of this today, aren’t I?”

“Ohh, you have no idea. Watch out for Dad, he doesn’t know his own strength.” Finally, he released Frisk and stepped away. “Maybe I can convince him to eat with us for a change.”

Frisk nodded, and turned, and opened the door. The hall outside was empty, but they both smelled pie crust at once. Toriel was nothing if not consistent.

Frisk said, “After you.”

The two of them stepped out of the bedroom, down the hall, past the living room where Toriel's old reading chair had finally seen some use. That scent enveloped them – pie crust, butterscotch and cinnamon, the sweet lemons from the flowers nodding in their various jars, and underneath it all, a garlicky whiff of snails. Maybe not what people would normally think about when they thought of home, but enough for Frisk to be satisfied.

He watched Asriel step into the kitchen, where Toriel's cookery clattered.

“Mom?” Asriel called. “He's awake.”

Ebott

Chapter Summary

This relentless future finally looks brighter and brighter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Everyone knows the legend, right? ‘Travelers who climb Mt. Ebott are said to disappear.’

“But the other day, Dad told me something interesting.

“Long ago, before the war with humans and monsters began, it was said that the mountain was a place where people went to challenge themselves. That the experience of climbing it would help them change for the better. Any traveler who climbed Mt. Ebott would disappear, but only because the person who climbed it would be different from the person who came back down. The legend was hopeful. Not a warning.

“But then monsters were imprisoned inside the mountain, and humans saw the mountain only as the monsters’ prison, and as time went on, hope turned to fear and despair. Mt. Ebott stopped being a place where people went to better themselves, and instead became a place from which no one ever returned. But the old legend still survived. Waiting for the day when everyone who vanished up there finally came home.

“I don’t know if it’s actually true. Dad likes to tell stories. But it’s nice to think about, isn’t it? Now that everyone’s free again, maybe that’ll be the story everyone believes.

“Still, I wonder. After the war, why did so many people travel there anyway? Did they just not believe the warnings? Did they hope to find something up on the summit? Or...did they want to leave something behind? I know why Chara climbed the mountain. It wasn’t for a very happy reason. But I’ll never learn why the others did. Hardly any of the monsters remember the humans who fell. Their souls are long gone and their families have probably passed on, too. Dad might know, but I can’t ask him. He’d get really upset.

“There’s still one left, though. One last human who went to Mt. Ebott. You know who I mean. So, I have to ask.

“Frisk, why would you ever climb a mountain like that?

“Was it foolishness?

“Was it fate?

“Or was it...because you...?”

“Hey, I recognize that look. I’ve asked you this before, haven’t I?”

“Haha...forget I said anything.”

* * *

(Knock, knock, knock.)

King Asgore clipped another withered branch off his bonsai. His hands were so huge that he needed to handle the shears like chopsticks, but he was nothing if not a delicate touch.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

“Yes, I’m here! Just one minute!”

He barely raised his voice at all, but it was still enough to rumble through every square inch of this house. His chair and the floor underneath creaked dangerously as he adjusted his angle on the tiny tree.

At this point, Asgore considered his bulk to be his biggest problem. True, it had been difficult to forge diplomatic relations with the humans. It had been delicate, painstaking work to balance humankind’s hopes, fears, and expectations against those of the freshly-displaced monsters, the latter of which had poured out of Mt. Ebott in a slow but determined flood in search of new homes and new horizons. It had been a matter of countless sleepless nights to concurrently tackle administrative affairs, relocation efforts, media control, and spending quality time with his children (Sans, at least, had helped considerably with all of the above before taking off with his brother, to the point where Asgore couldn’t even resent him for his late-night visits and persistent texting sessions with Toriel). Over time, the work had ebbed away as society settled into its new status quo. Those problems, to a degree, were solved. But precious little could fix Asgore’s tendency to stab holes in the ceiling if he stood up too fast.

He’d made an effort with this little house, at least – it was just one story and not terribly roomy, but still gave an air of spaciousness thanks to exceptionally wide doorways and high ceilings. Plenty of windows, too, so that the sunlight could rest on the menagerie of plants crowding every sill. Once he’d been able to set aside most of his kingly duties, Asgore had taken to the surface world’s variety of gardening tools and techniques with fearsome zeal. Bonsai barely scratched the surface. He could trim hedges in shapes that defied conventional space and arrange flowers in such vibrant colors that even the Royal Guard dogs appreciated the display. The grounds of Toriel’s school had already won so many awards that they were on the verge of automatic disqualification due to wrecking the curve, and the sight of Asgore’s own front yard had made several hapless passersby burst into tears. His backyard was a lost cause, having been trampled countless times by small, running feet, but he could appreciate that, too, in its way.

(Knock, knock, knock.)

That knock was more forceful than the others. He put aside his shears and rose from the easy chair next to the back window. The wood sounded grateful as it resumed its old shape.

It was a lovely day; he'd made a note of it in his journal. The seasons were changing and the air had begun to bite (in response, he'd developed a serious passion for plaid flannel shirts) , but the sun was still able to keep everything warm, and the leaves had not yet turned. The thermometer beside the front door held steady at seventy degrees. He glanced at it, smiled, and then opened the door.

"Asgore."

It was Toriel.

Asgore beamed wide. "Tori! What an unexpected surprise! It's so...nice to...see. You."

That sentence started well, but then it sidled out of Asgore's mouth and ran for the hills. Everything about Toriel – from the lines in her face, to the stiffness in her crossed hands, to the way the spectacles perched on her muzzle glinted in the light – argued that it was not, in fact, at all nice to see her.

He cleared his throat and bravely soldiered on.

"So, what can I do for you on this wonderful-"

"Where are the children?"

Asgore's smile remained where it was, but in the silence that followed, his pupils slowly contracted. His mind had followed the thread of this conversation to a number of possible futures, and none of them looked promising. Several were on fire.

He managed to say, "The children?"

"Yes. Frisk and Asriel. Where are they?"

"Well, I'm, erm, flattered that you'd come to ask me." He fidgeted with the front of his shirt; Toriel hadn't blinked once in this exchange. "But they're not visiting until next weekend, right? N-not that I'm complaining!" He laughed unconvincingly. "I insisted you draw up the schedule, after all."

"I thought they had slept in late today. When I came to wake them up, their beds were empty. They were nowhere to be found in or around the house. Sans and Papyrus are not returning until next month. Undyne and Alphys are still on their honeymoon. In the unlikely event that Mettaton had something to do with this, I highly doubt he could have kept it a secret. That leaves you." Toriel's voice was so level you could have straightened a painting with it, but her rigid posture and narrowed eyes suggested she kept it that way through a mighty force of will. Asgore felt uncomfortably warm.

"Also," she added, "Frisk had left this on his bed."

Toriel produced a folded piece of paper. Asgore stared at it, then took it from her hand as though it might explode. It was a letter, written in Frisk's large, careful print:

Dear Mom,

We are OK and will be home soon. Please do not worry about us. Talk to Dad if you want to know more. He should be able to explain.

Love, Frisk

P.S. – Sorry, Dad.

"Well, at least his penmanship is improving," Asgore muttered. Toriel snapped her fingers and the paper burst into flames in his hand; a moment later, it was nothing but a wisp of smoke. "Ah. Hmm."

"Asgore." She crossed her palms again. "Explain."

"Toriel, I really don't know. I mean, Frisk must have had his reasons, but I certainly didn't expect anything like this to happen. And I can say for a fact that I was not involved." He wiped soot on the front of his shirt and tried to smile in a reassuring way. "Even I know how foolish it would be to suggest they just run off without...oh."

Toriel's brow rose. Asgore had somehow managed to go even paler under his fur.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I mean. It's not. Well. Ahem." He nervously tugged on his beard. "It's all speculation, nothing that I could say outright, but now that you mention it, I did tell Asriel a story about the war a little while ago. And ever since then, I noticed a certain, erm, pattern to Asriel's questions, and he and Frisk did seem to have a lot of quiet meetings in the backyard that I half-overheard. I didn't think much of it at the time, but given recent circumstances, at least by what I have observed, my best guess would be..." He shut his eyes like someone about to experience the last few feet of a very long fall. "I think they may have gone to climb Mt. Ebott."

Silence. Asgore opened one eye, then the other. Neither Toriel's posture nor her expression had changed. That was when he realized that the heat he felt wasn't just due to nerves; the thermometer's mercury was climbing rapidly.

"Now, Toriel--"

"Is there no *end* to your irresponsibility?" A definite edge in that voice now.

"You know that I would never--"

"If anything at all happens to them today, it is on you. Do you understand me, Asgore?" She leaned in, teeth bared; she was getting louder. "Are you the least bit concerned about the danger they are in right now?"

“Toriel, the neighbors will hear-”

“I had honestly thought that you would at least try to take care of these two children after all you’ve done, but I suppose old habits are not so easy to-”

“*Toriel!*” She flinched back as though the sound had knocked her away, and maybe it had; Asgore’s shout echoed down the block for the next several seconds. They stared at each other wide-eyed in the intervening silence. Then, Asgore sighed, and held out his huge palms in apology.

“Yes, I am concerned,” he said quietly. “And now that I know what has happened, I will do what I can to fix it. But Toriel, after all those two have been through, do you really think that something like climbing a mountain will bother them in the least? Or that they would have done this without fully understanding the consequences? I know you’re scared, but...try to have some faith in them, won’t you?”

Toriel’s breathing quickened, but she finally averted that smoldering gaze.

“What do you intend to do?” she asked.

“My thinking is that mischief of this caliber needs accomplices. And this is Asriel and Frisk we’re talking about. If one of them sneezes, the whole town comes running with a tissue.” He scratched one of his horns. “I’ll give Bratty and Catty a call. Those girls are bound to know who helped them on this little adventure, assuming that they weren’t in on it. Then I’ll piece together the whole story from them, have some stern words with the responsible parties, and if those two really did travel to Mt. Ebott, then I – *we* – will go up there and fetch them.” Toriel glanced back up again, her expression incredulous. “Oh, come now, we might be getting on in years but there’s no way either of us could just let them be. It would take the better part of a day to climb that mountain and I don’t want them up there after dark. They’ll catch a chill.”

“You are suggesting we go together.”

“Well, if either of us tries to go alone then the other will just follow. It would be terribly awkward for everyone.” He smiled, shrugged, then stepped aside. “But, first. Would you like to come in? I’ll put the kettle on.”

She shook her head. “Asgore, this is hardly the time.”

“Toriel, you look ready to fall over. A few minutes off your feet and a hot drink won’t hurt anyone.” She still looked hesitant. “Come on, Tori. They have a head start on us anyway. And if they see us coming after them, they’ll just climb the mountain faster.”

Toriel stared at the open doorway. At Asgore’s reserved, hopeful smile. Then she sighed and put a hand to her forehead.

“I do feel a bit faint,” she said. “Fine. One drink. Then we help the children.”

“Of course. After you.”

She stepped inside and Asgore shut the door behind her. As she made her way into the kitchen, she took in the house – the too-tall ceiling and too-wide doorways, the furniture that all seemed especially thick-cut. It smelled like tea and chlorophyll. Her brow wrinkled.

“I cannot understand why Frisk and Asriel enjoy it here so much. They must feel so small.”

“They seem to have fun climbing on everything, honestly. Besides, it was either home renovations or filing down my horns every two weeks, and if I tried to do that alone I’d just throw my back out.”

Asgore’s kitchen was not unlike the one in his old house, albeit slightly larger to accommodate his table and yet more potted plants. A single picture window took up nearly an entire wall, and flooded the space in golden light. Toriel carefully pulled out a chair and sat down as Asgore rummaged through the cabinets, humming a familiar tune.

“Any preference? I still have some of the goldflower tea from underground, but there’s Earl Grey, jasmine, a bit of chamomile...”

“Whichever you like.”

“Goldflower it is, then.” He took out the box and then shuffled through a sizable collection of mugs; nearly all of them were printed with some variety of ‘#1 Dad.’ The glassware clinked musically throughout the room. “I think I still have one of your old teacups back here. We never were able to throw anything out.” He chuckled. “Why, I remember when you thought that one blue cup of yours had gone missing, and we searched all morning until you finally-”

“Asgore. Don’t do this, please.”

The clinking stopped. Asgore looked over his shoulder and saw Toriel sitting with her palms crossed and her head down; her spectacles printed two hard circles of light over her eyes. His smile drained away.

“...sorry.”

He pulled out a mug and a smaller teacup. Then he went to another cabinet and extracted the kettle and the teapot. Water hissed as he turned on the tap to fill the kettle. Toriel listened to that sound. Her hands shook. Then she looked up at Asgore, and when she spoke, her voice was quiet and fierce:

“Do you know what I hated most about living in the Ruins?”

Asgore glanced back again, then twisted off the tap. The kettle clunked on the stove burner. He said nothing. Toriel kept talking anyway.

“Whenever one of those children fell down, I did my best to look after them. I tried to keep them diverted, the way Asriel and Chara did for each other. You know how they always had their little games they loved to play. I scrounged up anything I could find. Crayons, toys, new books. It kept them busy, for a time. Then they left. And then, they died.” Her breath hoarsened. “But of course their things stayed behind. I kept them on high shelves or in

cabinets, somewhere out of sight, but every now and then I'd find them again, and I would remember. Everything about that day. Everything you had said and done. It would all come back to me at once." Asgore still wouldn't turn around. "But I could not throw them away. Because whenever I tried," her voice cracked, "it felt like I was burying one of them all over again."

She pulled away her spectacles and wiped at her eyes. Asgore slumped over the stove. One huge hand rested on top of the kettle.

"Asgore, I apologize for what I said. I know you care deeply about Asriel and Frisk. And I'm sure you had only good intentions when you made that terrible promise all those years ago. But despite that..." She replaced her glasses and shook her head. "I just don't think I can ever forgive what you did."

Asgore lifted his hand, stepped away from the stove. He snapped his fingers and the burner burst into flame, licking around the sides of the kettle. He stared at the fire.

"That's quite all right, Toriel," he said quietly. "I'm not certain I can forgive myself, either."

He turned and leaned against the counter, his expression pensive. Neither he nor Toriel would look each other in the eye.

"I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you," he said. "I've been looking for their families. Or their descendents, at least. It really has been a terribly long time."

"Their...you mean the children who fell?"

"Who else? It's been hard going, obviously. I wasn't able to truly devote myself to the task until the relocation efforts died down a little. But, I've had some success. The Internet really is an incredible thing. And it's been quite easy to make some small detours on all those diplomatic trips."

"Asgore." Toriel's voice was laced with horror. "Why have you been looking for them?"

"To tell them what happened to their children, of course."

Her jaw hung open. "Have you completely lost your senses? All that peace we tried so hard to build...if the humans find out that our king was responsible for such an atrocity, it would disappear overnight! The war would-"

"I'm well aware of the consequences. I've taken pains to let them know that I was solely responsible. And even if that's not enough, it won't stop me." He finally turned to Toriel, and his gaze was unusually steely. "They deserve to know what happened. We've both known the pain of losing children for too long. I cannot just stand idly by knowing that anyone else feels that way on my account. I don't approach them as a king, or a monster. I approach them as a parent."

The kettle started to whistle.

“Perhaps that is why they’ve been much more forgiving than I expected,” Asgore mused. “Certainly more than I deserve. Or maybe it’s just the passage of time dulling their grief. Either way, the ones I’ve found were hardly offering their hands in friendship, but they seemed...relieved. Thankful to have an answer.” The kettle’s screech built. “Still, there’s no guarantee they will all be so kind. It’s quite possible that I’ll have to answer for my crimes in a more formal sense someday. And if that day comes, so be it. I swear that I will see this through, Toriel.”

The kettle’s whistle had turned to a shriek. Asgore waved a hand and the flame doused. He sifted faded amber petals into the teapot, then poured in the boiling water. The kitchen filled with a faint aroma of sweet lemons.

“Do you take milk and sugar?” His voice was soft and casual.

“No, thank you,” Toriel said faintly. She no longer appeared certain of where she was. Asgore pulled out a box of sugar cubes anyway. “Asgore...let me ask one thing.”

“Ask away.” He pulled out a sugar cube and unwrapped it.

“This is something I should have done myself, but he was always so quiet on the matter and I didn’t want to pry.” She took a deep breath. “While you were looking for the children’s families, did you happen to include Frisk’s?”

Asgore popped the cube into his mouth, crunched it between his teeth. “Of course. He was the first, as a matter of fact.”

“What did you find?”

He swallowed and said, “Nothing.”

A long silence followed. Asgore hunched over the kitchen counter, his blonde mane of hair hanging loose over the sink. He turned just enough for one eye to meet Toriel’s.

“I thought something was amiss when no one ever stepped forward to claim him. Even though he’d turned down the offer to be our ambassador – quite understandably, in my view – he was still the lone human at the head of a crowd of monsters. He was rather hard to miss. But nobody came to welcome him home. He has no family to speak of. I found no mention of his name, or any news of his disappearance. None of his human classmates recognize him – he gets on with them fine, but they all seem to think he transferred from a different school. He was never enrolled at any other schools in this town, or the towns nearby, or the city. I asked every monster I could to let me know if they learned anything about Frisk from before he fell, a passing mention, a stray conversation, and they heard nothing.” The counter groaned as he tightened his grip. “*Nothing.*”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Toriel was at a loss for words.

“I’ll keep looking, of course,” he continued. “I imagine I will for a very long time. Because I don’t think I can accept it. The idea that anyone – especially a child, especially one like Frisk – could ever be so alone in the world.”

Toriel looked down at her hands. Her eyes welled up.

“When I met him in the Ruins, I asked him to take my hand,” she said. “I remember thinking how eagerly he grasped it. How tightly he held on. Much more so than the other children.” She took off her spectacles; they trembled in her grip. “And that was after who knows how many of those...resets, Asriel called them. I wonder. What must it have been like the very first time?”

The tea had finished steeping. Asgore filled their cups, then dropped several sugar cubes into his own mug and stirred. The spoon clicked rhythmically against the ceramic.

“He’s been talking more lately. Have you noticed that, Asgore?”

“Yes, I have. And Asriel’s been much less gloomy.” He carried the cups to the table, set them down. “They suffered a great deal. But little by little, they appear to be raising each other’s spirits.”

He pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Toriel. He looked down into his reflection in the tarry brown tea. The sweet steam veiled his face.

“We have some extraordinary children, Toriel.” His eyes flicked up to her. “Those other children, too, could have been extraordinary. I had no right to take those futures away from them. And I don’t blame you if you hate me for it.”

“Asgore, I don’t *hate* you, I...” She pinched between her eyes, then lowered her hand. “I made mistakes, as well. If I had stayed in the capital, tried to talk you out of it...I mean, I was furious at the time, yes, but if I had not been so rash, then maybe some of that misery could have been avoided.”

“You did what you thought was best. You mustn’t dwell on it.”

“But I-”

“Toriel, please listen.” He leaned forward into the steam. “We can’t help but make mistakes. We measure our lives by them. No matter how hard we try, how pure our intentions, we’ll always do things that we regret. There’s no escaping it. One by one, those regrets build on us, and weigh us down.” He leaned back again; his chair creaked. “But as painful as it may be, I just think it’s important that we never let ourselves become uncaring or cruel. Instead, we should help each other as much as we can, and hope that tomorrow will always be better than today.”

Toriel stared at his earnest expression. Then she covered her mouth to stifle the laugh. “Goodness. How very eloquent.”

Asgore grinned. “Was it? That’s good to hear. It’s been so long since I’ve had to make a speech.”

Toriel looked down at her teacup. She clicked her claws against its rim. She peered into her reflection in the drink, and was surprised at the smile on her face.

“Well, then.” She held the cup out to Asgore. “Here’s to better days.”

Asgore held out his mug. “May there be too many to count.”

And they drank together in the sun-drenched kitchen.

* * *

Frisk stood at the edge of the pit.

This cave was quite close to the base of Mt. Ebott, and easily visible from the main trail; it felt like a snare for unwary travelers, and history had proven it to be a very successful one. Sunlight still bled into its depths, and the wind hummed over the entrance like an invitation, lulling any tired hikers looking to step out of the chill. But then there was that deceptive gnarled root hiding in the gloom on the cavern floor, or the way the ground past that root inclined just so – and finally, the pit itself, large enough to swallow anyone whole, and cast them down into the underground, on that sunny patch where the golden flowers grew.

The pit was completely blocked off, now. Tree roots had burst through fissures in the stone, mangling the edges of the hole in their entanglement. They formed a net that looked sturdy enough to hold the weight of ten people. Yet they didn’t grow thick enough to block the sunlight completely; through the gaps in that wooden netting, Frisk thought he could barely see the light lay on that flower bed.

His hair and his hoodie moved to and fro in the breeze. After a long while, he lifted one foot, and dangled it over the edge. Then he pulled it back again.

“Frisk! Are you okay in there?”

He turned and saw Asriel at the mouth of the cave. His fuzzy head and the cuffs of his windbreaker seemed to glow in the murk.

“I’m fine, Asriel. Coming out now.”

He stepped over the root, walked out of the cave, and held an arm over his face until his eyes adjusted. When the glare faded, he saw Asriel anxiously toying with the straps of his knapsack.

“Sorry, Frisk. I know you wanted to go in alone, but you were taking a really long time and I’d thought you had fallen again-”

“That would’ve been embarrassing, huh?”

Asriel snorted. “Yeah, kind of.”

“It’s safe there now. The hole’s all blocked up.” Asriel stared. “By tree roots.” Asriel’s face shone with admiration. “Hey, don’t look at me like that. We’re not even sure if it’s the same tree.”

“It’s totally the same tree.”

“Okay, but I still didn’t really do anything to-” Asriel’s eyes wouldn’t stop sparkling. “You know what, never mind.” Frisk turned to hide his blush and held out his arms. “I’m ready.”

“Uh, yeah, just one second.” Frisk heard a rustle as Asriel fetched the other knapsack. “Man, this thing is heavy. I really wish we still had your phone, Frisk.”

“So do I.” The extra-dimensional phone Alphys had given to Frisk had been confiscated, destroyed, and replaced by Toriel, after she’d learned that the two of them had been using it to smuggle an entire convenience store’s worth of snacks. They’d had to pack supplies the conventional way.

“Put it on like this, and then pull on these...right?” Asriel wrestled the pack onto Frisk’s arms and tightened the straps until his shoulders groaned. “All good?”

“All good.”

“Then let’s go.”

Frisk watched Asriel walk off, his windbreaker swishing with every step; it had been customized to resemble his family’s traditional garb, predominantly purple with the Delta Rune emblazoned on the back. That jacket and Frisk’s blue hoodie had been sent in one of Sans’ care packages while he was abroad. Asriel’s was still relatively unused, but Frisk’s was already sporting some discolored patches and loose threads. He slept in the thing, when he could get away with it.

Asgore’s suspicions had been correct. This hiking trip was the product of a long and meticulous conspiracy, with none other than Bratty and Catty at the helm. Those two girls possessed a net of gossip, rumor, and blackmail so far-ranging that they probably commanded more influence over monsterkind than Asgore himself, and when Frisk and Asriel had approached them asking for help, they’d promised to use every ounce of that terrible power to assist their cause, right after they got done pinching Asriel’s adorable furry cheeks. Asriel had stoically weathered their aggressive affection; he’d sworn to Frisk that he would stay strong.

For the drive up to the mountain’s base, Bratty and Catty had press-ganged Burgerpants, who’d accepted the task with his characteristic verve and enthusiasm (“Godspeed, little buddies. Your parents can kill me, but they can’t make me care”). In their knapsacks were a variety of sandwiches and other healthy snacks prepared by the Snowdin rabbit family. Frisk had asked the family’s matriarch if she thought Toriel would be upset with them; in reply, she had cheerfully said they’d all have a nice laugh about it later, with an optimism that even Frisk found impressive. Their equipment itself – the knapsacks, flashlights, canteens, Frisk’s hiking boots (Asriel went barefoot as usual), and others – had been provided by Gerson, who’d dropped it all on them free of charge after hearing their plans for this adventure. Asriel had asked the grizzled monster if he thought that Asgore would be upset with them; in reply, Gerson had laughed for three consecutive minutes, without stopping for breath.

The path up Mt. Ebott had been underused and overgrown, for obvious reasons, but that had changed after the barrier broke. The descending monsters hadn’t left a trail so much as a four-lane highway; the churned dirt was still littered with clumps of evicted brush and bramble

that had been torn up and kicked aside by their exodus. The two of them stared at that beaten ground that cut between the leafy trees. The air was cool and scentless. The mountain was remarkably quiet. They would hear a creaking branch, a rustling leaf, a liquid trill of birdsong, but beyond that, the silence pressed against their ears like cotton batting. The mountain's domed summit loomed high, high above, obscured by the trees' canopy.

"It's going to be a long climb," Frisk said. "You sure you're up for this, Asriel?"

"Are you?"

"Mm-hm."

Asriel nudged him in the ribs. "Then why are we still standing here? I've wanted to do this since I was old enough to walk."

"Lead the way, then."

Asriel grinned, hooked his thumbs in the straps of his backpack, and started off. Frisk watched him go, and then fished a small notebook and a pencil out of his hoodie pocket. He flipped through the first several pages – they contained sketches of Asriel's face, Asgore's flower beds, passing clouds, the silhouette of Mt. Ebott. None of them were very well-drawn, but he was improving. He saw tally marks and temperatures and terrible jokes he'd heard from Sans. Finally, his finger stopped on a sketch of the pit within the cave, little more than a splotch of charcoal in a sea of scribble; he'd drawn it from memory. He took the pencil and drew dark loopy lines over the pit, then paused, and slashed an X over the entire page.

He looked up. Asriel had already stopped and turned around; Frisk saw the glinting eye of his phone lens pointed down at him. Asriel waved.

Frisk sighed, replaced the notebook, and started after him.

"You look really cool when you're drawing like that, Frisk," Asriel said. "Like some kind of brave explorer."

He'd said that without a trace of irony. Frisk couldn't help but smile.

"Thanks, Asriel. How's the battery on that thing?"

"Doing fine!" Asriel had been silent and shy for a while after leaving the underground, but when he'd found out about the innovations humanity had made to their phones, his face had lit up like the sun. You couldn't accidentally leave the lens cap on a camera phone. He filmed nearly everything he saw. He did so now, as he turned and walked up the trail ahead of Frisk.

"Careful. Don't trip."

"We barely started and I'm already getting some great footage. Are all mountains like this, Frisk?"

"I don't know."

“Everything’s so quiet and there’s so many trees and you can almost see the city in the distance if you look back, it’s amazing! I can’t wait to show Mom.” Then, Asriel stopped walking, and his expression turned haunted. “...oh, God, I’m gonna have to show Mom.”

Frisk gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and kept walking. Asriel hurried after him.

“Frisk, we need to come up with a story to tell her. If we come back home without a really, really good excuse, we’ll be grounded. And by that I mean Mom’ll literally put us in the ground. I don’t want to go through that again!”

Frisk snorted and stopped in his tracks, knuckles pressed to his face; horrified giggles seeped out from around his fingers. “Asriel, that’s *awful*.”

“What? It happened to me! I’m allowed to joke about it!” He sounded indignant, but looked quite pleased with himself. “Besides, it’s better than puns. Between you, Mom, and Sans, I’ve had all I can take of those.”

“You don’t think they’re humerus?”

“Frisk.”

“I had no idea they’d get your goat.”

“*Frisk*.”

“We should be okay, though.” He set off again. “I got Dad to talk with her.”

“What, you think she’ll be so busy getting mad at him that she won’t bother with us? That’s kind of mean, Frisk. It should work, but...”

“I don’t think that’ll happen. I always got the feeling that she doesn’t really want to be so angry with him. Hopefully they’ll take some time to understand each other better.”

Asriel had no reply to that. They trudged along in silence for a time. Then, he said, “She’s still gonna give us extra homework for the rest of our lives.”

“Worth it.”

“Totally worth it.”

Dried leaves rustled beneath their feet. The sun crawled across the sky as they walked, shifting the patchwork shadows below. They stopped every so often when they found something that they wanted to sketch, film, or photograph, but besides that, they kept a steady pace up the trail. Their legs did not tire. The path was flat and fairly straight, the incline not too steep, and they were both used to exerting themselves – Frisk had treaded back and forth across the entire Underground countless times, and Asriel had been so overjoyed to regain his limbs that he would often run around until he dropped.

The trail shrank, heightened, so that the shallow gullies of underbrush on each side dropped further away with every step. They rose from the woods below and saw how the footpath

wormed its way along the mountain's outer edge. This was the only trail that led up to the barrier cavern. The earth here had been chewed down to bare stone by the monsters' careful passage. The sunlight printed their shadows on the cliff face as they walked, Frisk up front, Asriel behind. Some of the cheer left Asriel's face as he stared down at that mass of misshapen footprints leading down the mountain. He appeared lost in thought.

Frisk and Asriel stayed far from the path's edge as the drop became deeper and steeper. Finally, they arrived at the cliffside where they'd all first arrived upon leaving the barrier, watching the sun dawn on the surface world. Frisk had stood with one hand held by Toriel and another by Sans, feeling the light lay warm on his face; Asriel had sat on top of Asgore's shoulders to get a better view, clutching his father's horns for dear life, his eyes so wide that they seemed to consume half his head. Right now it looked to be early afternoon, and while the light had changed, that breathtaking view remained the same. The rolling expanse of green, tinged with red where the leaves had just begun to turn. In the distance, the smattering of suburbs (none of the houses appeared to be on fire, which they both took as a sign that Toriel and Asgore's meeting hadn't gone too badly), and the horizon broken by the chromed geometry of the glittering city. Behind them, the cave where the barrier had once stood yawned like an open mouth.

"I'm going to take a look inside," Frisk said. "You want to come?"

"No, thanks. I'd like to get some photos." But Asriel didn't take out his phone. His jacket and his ears billowed gently in the breeze. His voice was oddly hushed.

"...alright. I'll be back soon."

Frisk set off for the cave, and stole one last glance over his shoulder before he entered the dark. Asriel still hadn't moved.

The tree was still there, in that echoing gloom. The brilliant jade of its leaves cut through the shadows as surely as before. Its trunk had grown wider, its roots so lively that the stone floor had cracked and erupted into mountains of its own. Now that the leaves had crawled across the walls and ceiling, marking this chamber's dimensions, the cave looked much smaller than he'd first believed. The ceiling, too, had begun to splinter. If the tree's growth continued like this, it was possible that it would one day hollow out the whole mountain and burst up through the peak. Maybe it had tapped into Waterfall's magically infused water. Maybe it was just that determined to survive.

Frisk's footsteps echoed as he approached the tree and placed his hand on the trunk. He thought he heard the leaves rustle at his touch.

"Thanks for everything," he said. "Be good, okay?"

It must have been his imagination. That brief sensation of the root bed caressing his ankle.

He made his way back outside. Asriel had finally gotten his phone back out, and silently panned back and forth over the horizon. His knapsack lay at his side. The Delta Rune printed on his jacket rippled and creased.

“The tree’s doing well,” Frisk said.

“That’s good.”

“The Underground’s probably full of roots by now. I guess it really did block that hole.”

“Mhm.”

Frisk leaned over, his expression concerned. “Asriel, are you okay?”

“I was just thinking.” He put the phone away. “This is where all the monsters were sealed, right? After the war. So, that trail we just walked. They would’ve had to walk it, too.”

The mountain’s shadow lay cold on them both.

“It must have been awful,” Asriel said. “Being forced to travel all the way up here, knowing you would never come back down. And all the humans watched us do it, thinking we’d be gone forever. No wonder that legend got started.”

“You’re here now, though. You all came back.”

“Some of us did. I guess that has to be enough.” He shivered a little. “Frisk, do you think any of them tried to run away? What must’ve happened to them?”

Frisk stared down at his feet. Then, he walked off. Asriel heard his footsteps fade, and smiled sadly.

“You’re right. It was a stupid question.”

Frisk examined the far side of the cave mouth; the cliff path snaked around up, disappearing into yet more woodlands. Fallen rocks littered the ground.

“Looks like the path keeps going up here,” Frisk said. “It’s probably going to get harder. You want to keep climbing?”

“Can’t stop now, right?”

“You can always stop, Asriel. Don’t feel bad about it.”

“No, I’m fine.” He turned and hitched up his knapsack. “There’s just...a lot of history here, you know?”

“Yeah.” Frisk kicked a stone out of the way. “It gets a lot rockier, too. Are your feet going to be alright?”

Asriel wiggled one of his paws. “What, these? Not a scratch. I’m probably doing better than you are.”

“I guess that means Boss Monsters have strong soles.”

“Well, compared to other monsters, I guess, but I don’t see what that has to do with…” He trailed off upon seeing Frisk’s grin. He thought about what he’d just heard. His muzzle wrinkled like he’d just smelled something foul. And then he grabbed his pack and hurried up and past Frisk, trying to cover his mouth with one hand. Frisk followed behind, still grinning.

“I saw you smile,” he said.

“You didn’t see anything.”

“Come on, you’re smiling.”

“I am and I hate it!”

They continued into the next tier of woods – this ground had not been stepped on in decades, and the path was long buried under the earthy-smelling strata of brush and fallen leaves. There was still that eerie silence, but the rustle of tree branches in the wind seemed louder, as if the mountain was offended at having its solitude interrupted. They had to bend back branches and spiny leaves to pass several times; after one branch smacked Asriel across the nose, Frisk grabbed a large stick and used it to help hold the obstacles aside. The trail, or what could be seen of it, started to twist and double back on itself in bewildering ways. In response, Asriel laid down beacons with his magic – small balls of iridescent light that hovered an inch or so off the ground, their pulsing skins covered with an oily sheen of rainbow. He created one of these shining marbles every few dozen steps with a snap of his finger, marking where they had walked. Frisk was rapt at the sight.

The trees grew bare. The wind turned chilly. Their legs began to ache. They found a relatively clear spot with a few fallen trunks and broke for lunch, fishing their sandwiches and canteens out of their packs. After they ate, they tarried a while longer to rest their muscles. Asriel patrolled the edge of the clearing with his camera, alternating between film and photography at every twitching leaf as Frisk sat and went through his notebook. He wasn’t sure what to write about, so he wrote about everything – the taste of the sandwiches, the tales of the mountain, Asriel’s magic, the smells on the wind.

Mt. Ebott’s peak never seemed to be any closer; it was as if the place’s geography simply rearranged itself around them, always a little colder, a little harsher, discouraging them from pressing on. The soil grew dry and studded with stones. The air thinned and burned in their throats. But they stayed determined.

Eventually, they arrived at a hill so steep they needed to help each other over it, Frisk seizing hold of a protruding tree root and pulling up Asriel with his other hand. At the top was a grassy patch ringed with trees like broken pillars. The sun had started to kiss the horizon, its light blushing scarlet. When they turned and saw the forest they’d traveled through, they saw the reddened dusk laying on the treetops like rust.

Asriel said, “I think this is a good spot.”

“You don’t want to wait until we reach the top?”

“The soil’s getting too rocky. They won’t grow.”

“Okay. Hold still.”

Frisk helped Asriel take off his knapsack, and then stepped back as Asriel rummaged through its pockets. He extracted a bottle of water, a plastic bag filled with seeds, and an old knife – its blade nicked and flecked with rust. He popped the bag open. From inside came the barest whiff, scarcely more than a memory, of sweet lemons.

Asriel hunched down low in the center of the grass, and stabbed the knife into the ground. He used the blade of the knife to carve out a circle of earth. He sawed through the dirt, levered it loose. Then he used his hands, digging his claws deeper into the soft soil to widen the hole further. When it was about the same size as a basketball, he took the water bottle and poured it in until the dirt went chocolate-dark. Then he finally added the seeds, and covered them up, and poured the rest of the water on top.

Asriel plunged the knife into the disturbed earth and stepped beside Frisk. The knife stood tall and straight like a grave marker. In a sense, that’s what it was.

They both stood with their hands folded, staring down at Asriel’s work. The wind plucked at the hems of their jackets.

“You think they’ll be all right?” Frisk asked.

“Considering how they grew in the Underground? If they survive the frost, they’ll probably germinate wild. Half this mountain might be covered in them by next year.”

“He’d like that, I think.”

“Yeah. I think so, too.” Asriel’s face was solemn. “Frisk, is it okay that we’re doing this? I mean...he did some really bad things.”

Frisk didn’t answer. Asriel glanced aside and saw him standing in the same position, hands crossed, his hair over his eyes. He looked back and smiled.

“You’re right. It was a stupid question.”

He reached into his shirt and drew out the locket. The dying sunlight tarnished that golden heart.

“Frisk, there’s something else I wanted to ask.”

“What is it?”

“What were you doing in that cave? The one with the hole.”

Frisk seemed to stiffen a bit. “Just thinking.”

“About what?”

He took longer to answer this time. “Second chances, I guess.”

“Haha. No wonder you took so long. You’ve seen plenty of those.”

Frisk nodded and began to walk off, but then he felt Asriel’s hand close over his own. That was when he finally turned to meet Asriel’s gaze.

“I was listening, you know. When you calmed down Chara. I heard what you said. ‘It’s the worst feeling in the world,’ right?” Frisk still didn’t move. “Frisk, do you still feel that way?”

“Of course not.”

“It’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it. But you’ve helped everyone so much. I think you should let them help you, too.”

“You are helping me.” He squeezed Asriel’s hand. “All of you. All the time.”

They stood like that for a while.

Then, Asriel said, “If you weren’t wearing that stupid backpack I’d hug you *so hard* right now.”

Frisk laughed and broke away. “I bet you would. Maybe next time.”

He helped Asriel back into his knapsack and they set off again. The path up the mountain could barely be called a path at all anymore; it was a series of ever-sharper inclines, the soil gradually falling away to solid stone. As the sun continued to set, the sound of birdsong faded, so that all that remained on the mountain was Asriel and Frisk’s footsteps and grunts of exertion. The skies turned a bruised purple that seemed to bleed away the solidity from everything; all silhouettes turned fuzzy, ghost-like.

“It’s going to be pitch-black by the time we reach the top,” Frisk said.

“Good thing we packed blankets. It’s gonna be tough to sleep up here, though.”

“Not as bad as the Snowed Inn.”

“Why, what was wrong with it?”

“Three monsters snoring next door.”

“Oh. How bad?”

“Worse than Dad.”

“Ohhh, that’s bad.”

Frisk looked behind him and saw that Asriel’s beacons were still burning bright. “How long should those last?”

“What, the lights? Maybe a full day. They don’t take a lot of magic. We should be able to follow them back down, too.”

“You’re so cool, Asriel.”

Asriel hurried ahead to hide his embarrassment.

Now the trail had gone nearly vertical. The shattered cliff face ahead consisted of sheer stone walls with only the merest of footholds, each leading to another flat rock like a giant’s staircase. The rocks chewed at Asriel and Frisk’s palms as they climbed, Frisk leading, pulling up Asriel when necessary. Their knapsacks felt like deadweights. Before long, they had to stop, their breath hitching in their chests. Even the wind over the mountain had ceased; the silence was sepulchral. In the forest below, Asriel’s markers shone like a constellation reflected in still water.

“We’ve gotta drop these things, Frisk.” Asriel wiped his forehead. “They’re killing us.”

“We’ll be in serious trouble if we lose them, though. We can’t make the climb down without water or anything.”

“I have an idea. Here, take yours off.”

They fumbled off the packs and Asriel secreted them in a small alcove on the cliffside. He stood over them, took a deep breath, and clapped his hands. The packs burst into flame.

For a moment, Frisk felt panic, but then he realized that the fire enveloping their supplies gave off no heat – it was hard white, and shone like mother-of-pearl, throwing off prisms of color with every lick. Its light crept across half the cliffside. Asriel stepped back, examined his handiwork. Frisk crouched by the fire for a while, grinning ear to ear.

The final ascent. That bright flame dropped away as they continued their climb. The footholds grew ever thinner, more precarious; a misstep here would send either of them on a fall much more disastrous than the one Frisk had suffered. But they helped each other up each stone at a time, clambering across Mt. Ebott’s face until even the mountain seemed to relent. The outcroppings became more forgiving. The stony edges less sharp. And then, Frisk smacked one palm over the lip of the last giant step, and felt dry soil under his skin.

They found themselves on a hilltop, where the earth sifted under their feet like dust. There were still trees here, but they were leafless, stunted, little more than petrified sticks, clinging to life by sheer determination. They stood like penitents in the moonlight as Frisk and Asriel cautiously made their way up. The ground continued to slope. They still couldn’t find the peak.

“It just keeps going,” Asriel said under his breath.

“It can’t go on forever.”

“Maybe we should’ve just quit after planting the seeds. I mean, that was really dangerous back there. Don’t we have anything better...to...”

Frisk had stopped walking. His head craned skyward. Asriel followed his gaze, and the words dried up in his throat.

Further down the mountain, the night sky had seemed flat as slate and black as whaleskin, with only the feeblest pinpricks of stars glowing in the murk. But here, at the summit, with night fully fallen, they saw a shimmering plane of color from amethyst purple to velvety black, the colors running together in whorls like wet paint, and the stars like diamond dust cast out into the expanse, their brilliant disorder changing every time they blinked; they could make out faces, and patterns, and stars laid in parallel like roadways spread across the sky. Several meteors streaked by, scratching their ivory paths across the dark. All changing. Nothing still.

Frisk and Asriel stood on the peak of Mt. Ebott, bathed in starlight. Tears came to Asriel's eyes. He didn't wipe them away.

"I dreamed about standing here." His voice filled with wonder. "It's more incredible than I'd hoped."

He felt Frisk take his hand.

"Hey, Asriel?"

Asriel wrenched himself away from the view long enough to see Frisk's smile. "Yeah?"

"After this, let's find something even better."

In the world around Mt. Ebott, new possibilities rose and burst. Papyrus' car stood parked on the side of a highway in the pouring rain; Papyrus carefully studied an upside-down map as Sans sat out on the hood, his face upturned, feeling the raindrops thud off his skull and run between the seams of his grin. Undyne and Alphys snapped selfies a mercifully safe distance from a smoking volcano; Undyne grinned wide as she showed off the gold band gleaming on her clenched fist, while Alphys frantically texted to Mettaton in the background. Asgore and Toriel made their own trek across the mountain's skin, following the markers Asriel had left behind; they saw his final flame gleaming like Polaris in the distance, and pressed forward with renewed purpose. People all over turned out their lights and pulled up their blankets and hoped that tomorrow would be kind. But for Frisk and Asriel, there was only this moment. These bent trees, this soundless space, the warmth of a hand in their own. They stood side by side. And the jewelbox heavens rotated ever onward, as the world moved into the relentless future.

Chapter End Notes

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