A Second Chance
by Just_1_Man_Writing_A_Story_For_You

Summary

An Umbreon who nearly lost everything and an abused Espeon walked their own painful paths alone until they met each other. Now they face a long healing process as they try to forget their horrible pasts and move on. The Johto region can be a cruel place, but one trainer will do everything he can to make their lives better on the road to the Silver Conference & beyond.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
An Umbreon's Beginnings

Chapter Notes

What's up everybody? I'm Writer4fun aka Just_1_Man_Writing_A_Story_For_You. The idea for "A Second Chance" has been in my head for quite some time so I decided to take the next step and write it. A big thanks to you, the reader, for finding this story piled under a mountain of Pokémon Stories & a lot of Espeon/Umbreon stories.

The way I see it, the road to success is always under construction so feedback would be greatly appreciated at any point in time and I have acted on it in some capacity. However, I completely understand if you just want to sit back & read the story. Enjoy chapter one and have a good day :)

-Just_1_Man aka Writer4fun

Disclaimer: I do not own Pokémon.

Chapter 1: An Umbreon's Beginnings

Ever since I was a tiny Eevee, I learned that nothing in life is a sure thing. I was hatched from an egg in a day-care ranch in the middle of what seemed to be nowhere along with other Pokémon. Although I couldn't get an exact count, I figured there were a couple dozen of us free to roam. The plot of land was very large and included a pond, a large field, and some rocky terrain. My favorite place was a small patch of grass in the far back corner of the ranch away from the commotion when I wasn't in the mood to play. Every Pokémon had one thing in common: we could not find our parents. It hit every newly hatched Pokémon at some point, but the workers were very kind to us so we thought of them as our parents.

We were clumsy balls of energy, but I had more energy than the others when it came to play time. As a result, I ended up with the most bandages being put on every week. The workers would come and round us up at the same times every day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They would also come out at random times to check on us or even shelter us in a large barn next to the main house. We were led there before incoming storms, or at least that's what we were told. Sometimes we would be ushered in despite the perfect weather. However, I always wanted to play longer or get into mock battles with the other Pokémon. After my second day of existence, I won my first battle against a Vulpix which gave me confidence and a desire to keep getting stronger. My daily routine continued for months until an older trainer approached the ranch.

It was the first time someone an actual trainer came up to the gate. Most of the people that visited were older looking people in business attire or people that just didn't look like trainers. A few families stopped by on occasion but left with nothing every time. I hid behind some rocks near the front gate in hopes of eyeing this new person.

"So, what do you have here?" the trainer asked with mild curiosity.

"Well we have some Houndour and Sandshrew by the rocks, Shellder in the pond, and Murkrow usually graze in the large field. We have more too if you're looking for something else," replied one of the workers.
"Ummm, I'd like to look around and see for myself."

"I need all of your Poké Balls and trainer ID please."

"Fair enough. I can see why having Poké Balls on me would cause a problem." He handed over everything as a worker eyed the trainer.

"Alright… Tom is it? Come back when you've picked one out." The staff member looked uneasy throughout the whole exchange.

As soon as I saw the Poké Balls handed over, I felt upset knowing I couldn't battle to show my battling skills. I still wanted to see what he was doing so I tailed him from a distance. What was he looking for? A friend? A new member for his team? Why did he come here of all places? I'm sure he could catch anything he wanted on his own. Should I approach him myself? If so, how do I approach him? This was the first time I've seen someone really taking their time to look around. Usually they just pop in and out without much of a problem.

After about half an hour of wandering aimlessly, he finally noticed me but kept going in search of whatever it was he was looking for. The look he gave me was one of intrigue, but not enough to warrant him coming closer to me. He continued to go deeper into the ranch so I decided to leave him be after I followed him. He probably wasn't going to acknowledge me beyond that first bit of eye contact so I figured going after him at this point would be a waste of my time. I trotted to my spot to catch up on some sleep in the warm sun. To my surprise, I heard his footsteps pick up so I sprinted into the tall grass in an attempt to lose him before getting to my spot. As soon as I stared to settle in, I heard his labored breathing and heavy footsteps.

"You're a fast little guy," he said with a smile across his face between breaths. "I think I've made my decision, but let me show you these badges first."

He took out a small case with two shiny things in it and six empty spots. I had never seen these "badges" before but I pawed at the sparkling metal and squealed in joy. How amazing would it be to see those sparkle every day and have a chance to win them all?

"It's settled, you're coming with me!" I hopped up and down until he finally picked me up and went back to the front of the ranch. It was that day when I realized my life was going to change, but not before the trainer and my so called "parents" had a conversation.

"So I see you found this little guy, huh Tom? He's pretty fast and energetic. He was practically born to battle."

"Yeah, I'll take him. How much?" Tom asked nervously. "I mean it's technically wild, but this isn't illegal or anything… right?" I looked over to the man and he froze up for a second.

"No. Not at all!" I noticed his voice wasn't as innocent as Tom's voice. "Since he's the only Eevee here and Eevee are rare in general, it'll be 10,000P."

"Are you kidding me?! All I have is two badges and 11,000P to my name. I'll be going to Goldenrod City with almost no cash!"

After they stared at each other for what felt like years, I looked up at Tom and put on the cutest face I could. He sighed, smiled, rubbed my head, gave the man some paper, collected his things from the worker, and left with me in hand. I soon realized that something was off about what just happened.

Me, a little Eevee that loved to battle, left without a battle and that made me upset. All that love to
keep me in fighting shape and for what? To just give me away? Was any of it even genuine? I resented everything at that moment in time and I headbutted Tom while trying to jump away but my new master saw the anger and sadness in my eyes and comforted me. He said that he was going to battle his way to the top with me on the team as he pulled out the case yet again. I stopped attacking him and cried with tears of joy at that statement and soon fell asleep in Tom's arms. He rubbed my head and carried me down the dirt road, favoring me in his arms instead of my Poké Ball on his belt.

The road to the top was going to be a long and apparently lonely one. A Quilava was the only other Pokémon my master owned but it did get him two badges. He introduced me after setting up camp for the night in a forest. Unlike everyone back home, Quilava was uninterested in me. Tom sat back as I got a little closer to talk to him.

"Hi! I'm really excited to be travelling with you! Is travelling fun? How are the adventures?"

"It's okay I guess," he said monotonously.

"Don't you ever get tired being Tom's only partner?" Quilava let out an annoyed sigh.

"Not really. I'm strong enough to win battles in one attack." He looked at the stars and let out a deep breath. "Now that you're here, I guess that's a good thing for all of us. Tom has a new challenge in training you, I get some down time, and you get to battle tougher opponents."

"Great! I like battling. I think I'll fit in just fine."

"What about winning? Can you win your battles?" he said sternly. "Playtime is over little Eevee. I'm not sure how Tom exactly feels, but I'm not a fan of losing. It took one loss to a Pidgeotto to make me realize that breezing through life is impossible."

"I-I think I can win," I whispered in an attempt to get him to lighten up. He must've figured out that his attitude wasn't the best so he softened up his facial expression.

"As long as you put in the work, I'll be fine with that for now. Does that sound good?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Go back to Tom so we can sleep. Training starts tomorrow so be ready."

We trained for about a week against some wild Pokémon to get me adjusted to formal battling and responding to commands. Rattata was my first battle which ended up being a cakewalk. It took some time for me to feel stronger and took even longer for me to realize that finding a time to counterattack was more important that just dodging. Quilava still battled against almost trainer although I got a chance to see the difference in skill on both sides. The last trainer we ran into before the city was my first trainer battle. Psyduck didn't stand a chance as I easily outmaneuvered it while ramming into it when I was close enough. Tom called me back before walking into a large city.

Despite me being in my ball, all the people walking around scared me. I knew that I'd have to get used to people now that I was travelling. My master was all too eager to get the next badge and went straight for the gym despite it getting dark. After we walked in and walked to the battlefield, he released us from our balls and gave us a pep talk.

"Alright guys, this is the Goldenrod City gym. The third badge is right here! We have to take it right here, right now! Let me just heal you guys up first." The medicine stung but I felt completely refreshed. "Let's go!"
We both nodded and gave our best battle cries. Mine was quieter due to the nerves but I managed
to snap out of it and get ready for the fight. After the speech, a girl in a white shirt and white shorts
stepped into the other trainer's box. She was very polite despite the late start time; the sun had
finally set outside.

"Welcome to my gym! I'm Whitney and I specialize in the normal type. They're a very underrated
type so I hope you didn't come in here expecting to waltz through the battle. This will be a two on
two battle for the Plain Badge. Are you ready?" She was so excited as she threw a ball onto the
field. A ball of light emerged from her side of the field and the materialized Clefairy was ready to
go. My master was very focused on the pink ball of energy and turned to me before turning back to
the judge.

"I choose Eevee."

The confidence in his voice was reassuring. All five of us stood in silence while we all collected
our thoughts until the judge declared the battle to start. The flags went up and I went into my zone.
This is what I've been waiting for.

"Clefairy, use Metronome!"

A wag of the fingers from Clefairy meant that her Metronome was up to something devious and
when the fingers stopped, I was hit with a Tackle attack. It hardly left a mark seeing as it didn't
look comfortable running into me.

"Quick Attack!"

"Doubleslap!"

The moves were fast paced but Clefairy was missing while I rammed into it. It wailed in pain while
taking another Metronome command from Whitney. This time, Clefairy jumped and its foot
glowed, earning a grin from the gym leader.

"Jump Kick! Yes!"

"Dodge with Quick Attack!" Tom quickly ordered with a worried tone.

It was already slow enough and I knew it wasn't going to hit me yet I dodged anyway. The sound
that followed was not pretty. The force of the Jump Kick miss caused the Clefairy to crash to the
ground, breaking its knee or even the whole leg and faint from the impact. After a look by the
judge, he made his decision.

"Clefairy is unable to battle. Eevee is the winner!" the judge said raising the flag.

With a fist pump, Tom was feeling the match was over. But that changed in a hurry as Whitney
threw out her trump card.

"Miltank, you're up!" Whitney happily cheered. It almost sounded too happy.

Whitney was smiling even wider than a normal person should. I guessed that she expected to knock
me out in one hit but no, I was going to win. I didn't take that much of a beating from the earlier
round so I have no excuses. Tom gave me a thumbs up for support and I nodded in reply. The
judge surveyed the field and declared that the second battle could begin.

"Alright Miltank, Body Slam!"
"Dodge with Quick Attack!" That cow could move! It jumped and braced for impact with either me or the ground but I dodged just in time. Beating this thing was going to be a tough task.

"Rollout, let's go!" Tom had no chance to order a counter and I was hit with a solid impact. I tried to get up but to no avail and it swung around for a second Rollout hit and just like that, I was rammed again. I tried to get back up but my body wouldn't respond. A flag went up in the corner of my eye before I closed my eyes.

"Eevee is unable to battle. Miltank is the winner!"

I whimpered on the field and was called into my ball. However, I was let back out and was met with Tom's face in a matter of seconds.

"It's okay Eevee, just watch Quilava and you'll learn. Battling is never easy... especially when you've never battled against other trainers like this one." His voice was so calming to the point where I stopped crying and placed myself in a good spot to watch the final battle. "Quilava, let's go!" It just looked so confident standing out there on the field but Whitney was just as hungry to win. I watched Tom go from caring to intense in a fraction of a second to match her determination.

The judge reset himself and raised the flags for round three. "Miltank versus Quilava. Begin!"

"Smokescreen, and hurry!" A black smoke covered the whole surface and the Miltank lost its momentum as well as its target. Whitney remained calm and took a deep breath. It amazed me how something could change the battle in an instant and she could remain perfectly calm. Maybe, just maybe I need that aspect to my fighting.

"Jump and use Body Slam, Miltank!"

I saw the cow jump higher than before and was aiming for my teammate but without a command, an Ember attack flew from the thick smoke and put the cow off target and even burned it. Judging by the smile on Tom's face, it looked like they had done that stunt a few times in the past. A Rollout attack followed, clearing the smoke and nailing Quilava for some hefty damage, yet Tom didn't panic. In fact, Tom remained silent and let Quilava fight with no commands.

I was witnessing pure harmony. Each Ember was meant to throw Miltank off course and Quilava used the smoke to his advantage until it cleared. Miltank got in a shot with Rollout, but Quilava used Smokescreen again to cover himself before waiting to strike. With Miltank laboring after each missed attack, Quilava used its speed to get off a hit with Quick Attack even though he wasn't as heavy as the cow. I decided this is how I wanted to battle someday. Yes, commands are important but there seems to be some type of freedom when going with your gut.

The burn put on by Ember was too much over the course of the battle and Miltank's attacks weren't hitting as hard as they used to when they did connect. Both trainers and Pokémon were breathing heavily from the stress of the battle until Miltank collapsed from the onslaught in addition to the cumulative burn damage. The sound of it hitting the ground was very satisfying.

"Miltank is unable to battle. Quilava wins! This match goes to the challenger!" It was over; that shiny badge was ours. Tom hugged me and ran onto the field to hug Quilava.

After some waterworks by Whitney, Tom politely asked for his reward and she apologized while giving him the badge. All three of us admired the sparkle before Tom put it in his case and guided us to the door. Upon walking outside, I was glowing and gaining power until I felt the sensation fade away. My brown and white fur turned to black fur with yellow rings. Tom dropped to his knees and cried tears of joy while hugging me. And to think, I was crying in his arms some weeks
ago and now he's crying in mine. It's funny how things work out.

We walked back to the Pokémon Center under the full moon feeling as happy as can be. My rings started to go from a dull yellow to a very bright yellow and we got some curious looks from people walking around in the warm night. Tom and I strolled into the center while the nurse on duty greeted us. After healing us, she had a lengthy conversation with Tom upon seeing our new badge. Apparently, Whitney handed out a badge to challengers only 20% of the time on the first try. I may love the night but I have to sleep too and upon hearing that statistic, Tom's screams of bewilderment rang through the lobby waking up any potential sleeping members. After an apology, we headed down the hall to an empty room meant for one trainer.

He threw his bag into a corner and proceeded to change while I slept at the foot of his bed. I was almost asleep but his shirt landed on half of my face. I woke up feeling groggy and stared at him and he just laughed at me. I walked over to the mirror and did the same thing upon seeing my reflection. Before we went to bed, he showed me my ball.

"Do you want to sleep in here tonight?" he asked, a little unsure of himself. "I couldn't have you sleep outside your ball when we were training because of wild Pokémon. Quilava isn't really fond of sleeping outside in general so he'll go back in a minute."

He was right. As much as I hated my ball due to living outside of one most of my life, I would rather be safe and even I know my strength. Quilava even acknowledged he was not strong enough to fight hordes of wild Pokémon by going into its ball every night. I gently pushed the ball away to prove my point. He rubbed my head and went to bed; I soon followed at his bedside. As I drifted into dreamland, I couldn't help but wonder about my home life versus life on the road after seeing and winning that badge.

The care I was given was the bare minimum although I was still healthy, the affection was much more limited than what Tom was doing, we all didn't have parents, and the fact that Tom handed some things over to the worker in exchange for me instead of truly capturing me raised a red flag in my mind. With Tom by my side, I think I'll eventually come to realize that the travelling life was the way to go. I know there are still five slots left to fill in that badge case.

I couldn't wait for what tomorrow would bring.
Chapter Notes

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Chapter 2- The Highest of the Highs to the Lowest of the Lows

The morning sun came through the windows too soon for my liking. Half awake, I nudged Tom and was met with groans. I kept poking him with my paw until he decided to wake up. After he got dressed, we went to the lobby to eat breakfast. Pokémon food wasn't bad but the specialized food for specific types always tasted better. Luckily, Tom purchased fire and dark type food so we enjoyed the special treat after our sweet victory. While we were eating, Tom pulled out a map and studied it in order to decide our next move. After minutes of looking at it, he was still somewhat confused on his next stop so he turned to us.

"Okay, on the count of three, we all point to where we want to go for our next gym challenge. Ready? One. Two. Three!"

All three of us pointed to different areas. Tom had Ecruteak City, I had Olivine City, and Quilava had Azalea Town. After looking at our seemingly random decisions, Tom and Quilava looked at each other with grins on their faces.

"Quilava, you would want to go there again, wouldn't you?" Tom said, grinning wider. "I know how much you want that badge again but we already have it. Plus, that gym leader wasn't too happy that we swept 'em."

Hearing that made Quilava's grin bigger too; he knew that his fire roasted bugs all day, every day. After a long belly rub by Tom, he decided to look up information on Olivine City's gym. I didn't like the looks of the Pokémon from the Pokémon League information guide. I saw "STEEL TYPE" on the top of the page and proceeded to poke at my master.

"What's wrong Umbreon?"

"I can't fight steel types. I want some action next gym battle." But all he heard was a sad "breee". The language barrier can be and still is annoying for us, but at least Tom can read me well so it's not a huge problem.

"Let me guess, you don't want Quilava stealing the spotlight again?" Tom said with a detective like tone. "I guess you're right, plus I need a more diverse team to take down steel types."

Saying I can't fight steel types is an understatement. At the ranch, I played with Magnemite but ran into them on accident and it really hurt, even with my fluffy coat; why would I fight one if it hurts just running into one?

Putting two and two together, we headed for Ecruteak to face the ghost type specialist, Morty. The route to the city was pretty barren. A few trainers were relaxing until we came along. However, they were polite and accepted our challenges. Quilava continued to dominate foes while I learned to use Faint Attack. In fact, I was pretty sure I was able to beat Quilava with my new move, but his...
flame wheel made me think twice. I found myself not being commanded by Tom whenever my foe was drastically weaker than me or I had a type advantage. I realized that I was one step closer to perfect harmony with Tom trusting my movements. Sure, I was far from perfect but the fact Tom gave me more leeway during fights meant I could handle myself.

We pulled up to the city entrance in the late afternoon despite such a short route. As much as Tom wanted to rush to the gym, his stomach told him otherwise. He decided a trip to the pokemon center was in order first to heal us up and to enjoy a nice 5:30pm dinner. He called Quilava out of its ball and all three of us walked up to the counter.

"Hello, I was wondering if you could heal these two please?" Tom asked. "Also, is Morty going to be in tomorrow morning to take challenges? I have three badges and would like a fourth," he said with a smirk on his face.

A statement like that made my ears perk up. This was not the Tom I knew since we met. That cocky attitude had me worried considering he only had Quilava and me. Did we really stand to waltz through a gym leader like that? Whitney took some tactical planning and a lucky burn to seal the deal. Quilava didn't say a word when I looked at him, but his eyes told me power would get us through this match.

"Of course I can heal these two," she replied sweetly but then turned businesslike shortly after. "Morty actually prefers to battle around this time as opposed to mornings. He says his ghost Pokémon feel energized as the night goes on. If you want, I can look to see if you can get a match in later tonight."

"If you can, that'd be great because someone else likes the night too." He replies, keeping the smirk on his face while looking at me; I tilted my head. The keyboard taps finally come to a stop and she turns the screen to Tom. He analyzes the screen and nods. "Sign me up for a 7:30 battle please. We could use the two hour rest."

"Very well. Good luck in your match."

With that, we all ate our food silently in the lobby but I suspected Tom and Quilava had something going on in their heads to make the battle turn in their favor. My gut feeling was that I would use Faint Attack and Bite constantly so I didn't have the same pressure on me compared to my fire partner. Tom continued to be deep in thought until he saw the clock. He took a deep breath before standing up and motioning for us to follow. The walk over was like the calm before the storm. A beautiful night sky was clear while the streets were lined with lights. We arrived at the gym entrance expecting something ghost themed, but it looked like any other building in town. It was time.

The gym itself looked different, but the battle area remained the same. A giant sandy rectangle with lines brings a sense of stability to all trainers and Pokémon despite each gym having its own style. A man stood with blonde hair and had a ball in hand.

"I assume you are Tom, yes?" Morty asked with a hint of curiosity. Tom nodded in response. "I am Morty and I favor ghost types. They are the craftiest yet most playful Pokémon that I have seen in my time as a trainer. There's just something about them that researchers can't put their finger on. Anyway, this will be a three on three battle." Tom just stared into space before Morty asked him if he was fine.

"I have only two Pokémon," was all my master could say, albeit very calm and stern; that demeanor was a good bluff. I could only assume his first two badges had come on the strength of Quilava alone and Whitney must have been his first intense battle. Maybe Tom was aiming to
catch other Pokémon later on, but most people would've assumed any trainer had more than two with three badges. I mean, Quilava wasn't much of a talker so I would appreciate the company.

"I cannot allow myself to be out one less Pokémon simply because a trainer is not prepared, so it will be three on two" Morty shot back. It almost sounded like a worker who scolded me for playing too rough back at the ranch. Tom understood and went to his corner with Quilava and me. The judge stood at the ready.

"Gastly, let's roll!"

"Quilava, you're up!"

I was utterly stunned. A type advantage and I was on the sidelines? I sulked next to Tom as I waited for the judge to start the match. He still showed a calm demeanor despite being down 3-2 before the match even started. At the judge's command, the battle started.

"Ember!"

"Hypnosis!"

Gastly was hit with the ball of fire but missed putting Quilava to sleep. Gastly was visibly upset that its move missed and turned to Morty for an attack. It couldn't come fast enough.

"Flame Wheel! Keep up the pressure!"

Flames engulfed my battle partner and he charged toward the Gastly at full speed. An explosion went off in the middle of the battlefield with Gastly struggling to move after the smoke cleared.

"Gastly, get up and use Night Shade!"

To Tom's dismay, it got up and fired a Night Shade towards Quilava who couldn't dodge it in time. The move connected and Quilava was flat on the ground, but only for a few seconds as he got back up and shook it off.

"Finish it up with Flame Wheel, let's go!" Tom shouted and Quilava did just that. The Gastly fell to the floor; there would be no more attacks from it.

"Gastly is unable to battle, Quilava is the winner!" the judge said after raising Quilava's flag. Morty was unfazed as he recalled Gastly while Tom eased up and smiled a little bit. Haunter was sent out next and his smile faded away as our new opponent was more intimidating.

"Smokescreen!" Tom called out, hoping to provide the same advantage as in Whitney's battle. However, Haunter used Lick from long distance but luckily for Tom the paralyzing effect didn't happen. To my surprise, Morty breathed a sigh of relief despite the attack landing. However, Tom and Quilava hadn't noticed it. I wasn't sure why he sighed but I had a feeling that something worse was coming.

"That won't work if I have ranged attacks," Morty said while waving a finger at my master. Infuriated, Tom ordered a Flame Wheel and it hit its mark, but he paid for that in addition to the smoke clearing from Smokescreen.

"Hypnosis!"

The move hit Quilava and soon it was sleeping like a newborn Pokémon. Tom panicked and looked at me, unsure if he wanted to switch. He decided to bank on Quilava waking up fast. That
was a costly mistake.

"Dream Eater," Morty coldly ordered.

"Get up Quilava!" he pleaded but it was no use. The Night Shade from before proved to be too much and now Haunter passed through Quilava smirking while Quilava shivered in fear and pain until he fainted. The judge raised his flag and declared Haunter the winner. Yup, it was definitely worse than paralysis.

Tom and I were awe stricken by the turn of events. So many questions raced through my mind. How could my partner be knocked out? Had he even come close to being knocked out? Is he really being recalled to his ball? Is the road to the top really that hard? How would Tom handle this? This is only the fourth gym for Arceus' sake!

"U-U-Umbreon, g-g-g-go," Tom stuttered as he pointed to the field; he was broken. I had to bring him back to his senses. Thankfully, he had let me fight on my own before so I had some idea how to defend myself while looking for the right time to strike.

I entered the field as confident as I could be with a Haunter near full strength and one other Pokémon up Morty's sleeve. The judge motioned the battle to begin and I was off to the races. I was not going to lose in a gym battle, not again. Faint Attack was used to counter everything that Haunter threw at me. Night Shades and Shadow Balls couldn't catch up to me as I ran circles around it. Finally, an opening to nail the Haunter came after Morty ordered a Hypnosis but it missed me.

"Haunter is unable to battle, Umbreon is the winner!" the judge declared. And at that moment, I was feeling on top of the world. Only one more foe left. Quilava was let out to witness the final match. As I turn back to my corner, all I see is a Pokémon filled with hope and my master regaining his confidence.

"Gengar, time to finish this, go!" A blob of pure darkness with red eyes stood before me.

No, I will not lose. I refuse to lose. My rings went from dim to a glorious yellow as my body felt leaner and stronger. The judge threw up the flags and the battle proceeded with no commands. I realized that Morty and Gengar had perfect harmony. Both of us could fight to our full potential because neither of us could tell what's coming next. Our masters stood with arms crossed, waiting for the final blow to be struck with Tom looking more concerned than Morty.

We traded Shadow Balls for Faint Attacks and Licks for Bites. It couldn't hide in the shadows for long as I could tell where it was. I kept moving so that Hypnosis wouldn't take hold of me and I did my best not to put myself in a vulnerable position. It got to a point where we were circling the field not wanting to attack at the risk of making the wrong move. Eventually I took the risk and charged in.

Both of us were down after I collided with a Night Shade while using Faint Attack at close range but I was not out. Panting heavily, I rose to my feet expecting Gengar to do the same. It did, but the moment I charged up another Faint Attack, it collapsed and stayed down. Everyone in the gym remained silent as the moment of truth was getting closer. I struggled to remain standing and waited for the judge's verdict; it was the longest five seconds in my life.

"Gengar is unable to battle. Umbreon wins! The victory goes to the challenger!"

Those words gave me enough energy to run over to Tom and for him and Quilava to meet me. He hugged me and I collapsed in his arms. Morty came over and graciously offered us the badge. Tom
took it and smiled. However, I heard Morty begin to lecture my master.

"You have won today, but you need more than two Pokémon to make it through the other four leaders. I will, however, acknowledge your strength so I wish you good luck in your quest." After Morty left, Tom brought me back to my senses with a nice belly rub and I licked his hand in return.

"Sorry about the stage fright, Umbreon. I just didn't know how to handle the pressure this time. Quilava hasn't lost a battle since I got him. Anyway, let's go back to the center to rest up. Would you like to walk out in the moonlight?" I nodded since the moon made me feel a little healthier when it was out.

On the way back to the Pokémon center, I became aware that two people were following us too closely. I attempted to cross the street to lure Tom away from them and it worked. However, they stared to get even closer. Tom picked up on the situation and turned around to confront them since nobody was wandering the streets so late at night. Both people stood a little taller than my master with slightly more muscle.

"Is there something I can do for you two?" They pulled out three Great Balls and let loose Arboks.

"Give up the Umbreon and you'll be free to go," one man said calmly.

"Like hell I will!" Arbok slithered in front of its master sensing a fight.

"We've been following you two for weeks after you picked this thing up from the ranch. That idiot running the place shouldn't have sold you that Eevee but we made sure an accident like that won't happen again. He thought you were the middleman; what a pathetic excuse. He knew he screwed up because a girl was supposed to pick it up. By the way, why did you buy it? You don't seem like the type of guy to do something like that. Or am I wrong?" Tom's breathing hastened as he started to get angry.

"Because I couldn't catch anything, okay! I was desperate. Every Pokémon I tried to catch ran away from me or called its pals to gang up on me. I heard about this place from a guy hanging around the Azalea Town well; said I could buy one if I had enough money."

He pulled out a radio. "Hold pink team's position. Nobody is to leave their post until I get there. We need to have a little talk." He then surveyed the area again to calm himself down. "Idiots... all of them. Luckily for me, I won't have to deal with them again after I'm done with you. Last chance to surrender or we'll take it by force."

"You sure you're not the idiot? I'm not giving him up to you just because you asked."

"Listen you pathetic excuse for a trainer, we know you just got out of the gym. Umbreon over there can't fight right away and you know it." A truck pulled up next to the curb. "Don't try to run either; you won't get far. This isn't our first rodeo."

Tom started to get into his own fighting stance. "The moon gives it a little extra power in a pinch. However, I'm willing to take you on with him."

"That's it! You just signed your death certificate. Poison Sting!"

"Umbreon, Bite!"

I felt an adrenaline rush as I sprinted to dig my teeth into the snake Pokemon. Tom had charged the other man while he attempted to call out a second Arbok. He got in a solid punch, but that was all he could do.
"Arbok, Poison Sting on the kid!" I couldn't get away from my battle to help. Screams of pain echoed throughout the streets as Tom was covered in cuts.

"I'm not a kid," he said with labored breathing. "I'm 20 years old! Cut the crap and fight me like a… gaaa!" Tom hunched over and coughed up a little blood.

"Looks like you got poisoned. We could just stand here and you'll be out of our way in minutes. All you had to do was give up Umbreon."

Tom wasn't having any of it. "Quilava!" He came out looking exhausted, but the flames on his back were still bright. "Ember!" The attack was surprisingly effective on Arbok.

"Fighting until the end? Let me show you no mercy… like a man would. Poison Sting! Both of you!"

The onslaught couldn't be dodged as needles pelted the three of us. Quilava collapsed next to Tom while I staggered around only because the moon aided me. A third man in the truck sprinted out with an antidote to spray on me. After that, he stomped on our Poké Balls ensuring we were no longer owned.

"Idiot! This thing needs to be somewhat healthy! She may be a bitch, but she paid good money for this thing and she's going to pay us a month's salary for this." I lost the adrenaline rush and collapsed; he put me in a cage in the back.

The last thing I saw was Quilava smiling before he stopped breathing. I turned to Tom and he too was out cold, or so I thought. He looked up at me, mustering enough strength to speak despite the poison that would end his life after he was done talking.

"You'll make it to the top Umbreon. You'll always be stronger than any opponent." He drew his last breath and I had officially lost the only friends I ever had. My will to live went down to zero, yet I was forced to stay alive because someone else wanted me.

As I was being transported to my unknown destination I realized that I went from the highest of the highs to the lowest of the lows in a matter of minutes. The only question I had was: What now? All I could do was wait.

It had been months since that incident and every day, I was in a cage waiting or was being experimented on for one reason or another. I was scared to fight back for fear of my life ending. Tom and Quilava eventually faded from my memory as I fought just to live another day. I occasionally saw large sums of money around my cage and realized I was "for sale" as they called it. The experiments had to do with learning new attacks at a rapid pace and even learning more than four moves. Bite had been long gone and replaced with some purple substance that weakens the user over time and they deemed my natural speed to be high enough to remove Quick Attack.

The process of learning new moves was seemingly painless, but trying to relearn moves was the painful part once the scientists got orders from a higher up. Needles filled with some kind of memory fluid riddled my body for hours each day until I passed out from exhaustion. I learned a move where I shot a black energy pulse; someone mentioned that the move wasn't native to Johto.

They thought they had me under control until I realized they made two severe mistakes. Their second biggest mistake was giving me powerful moves with no idea how to control them and very little training. The biggest mistake they could've done was say they were going to get rid of Faint Attack for good. Just like that, I regained my will to fight.
Deep down I became enraged when I heard that Faint Attack was going to be replaced. That move brought Tom back into my mind immediately. That move was my last memory of him before I was taken. That move defined my strength, my rivalry with Quilava. That move won me a gym badge! That move was going to take me to the top. Nobody messed with that move, not even Arceus himself.

The next day arrived and as I was led into the experimenting room for the umpteenth time, I decided to test my new moves. My pulse attack knocked out about seven researchers and blew a hole in the wall facing a forest. That's not exactly how I drew it up because I wanted to leave out of the front door, but it's not like I had a choice. Guards and their Pokémon came as I was about to escape so fighting was the only way out. The guard's Pokémon, mostly Persian, were confused by the purple substance at first but kept charging. After fighting them over the next three minutes, they all collapsed. Backup wasn't fast enough and I escaped into the forest, but not without a well placed Slash on my front right leg during the scuffle.

This forest was and still is a savage place with power struggles going on every day. One Pinsir tried to kill me almost immediately after I found a place to sleep peacefully but I defeated him in a hard-fought battle. It couldn't get an actual attack off because I wrestled him to the ground and repeatedly bit him to within an inch of death. After I made sure Pinsir wasn't a threat, I let someone else take care of moving the body because I needed to regain my strength. Pokémon in the immediate area did not challenge me after seeing the fight, especially when my rings reached their maximum brightness. There will always be someone willing to challenge me, but anyone who saw that fight knew they would fall before me every time.

I'll always be stronger than any opponent.
Chapter 3- The Runt

Since I was an Eevee kit, I always wanted to be loved. Born in a forest outside a small town near a large lake in northern Johto, I was used to the quiet scenery, except when it was time to play. As the only girl in a litter of four, my Jolteon father and Espeon mother had to watch us carefully when we would play. Despite my smaller size, I was easily spotted because my three brothers were always on top of me. Every day it was the same thing: wake up, eat, play, eat again, play, and sleep. Life was pretty simple, but all of us grew up and playtime turned into battle time. Each day was a chance for victory but I never won a single fight. That being said, I did get stronger and could eventually defeat the occasional Mareep that tried to intimidate me. Dad told me all about his battles, especially when it came to gym battles. He had sneaked into the town down south before he met mom and saw how fun it was to fight for a little prize; there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted some of that.

Size always seemed to be the first thing a wild Pokémon would recognize when facing me and eventually, my family made the decision to abandon me because of it. I literally woke up that particular morning and they were all gone along with their scent. I guessed that taking care of me in general was too much or nobody wanted to risk fatal injury defending me. At least I could find my own food and fight Pokémon close to my size for it. That night, all I could do was cry in a hollowed out tree trunk. I realized that nobody was going to protect me and wild Pokémon certainly weren't going to love me.

I was careful to avoid larger Pokémon like Noctowl for the next few days while trying to establish a home or an elemental stone to give myself a better chance of survival. The plan was simple enough, hunt for stones and food during the day while find a place to sleep at night. Dad said that once I picked a stone then I would be stuck like that for the rest of my life and Mom said she evolved from happiness toward her trainer. Well, I wouldn't be that happy anytime soon and a stone wasn't going to pop out of thin air so I had to look.

Any chance for hope seemed to be gone the moment a trainer saw me and called her Swinub to battle. I tried to tackle it but it didn't budge and the trainer ordered a Take Down. Dodging was the best chance due to my smaller size so I sidestepped it and tackled again. Off guard, the Swinub took the hit while preparing a Powder Snow. The cold snow knocked me down long enough for a red and white ball to tap me on the head and suck me in. I tried to escape just like I would with my brothers but the ball was not an Eevee, it would never get tired. Just after seconds of struggling, the
ball locked. I was caught.

After what felt like hours, I felt better in my ball and was soon called out by my new master. She seemed like a giant to me with long red hair. After the teenaged trainer called me out she let me wander. There were some healing machines, a large video board, computers, tile floors, phones, benches; it was a typical Pokémon center. Finally, I looked at her and noticed a large shoulder bag and four other poke balls were at her waist in addition to mine but they disappeared out of view as she picked me up by the scruff of my neck. I was soon eye to eye with her but managed to see a blue rock in her bag. It couldn't have been? It was: a Water Stone. The one thing that would keep me alive was in sight yet not within reach.

"I'm Sara and oh wow! Aren't you just the cutest thing?" she said as she started to pet my head. "You were so cute from far away but you're even cuter up close."

My first reaction was to tilt my head in confusion. I'd never been called "cute" before due to my small size. In fact, my brothers picked on me and my parents apparently saw me as a problem child, not a cute one. Once it hit me, I squealed with joy and Sara hugged me before returning me to my ball.

We left the center after she spent some time at a computer and continued to the next town. Being inside my ball gave me time to sleep and ponder everything that just happened. I went from an abandoned runt to a trainer's Pokémon in a matter of hours and the sun was still up. My family would probably never be seen again because the Eevee line was very popular yet I felt at ease with Sara. Also, I could feel the massive drop in temperature inside my ball for quite some time as we moved on. Her team consisted of: Magneton, Pidgeot, Tentacruel, Swinub, and me.

Despite everyone else, I was sent into battle numerous times before the next town. That size disadvantage in the wild was no more in trainer battles while I continued to rack up wins in the coming weeks. I could just curl up in a ball or lie flat on the ground to avoid ranged attacks while closer hits ended up in a lot of swings and misses. Each victory brought me closer to Sara and Sara closer to me before she had to recall me each time. That Water Stone from earlier was still in my mind but I didn't feel like evolving that way.

Once again, I felt the familiar feeling of being healed at a Pokémon center before I was called out. However, everyone else was out as well with confused looks. Sara immediately turned to the group with fire in her eyes.

"Alright everybody we're going to take on Clair at high noon. She uses dragons which resist almost every single type, so we have to hit hard with all of our attacks. I heard it's going to be 4 on 4 so I'm trying to decide who to use. I'll have to see as the battle moves on I guess," Sara explained sheepishly.

All of us stared at each other wondering who was going to miss out on the fun before being called back into our balls. Before I was called back, she looked through her bag and started to pull out the Water Stone plus some flat disc. I stared at the stone blankly, admiring its beautiful shade of blue while thinking of a Vaporeon's lifestyle before Sara put it back in her bag and mumbled something about gauging Clair.

After Sara walked over to the gym and introduced herself to Clair, the two exchanged formalities and ground rules. Unfortunately for Sara she had to pick her Pokémon now. Not show them, but pick them off of her belt so someone was turned over to the judge before the battle started. From my ball, I watched them stand ready along with the judge. Gyms were supposed to be average… or so I thought based on Dad's stories. This one seemed to have a larger than normal sandy battlefield in the middle surrounded by some kind of moat. How could any Pokémon fight like this? Questions
continued to fill my head until everyone got into positions.

The flags went up and both of them sent out their first Pokémon. Matchup one was Gyarados against Magneton. It was the quickest battle I had ever seen with Gyarados lying knocked out in the moat just seconds after a Thunder nailed the huge serpent. Sara didn't even have to utter a command because Magneton knew what would happen. Next up was a beautiful Dragonair. It opted to meet Mageton on the field, probably fearing a super conducted electric attack.

"Magnetron, Thunder Wave!" Sara said with confidence.

"Dragonair, counter it with your own Thunder Wave!" Clair ordered with intensity, not feeling pleased after being down 4-3 in one hit.

The moves collided in midair and created a dust storm on the field. With nobody able to see, Sara decided to pick her next move carefully, but rather than wait, Clair followed up her move with a powerful Surf attack. Through the smoke, Dragonair's orb on its neck began glowing a bright blue and water from the moat rose above everyone and came crashing down on Magneton, soaking everything in the process. Sara knew Clair messed up and now Dragonair was covered in water.

"Quick Magneton, Thunder Wave!"

The move travelled faster through the water and found its intended target. Dragonair whined at the discomfort before Clair ordered another Surf. Again, the water rose and came down with more force and Magneton was out. The judge declared a knockout before motioning Sara to throw out her next battler after the score became 3-3.

"Pidgeot, lets him 'em hard!"

A large bird emerged from its ball with a fierce war cry. At the signal, Sara wasted no time going for the knockout.

"Quick Attack, then follow it up with a Wing Attack! Keep going until it's down!"

Blurred lines were all I saw when it moved at its incredible speed. The paralyzed dragon stood no chance to dodge as it took the attacks head on for massive damage. At the sight of Dragonair not moving, Pidgeot stopped to assess its work; that was a mistake.

"Dragonbreath, hurry up." Clair showed no panic in her voice as the majestic creature fired its move at Pidgeot. My team member dodged it easily by flying in circles, but it didn't think Dragonair would keep it going for long. As it moved to chase Pidgeot, the paralysis took effect and the attack stopped.

"Come on Pidgeot, your cockiness almost cost us a free hit. You're better than that!" Sara scolded to her Pokémon. It shook its head as if the speech has been said a thousand times before resuming the onslaught.

"Keep up the pressure Dragonair, Dragonbreath!" Back to the enthusiasm; I couldn't figure out why she was going from calm to yelling so often. Most trainers are yelling from the start.

"How is it not out yet!? Finish it with Steel Wing!"

Pidgeot's wings began to glow as it charged while Dragonair charged up another Dragonbreath. As they got closer, another explosion rocked the battlefield. Sara rejoiced at the sight until she saw Pidgeot stumbling backwards sluggishly.
"Finish it Dragonair! Surf!"

"Steel Wing!"

It was a race against time. Pidgeot came in close but Dragonair winced from the paralysis and that sealed the round. Steel Wing connected and Dragonair dropped to the floor with the judge rendering the KO verdict after hearing the huge thud. Now it was 3-2 and I was getting overjoyed from the thrilling battle. I had this funny feeling inside of me, like a power was bursting at the seams but I decided to hold it back fearing the unknown effects it might have on the battle or my ball.

"Dragonair, it'll be a quick round," Clair said in a matter-of-fact tone as she sent it on land.

Oh no. She had another one? Despite being small, that huge wave of water was obviously going to hit me wherever I stood. Luckily, Pidgeot was still moving so it'd be some time before I'd see some action. The judge raised his flags and Sara went all in again.

"Use Wing Attack but add Quick Attack for speed!"

"That same strategy won't work on me! Dragonair, Slam!"

My master was getting edgy; she knew something was wrong with Pidgeot. Confusion came across Sara's face too as she expected a better counter than Slam. It was an inaccurate move but Clair was banking on nailing my partner before it hit Dragonair. Pidgeot gained speed yet again before Dragonair tried to hit it. Surprisingly, both moves hit at the same time but Pidgeot couldn't get up. It hit me right then that Pidgeot was paralyzed since Dragonbreath hit and now it was in danger.

"Ice Beam," Clair ordered in a monotonous tone.

Just like that, a beam of ice struck Pidgeot and it fainted on impact. Battle tension was rising quickly as Sara looked like she regretted something upon seeing that move. However, she called on Tentacruel to battle. Poor Swinub, I guess it was too weak to take on Clair since its poke ball was given to the judge before the match started. Maybe I wouldn't have to fight. That might be a good thing; I mean I'm small as it is. No way could I stand an attack from these things!

"Tentacruel, Poison Sting!" Sara called out with some urgency.

Poison needles flew at the target but Dragonair instinctively dove into the water; Tentacruel followed suit.

"Move the water yourself and use Slam when you're ready," Clair ordered calmly.

"Keep firing Poison Sting!" Sara barked out, hoping a side effect could from her barrage.

Breaking Dragonair's concentration was Sara's only hope with a Slam on the way after it parted a portion of the moat. As the poison needles kept hitting it, Dragonair managed to land a powerful Slam at its weak spot; a critical hit. However, Sara got what she wanted as poison damage was coming on fast and she opted for a reckless strategy.

"Use Wrap! Go for the stall knockout!"

Moat water furiously came splashing onto the field due to Dragonair losing control over the flow of the water. The orb on its neck dimmed as the two battled fiercely for control. Tentacruel finally had a good grip on Dragonair, yet it continued to squirm.
"Poison Sting! Finishing blow!" Sara screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Don't let it fire! Dragonbreath!" Clair barked out in response.

Clair and Sara were really going at it as my teammate fired another round from point blank range but Dragonair got off its attack too and Tentacruel was forced to release it. After some heavy panting from both battlers, they both collapsed with half of their bodies on land and in the water. A double KO signal came from the judge.

"Kingdra, it's the finale. Let's grab a win!" Clair called as the beast went straight into the moat.

Sara was pushed to the breaking point. I was her last ticket to a badge and Kingdra was the last line of Defense. She finally threw my ball and I landed on the field facing my foe. This was it; I wanted to prove I could hold my own in an intense battle despite my size disadvantage. I was going to make Sara happy.
Chapter 4- Where It All Went Wrong

I was more nervous than I was the day everyone abandoned me. One pokemon stood between me and a tough victory for Sara. Barring a miracle, I wasn't going to last long. A gym leader is keen on how to take advantage of their opponents and fear from a massive tidal wave held me from standing tall. Sara thought my smaller size could still work but she was wrong. Clair wasted no time exploiting my weakness.

"Kingdra, Surf."

Sara's strategy was rendered useless as the wave-much larger than Dragonair's- came crashing down and it felt like the battlefield was going to be underwater. While I was being bombarded and trying to swim.

"Quick Attack!" Sara ordered out of desperation.

"It's no use," Clair said while shaking her head. "Kingdra is also part water so its control of water is much better than my other dragons. Had you let Gyarados attack, then you would have seen that. The moat is like an infinite source for my Pokémon's strength and defense. You can't simply escape with that. It's a shame too; it was a good battle up to this point."

Completely dejected, Sara tried to come up with a strategy but it was no use. I kept being tossed around like the items in Sara's bag when she ran. Eventually, I started to lose consciousness until that familiar feeling of power welled up inside of me. I couldn't hold it back any more; there was no reason for Sara to lose after all of her hard work up to this point. The energy coursed through me which caused a bright light to shine in the arena. Kingdra stopped its attack fearing this was an extremely powerful move. When it was all said and done I was bigger than before, had a new fur color, and somehow gained psychic powers. No turning back at that point, well maybe to look at Sara.

"Y-y-y-you evolved Eevee." She was in shock at the sudden turn of events. The little me turned into a normal sized Espeon out of sheer joy for this battle. A cautious optimism came over my master as she planned a path to victory in her head after looking at her Pokédex. "My guess is that you can't control your new powers that well, but we have more of a chance than before. Use Swift!"

Swift? I had no clue what that meant but went for it anyway. Stars started to form after some concentration and the attack landed on Kingdra. The feeling of this new power made me feel great, yet Sara still had doubts. Again she ordered a Swift, hoping to take advantage of my evolution.

"Interesting, but that still won't help. Dragonbreath!" Clair ordered with force.

A burst of energy was heading straight for me so I lied flat in the hopes it would go over me like ranged attacks of the past. However, the move still connected which led to Sara becoming flustered. She knew that I had become too big for her strategy of dodging and going in for close combat. I staggered to my feet while another one came at me; no lying this time. I decided to jump to the left to make myself off centered with Kingdra.
"Surf!"

"Espeon use Confusion to deflect the water around you!"

Sara had finally figured out a chance to win. Yes, that surf was going to be massive but when I can deflect only the water coming toward me it makes it easier to handle. Right then, the wall of water was coming down and I used Confusion like Sara ordered. To everyone's surprise, it worked and the water moved harmlessly around me as I made my little psychic bubble to deflect the water. Now I had the problem of fatigue to deal with. Moving that much water, despite it being a small portion of the full attack, took too much energy out of my new, underdeveloped body.

"Alright Espeon, use confusion on Kingdra this time." Despite the fatigue, I essentially rolled up a ball of weak psychic energy and fired it at Kingdra. It dodged easily by diving into the moat.

"Come up and use Smokescreen, then a two part Surf. Let's go!" Clair was going for the "can't defend what you can't see" trick on me and unfortunately for Sara, it worked. The field was soon covered in a thick smoke and the sounds of us coughing. I sensed a wave coming so I prepared my makeshift shield only to find out the wall was much smaller than before and I easily deflected the water. Fatigue again got to me as the second wall came at me with full force. It was déjà vu as I struggled to escape the crashing waves.

"Quick Attack! I know it'll work this time," Sara pleaded.

My muscles ached from fighting the act of drowning but I mustered enough energy to jump up and charge at my enemy. It wasn't much in terms of damage but I still scored a direct hit on Kingdra. After moving away from the moat's edge, I was panting heavily. How was I still standing? This beast should have beaten me on the first Surf yet here I stand with half a chance.

"Time to wrap this up Kingdra. Light Smokescreen."

"Espeon, you know what's coming. Deflect the water!"

A lighter layer of black smoke covered everything so I could still make out the Kingdra's shadow in the moat but the wall of water never came. I took advantage of the situation by firing a Confusion attack at it, hitting the mark much to the pleasure of Sara. What came next was something Sara could not have planned for and something I bet Clair has done hundreds of times before.

"Hyper Beam," Clair ordered coldly.

An even more powerful beam of energy was coming for me that made Dragonbreath look like child's play. Confusion didn't do a thing as the beam went through my psychic shield and scored a direct critical hit. That was it; I'd collapsed and did not get up. The judge signaled that Clair won while Sara stood in disbelief.

"B-b-b-but how," was all my master could bear to say while dropping to her knees. I still lied on the ground aware of the situation and my surroundings. Clair took a deep breath and decided to explain her clever strategy sensing Sara was too broken to have a rematch anytime soon.

"It was pretty easy. I knew you were going to do that shield strategy after it worked the first time so I changed things up the second time. The first wave was moderate enough for you to counter but the second wave was a normal Surf. Your Espeon had no chance to deflect a second wall of water around itself due to fatigue." Clair lectured at Sara while Sara was looking down at the floor in a fit of rage. "Finally, I can't believe you thought I was going to do it again for a third time. After all of
those shields, your Pokémon couldn't stop a full force Hyper Beam. You failed to adapt to the battle and failed as a trainer to see your Pokémon getting tired from such a strategy. I have no more challengers today despite it being early afternoon. You can mope around in here for as long as you want. I have to get going."

With that, Clair and the judge left after the very Swinub that beat me was returned. Alone in a large gym with only my master being what felt like miles away and my panting; it was an eerie feeling. I heard every word of that verbal thrashing. She was right. I had a feeling that the same strategy over time wouldn't work on such a powerful Pokémon, let alone a gym leader who has countless battles against someone who thinks they know it all. We both just stayed in the gym pondering what to do next. I was still waiting to be recalled to my ball because I couldn't stand. Pain still coursing through my body, I turned to see Sara walking toward me as if she was trying to fight something back. I perked up once she was within inches of me and felt the scruff of my neck being picked up. This time, I sensed it wasn't as innocent as the first time. Our eyes met for what seemed to be minutes before she backhanded me.

"You stupid ball of fur! Why did you decide to evolve now of all times!?!" She screamed at the top of her lungs. "I was going to evolve you with that damn water stone and teach you Ice Beam if I lost! This battle was supposed to be a test for me, not you!" I continued to sob quietly as she continued the verbal abuse. "Hell, I'm amazed I made it so far but then you blew our strategy by evolving and being a worthless psychic type who can't even shield yourself without getting tired!"

It was true that I could not completely control my powers but there was no way I was going to win by myself. She continued to berate me.

"You just couldn't wait, could you!? Now I can't evolve you and win a rematch fast enough to challenge the Elite Four! I knew Swinub was too weak but he was going to replace Tentacruel in the fight anyway. Two Pokémon knowing ice moves against a dragon trainer would mean an instant victory!" She then threw me to the ground in frustration while getting in my ear. This time she opted to whisper and hiss at me. "I knew you were different and tolerated it because of the wins but I'll be damned if I have to use you at the Indigo Plateau."

I thought she was done but it was far from over. She proceeded to kick me, stomp on me, punch me, and utter random phrases in her anger. Nobody was coming to save me now. The gym was empty, my family is still gone, my teammates are indifferent toward me, and I couldn't even save myself. Verbal, physical, and emotional beatings continued until the sun was setting; about three hours in total before Sara ran out of energy. Finally, I was recalled to my ball, but not before I heard "You'll be dead in the wild."

Hours must have passed by since the gym incident because I finally regained my senses. However, I was still in agony while looking at a lot of trees on my side. Also, I felt a weird feeling of freedom. I soon put all the pieces together and realized that Sara released me. What's worse than being abandoned this time around was that she didn't heal me. Sara actually wanted me to die as I stumbled through the large forest while dusk started to creep in. I survived the first few hours by finding berries to regain my strength, but it was only enough to keep me upright. The physical and emotional scars would not be going away anytime soon.

Travelling for hours on end with no clue where I was took its toll on me so I wanted to find a place to rest. I stumbled across some type of rock formation and assumed it would be a perfect den. I felt
this sense of strength when I approached, the type of strength to survive in the wild without question. Not worried about who or what might be living there, I gathered more assorted berries to store there. At least if someone was home, I could offer them my stash for a stay… or my life. I decided after a few minutes that I needed a bigger stash if I wanted to barter it for my life so I went really out of my way to get more berries. Now that sun was finally set, I had to get back to the den.

"Well, I was thinking about having a light meal but this shouldn't go to waste," a cold voice said behind me from above. I turned to see a Noctowl eyeing me with evil intent. I could've run for cover but I decided against it to see if it would go away. Those healing berries still hadn't brought me back to fighting shape yet.

"It's late and I have to get going."

"Oh no, it's actually quite early for me," he said in reply. Well, there was my one chance. "You'll be mine on this fine day. Maybe in more than one way."

It swooped down and went for Peck as I countered with Quick Attack. Physical force was something I had to create to send the bird away with my Confusion taking too much energy to use. I wanted to sleep and wake up the next morning, not sleep forever. He got the message that I wasn't going to submit anytime soon so he went to his strongest move, Take Down. I tried to use Confusion but since Sara didn't heal me, nothing happened. My only strategy was to battle it out until it got tired. Running would be useless because I would be in a vulnerable position and I knew Swift and Quick Attack would hardly ruffle its feathers, let alone damage it. Take Down was missing for awhile until I was nailed with one. And with my weakened state, it was enough to make me collapse yet again.

As it landed and started to admire its handy work, I began to reflect. Not much time or thought needed to go into this: I had lived a miserable life. Despite everything I try to make others happy, I failed every single time. A useless runt turned into a useless psychic type who can't even use psychic attacks. I lied there, just waiting for death to take me away in the form of a Noctowl using Take Down; it never came. In fact, I felt that same strong presence from the den in front of me.

"You really have been a thorn in my side, huh Shade," the Noctowl annoyingly stated to the new Pokémon in the battle. An Umbreon just stood there in its battle stance, silent with rings glowing, waiting for Noctowl to attack. "No matter, I'll have the pleasure of a feast in a few minutes." And with that statement, they both moved at the same time toward each other. I was fading in and out of consciousness but saw enough of the fight to know that someone actually came to save me and wouldn't be dragged down by my uselessness.

His moves were strong enough to hold off Noctowl but Noctowl wanted the kill. He went for a reckless dive bomb Take Down and Shade went for Faint Attack. They collided and the Noctowl's skull was instantly crushed under the sheer force of the attacks meeting head on. If the skull crushing hit wasn't enough, its neck made that distinct *crack* sound. It seized before the wings stopped twitching.

"Hey, are you alright?" Shade asked me with a deep concerned look on his face after he made sure Noctowl was really dead. His rings still were a glorious yellow, guiding me to his outline in the dark. I kept my eyes open long enough to see him and nod my head.

"I think… I need… some… sleep…" was I all could say before I passed out. I swear I was moving shortly after because there was support under my stomach while my legs dangled. Still out, I now decided to reflect again. Carrying me away not to hurt me, but to help me; I actually matter to someone in this world. I thought the den was just a slab of rocks, but I didn't go in too deep when I dropped my berries off and failed to notice the warm spot of leaves and feathers. They felt so
comfortable on my battered, bloody, and bruised body. Before I was really in a deep sleep, I heard his soothing voice.

"Nobody will hurt you while you sleep, I promise. You've probably gone through hell and back but you survived. That's all that matters. Now get some rest," he cooed while nuzzling me.
Chapter 5- Healing

While I watched her sleep, I noticed a huge berry collection near the entrance of the cave after I brought her in. She must have been trying to make it her home for the long haul or maybe use the berries as an offering if someone else didn't want a new guest. After I set her down in my bed, I made a fire with sticks and stones close by to keep her warm. Before I went to grab some berries from the pile to heal her, I went to check on her and she hugged me in her sleep so I opted not to disturb her.

The first few hours had me worried because I had no idea if she was going to make it, but her steady breathing was a good sign. She shuddered in her slumber, probably due to nightmares. Every time she did, I nuzzled her gently and she stopped immediately. The worst was when she cried in her sleep while screaming something about a Kingdra, even though it was only one time. I pet her very gently while humming an old lullaby from my time at the ranch. She still wouldn't wake up but she eventually calmed down as she continued to hug me. My Espeon guest continued to sleep for a total of three days despite all of the nightmares. It wasn't surprising at all considering she was at death's doorstep due to exhaustion for what seemed to be way too long.

I want her to wake up soon so I could ask her so many questions. Why was she here? Why was she this beat up? The forest is tough, but not one Pokémon living here can do that much damage on its own. Maybe a large group could deal that much damage, but there would be no mercy on their part. I do know that she was owned by a trainer at some point because wild Espeon or Umbreon are nonexistent; we just can't reach that level of happiness in the wild. And knowing she was a trainer's Pokémon led me to believe that she had an intense battle before I found her fighting Noctowl. Ah, another question for me to ask: Who's your trainer?

"Mmmmgghhh," was the first thing she said (or tried to say) since she said she wanted to sleep. I let my rings glow a little bit more to help her wake up. After she realized her head was buried in my chest, her eyes grew wide and she jumped back only to hit the side of the den. "Who are you? Where am I? What happened to me? What do you want with me?" she asked rapidly, as if those were going to be her last words.

I just looked at her blankly before taking a deep breath. "In order: I'm Shade, you're in my den, you passed out, and I wanna talk," I replied in a calm fashion.

"S-s-s-so you're the same Shade from last night?" she asked still trembling.

I put on a smile. "Yup!" It worked as I saw she was shaking less. "So what's your name?"

"Ruby, I kinda named myself after seeing the gem on my head in a reflection," she replied sheepishly. This was progress. As long as I knew her name, I could connect with her on a new level.

"Don't worry, my name just comes from the other forest Pokémon because I blend in with the shadows around dusk. From what I understand, it's a pretty common name among Umbreon."

"W-where are we exactly, Shade?"
I tried to break up the large chunk of information so she could digest it. "Well… my den… in this forest… located around Mount Mortar." It seemed to be working as she asked her third question again.

"What happened to me last night?"

"Last night? Ruby, you’ve been asleep for three days straight but never mind that. Point is that you were on the verge of death, I saved you from a Noctowl, carried you back here too. Oh yeah, I was going to try and heal you with this impressive berry collection but you hugged me in your sleep so I didn't want to disturb you." Ruby just sat there, took it all in, and before I knew it, she was running up to me crying; I hugged her just like in her sleep.

"Y-y-y-you s-s-s-stayed w-w-with m-me?" Ruby sobbed while hugging me. "What if someone came after you and me?"

"Of course, I knew you were scared and your injuries were too severe to warrant me leaving." I let her get the sobbing out of her system before I continued, but not before we locked eyes. "Ruby, not one single Pokémon in this forest would dare come after you if you're with me. A group of Pokémon? Maybe, but even so, I'm willing to fight for you."

I hope she saw and heard how sincere I just was considering I haven't shown this side of me to anyone, not even Tom. It took some time, but she finally calmed down and stopped sobbing to ask her final question.

"What do you want with me?" Now, she kept a steady mouth but her body language was far from steady. I moved closer to her in the most non threatening way possible and sat down after she moved away so that we were face to face, but had room between us.

"Just to talk. You know, get to know each other." Ruby had a confused look on her face. "Look, I think you can hold your own out here, but I just don't want to lose anyone that doesn't have a chance… not again." Her ears perked up at that last line. "I know you probably don't want to talk about your past, but how about I talk about mine first?"

"I don't know Shade. I've been nothing but a problem to everyone else since the day I was born. You'll probably think I'm whining."

"Ruby, no matter what you tell me, my opinion of you will not change. Do you know why?" She looked down at the floor and shook her head. "My opinion of you is that you are a scrappy fighter. You were on the verge of death, yet you still managed to fend off a tough opponent. I don't even know you but I admire your will to keep going. I've seen countless Pokémon in my lifetime, but I've seen only a pawful that could hold a candle to you when push came to shove. Ruby, that is nothing to be ashamed of." The honesty behind my words made her look up. I smiled as she started towards me again. I was starting to wonder if I should tell her my story because I hate to see her cry; she's gone through too much in the past few days.

It wasn't by accident that I told my entire life story to Ruby. She didn't use any of her psychic tricks on me nor force me to explain anything; it just felt natural. She had questions and I answered them as carefully as possible so she could understand everything. After it was all said and done, she looked at me like she hurt me.

"What's wrong Ruby?" I asked with a concerned look on my face.

"Why? Why are you telling me I've gone through hell and back? You had it all: a loving trainer, an
unbeatable teammate, gym badges, and almost lost it all. The only thing you have left from that
time is your memories and a scar on your leg. Doesn't that make you upset at all?" Ruby replied
while choking back tears.

All I can do is take a deep breath and go even deeper in thought. "Yes, it does make me upset, but I
never let it get to me to the point of self-destruction. I realize I can't change the past but I know I
can change the future. Out here, I've gotten into battles over the smallest things and came out on
top. Why? Because I've taken the strength Tom gave to me and I'll use it to continue to get
stronger. I can't waste all that hard work. Instead of using it for just my benefit, now I'll be using it
for your benefit too. Nobody deserves to have their life be a living hell."

Like before, she took all of it in but Ruby took a deep breath instead of crying.

"Shade, I think I'm ready."

Good, she was comfortable enough to tell me something. Was I expecting her full list of problems?
No. However, anything would be helpful so that I won't do anything to make her lose my trust.

"I'm all ears Ruby."

"Shade?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we lie down?"

"Of course. The bed is right over there and I'll sit next to you," I explained while pointing. She
shook her head and pawed at me.

"No Shade, can we lie down?" I picked up the hint very quickly.

"Anything to make you more comfortable Ruby. But first, you need to eat something."

Finally, I have a chance to get her some food. I walked over to her huge stash and picked out a mix
of berries that would heal her injuries as well as ones that would fill her up. After rolling them to
her, I ate my share while watching her in hopes of reading her body language. Ruby looked
nervous, maybe questioning if she really wanted to talk after she was done eating. When she was
done, she glanced over at me so I smiled and motioned her to lie down. We walked over to the bed
as she told me to get in first. I made myself comfortable as she got in after me, trying to get
comfortable as well. It didn't surprise me that we were positioned the same way as before with her
head near my chest, only this time she could actually talk clearly.

What am I doing? Am I about to open up these wounds again even though I want to start over?
And to a stranger who was lucky enough to see me when I was about to die? Wait a minute…
Shade told me everything about his life without hesitation. He wasn't even worried that I would call
him a freak after the experiments done on him. Maybe I should talk about everything, but I really
need to eat these berries; I'm glad Shade and I get to enjoy them instead of giving them away as
some kind of payment. Before I could ask, Shade rolled over a variety of berries to me. I looked
down at them nervously before eating. After I'm done, we're going to talk.

Oh no, I don't think I can do this! I have to tell him. Deep breath Ruby, I'm sure he'll understand.
Hold on, he's smiling? Hmmm, maybe I can do this. We walk over to the bed and I want him to go
in first because I have no idea how much room I'll take up. After he gets in, I follow and we're
right back at square one, only this time my face isn't buried in his chest. He looks so strong and
confident, actually watching over a weakling like me instead of letting me become a meal.

He snapped me out of my trance. "Comfy, Ruby?"

Comfy is an understatement right now. The fire has been long out, but Shade's warmth is just as good. Blushing also is a way to make sure I'm warm. "Yes, I'm very comfy." Shade looked down at me as if he wanted me to start after hearing my response. However, he started it.

"Now it's my turn to ask you a question Ruby," he said with a bit of doubt. "I know wild Espeon don't exist. Who was your trainer?"

Oh Arceus, he went there. He went to the one place I wanted to avoid. I was going to tell him my time in the wild and that was it but nope, I'm on the spot now. Horrible memories of that battle were coming back in full force along with the abuse; any confidence I had was now gone. Wait a minute, he's petting me?

"Baby steps Ruby, you can take as long as you want. We aren't going anywhere. Remember, no Pokémon in the forest would dare come in here." He's right; I can just tell him what happened. There's no reason for me to hold back and I can't shake this forever. He stopped petting me as I started.

"Alright, but before that, I was obviously wild." He nodded in response. "I was born as the runt of the litter and because I was a runt, I was more of a problem than a daughter. My parents and siblings decided one day that I wasn't worth their time despite raising me for awhile. I guess they wanted to teach me the basics of life so I would have a chance to survive or they would feel less guilty about leaving me." Still looking at me, he urged me to continue. "The only way I thought I could make it was to find a stone to evolve since I was far from happy so I searched high and low, day and night for one. Instead, I found a trainer named Sara who caught me after a battle. I could live to see another day since a human owned me and could protect me from danger."

"How did you feel about that?"

"Overjoyed to be honest. For the first time in my life I was extremely happy. Someone didn't care about my size and wanted me to succeed. Sara sent me into battle a lot after she caught me so I got the chance to show I could hold my own. I never won a match when it came to my siblings but Sara helped me remain undefeated before my only loss as the..." I started to shudder as the images of that forsaken moat filled my head and it got worse when I was ready to explain the battle. This time, Shade was here beside me, actually listening to me. I knew something soothing happened in my sleep because I would stop shaking and the nightmares would go away; the same feeling was coming back and Shade was giving off that feeling.

He went back to petting me, trying to calm me down. "You don't have to go on if you don't want to. I understand the stress of a gym battle and what it can do to you."

I shook my head in response. "No, I have to finish this. You already told me everything, now it's my turn."

"It doesn't matter if I finished my story Ruby, what matters is how you finish the story. I want you to feel comfortable right now. Remember, my opinion of you will not change for the worse whether you finish or not."

Shade's right, but I want everything out there. I motioned for him to keep petting me because it felt relaxing. "Okay, we went up against a dragon gym and the battle was four on four but Sara had five Pokémon. She got rid of a Swinub for the battle because it was too weak so I was in reserve. We
started off with a quick knockout but then the battle went back and forth as we traded Pokémon until it was Kingdra versus me."

"So Sara wanted you as the trump card?"

"I was more like the last resort; I don't think Sara wanted me to battle. She had a Water Stone in her bag and an Ice Beam TM beside it so I was almost a Vaporeon. Anyway, she thought my size was going to win us the badge but we were wrong as Surf attacks flooded the field so I couldn't use my size while I was practically drowning. It was over until I evolved out of happiness for the battle. Since I had psychic powers, Sara tried to use them to her advantage. I wasn't used to my new form and couldn't use them without getting tired. With combination attacks by Kingdra, I was powerless. A Hyper Beam was the last attack I saw before I dropped to the ground."

By this point, I was starting to curl up tight into a ball and wince because I knew what was coming next. I don't care about the bone bruises hurting as I curled up. Too bad Shade cared.

"Ruby, you do a terrible job of hiding pain," he said with a light smile on his face. "You don't need to hurt yourself anymore, mentally or physically."

By this point, I knew I could trust Shade, but he was going above and beyond for me. I'm not a believer in love at first sight, but he's doing a good job of proving me wrong. If he honestly didn't care, I would be dead right now or even worse. "I'm almost done, but I don't know if I can get through this next part. I need to get it out though." He nodded and we just stayed in the bed silently while he continued to pet me. Warmth and sleep overtook me before I could finish so Shade waited patiently until I woke up about an hour later. Shade was still awake when I woke up, rubbing my head very slowly. He showed no signs of ever falling asleep. That's it, I'm going to finish this with him right here.

"After the battle, Clair gave my master a long lecture on how she wasn't a good trainer. Sara took everything in while Clair left the gym with the judge to do something else. Something was wrong in that moment because I wasn't called into my ball. Instead, I was picked up by the scruff of my neck; it was the beginning of pure hell." Fast, deep breaths came up instantly but I'll be damned if I don't finish. "I was slapped… kicked… stomped on… punched… and was yelled at for hours andthenandthenandthenandthen..." All I could do was speed up while the flashback continued until I felt a paw on my lips; I looked up.

"That's enough Ruby. I don't need to hear anymore."

"But Shade, I wasn't done…"

He moved closer to my ear. "Shhhhhh. That will never happen again. Look at me Ruby." The fire in his eyes would make Entei tremble in fear. "If anyone were to hurt you like that again on my watch, they wouldn't live to see another minute."

Why not go that far any forest Pokémon?"

"They don't know what it's like to work toward a badge because they've never been caught by a trainer. They're all selfish because they try to stay alive by killing any Pokémon they see as a threat here. Young ones are sometimes used as hostages in bargaining. I've heard too many scenarios where there is no happy ending. There are no limits out here. Not to sound arrogant, but you're not the first Pokémon that I brought back in this den to protect."

That was horrible to hear. Now I'm grateful that my family stayed with me that long, but I have to ask him now. "Why would you go that far for me Shade?"
"As for you, I had a feeling that Tom saved me from something when I was younger. I had to save myself from being someone's permanent experiment. Now, it's my turn to save someone else and you, Ruby, are that someone. There is no way on Arceus' green earth that I will let you suffer because of one loss. And if any trainer catches you, I will fight like hell to get you back or die trying. That is a promise."

"Shade, I... I..." I was utterly stunned at what I just heard. Could I really believe Shade's words? This wasn't that same level of kindness that Sara gave me when she met me; it was on a higher level. He kept the fire in his eyes until he took a deep breath.

"Thank you for telling me everything Ruby. Now that I think about it, my opinion of you has changed for the better. You're not just a scrappy fighter, you're brave too."

Soon we were nuzzling each other, but I ended up kissing his maw on accident, which he returned. Despite the cold, howling wind outside, I started to fall asleep yet again. Sometimes it got into our den but I only had to shiver one time. After that shiver, I got really cold for a few seconds before I was warm again. All I could see was black with a touch of yellow and if I wanted to look up, I could see the face of someone who has done so much these past few days even though I was asleep for most of them.

"I'm not going to let a little wind ruin your first peaceful night of sleep." Shade whispered into my ear as I curled closer to him, getting warmer and sleepier as he blocked the wind from reaching me. I stayed awake just long enough to hear his lullaby before I finally closed my eyes.
Putting In Work

Chapter 6- Putting in Work

Despite being the "Sun Pokémon," I still wanted to sleep longer as I heard some young Pokémon playing near our den. I mean, it's technically Shade's den but he decided to share it with me. That speech about fighting for me still rang in my head and offering shelter for free was just a step on the road to becoming stronger. I stirred before I opened my eyes, expecting Shade to still be asleep; nope, he was wide awake. He must have felt me moving so he slowly let his rings get brighter until I rubbed my eyes open. His face was the first thing I saw after the sleep, yet it still felt like I was dreaming.

"Good morning sleepy head," he said with a smile on his face.

"How are you awake? I thought Umbreon were Pokémon of the night? Ya know, they sleep through the day?"

He had to think about his response for awhile. "Normally we are, but being with a trainer can change any Pokémon's behavior. However, we still can still go back to our natural instincts if we want."

I have yet to see Shade not answer any one of my questions. Honestly, I want to stump him one time. I don't know when, but sometime it has to happen. He can't have an answer for everything can he? I didn't want him to let go of me but the day has to start sometime. We walked over to our huge berry collection to pick out breakfast before chowing down. Before I was done eating, I noticed Shade was staring at me.

"Ruby, I have an idea for today." That got my attention since all I did was sleep for the past few days.

"Okay, what's your idea?"

"I think it's time to train."

"Well what exactly are we training? Are we working on speed? Stamina? Come on, tell me!"

"Not 'we', more like 'you' Ruby. Together, we will work toward improving your psychic skills but since I don't have any powers like yours, only you'll benefit from this. I'm just going to help you through it."

Shade has a point. Improving my psychic abilities would be a huge boost for my confidence. It comes down to a matter of what I have to do. Hopefully it won't be something too bad. Looking at him, I nodded and finished my breakfast. As we stepped outside and started walking to our training area, I realized how beautiful the forest actually was. Trees were lined up perfectly, Pokémon were playing off to the sides of the paths, couples casually walking by one another, and all the smiles. Was this really the same forest that apparently came after me on that night?

I tried to make the uneasiness in my head go away but I had to ask Shade about the change of environment. "Shade, why does everyone look so happy? I thought that the forest was a terrible place."
He continued walking ahead of me while answering. "Long story short, this is my territory now. I attacked a ruthless Pinsir after he attacked me and said I was in its territory. Unlike what most Pokémon would have done, I let it live so now the Pokémon around my den aren't afraid of me. Pinsir could be awful by demanding something whenever he felt like it. If you couldn't bring what he wanted to him, then your time in the forest was limited. But under my so called reign, everyone is happy because they see the kindness that I wanted Tom to see." His reasoning put everything into perspective, but he stopped walking and turned to me. "What you saw that night was out of my territory. I don't know whose it was, but that Noctowl was some kind of guard."

"I remember you beating Noctowl. How did you win against Pinsir?"

"He didn't take me seriously and I just pounced on him when he didn't expect it. Not one attack came from him, only flailing until I knocked him out. My Pokémon are the least hostile in this forest, or at least they don't try to attack me for dominance; most of them probably heard about the battle." Just the line about it being his territory made me feel at ease so I opted not to ask about other territories and the complex network of so called rulers.

Before long, we were at a pond that seemed way off the beaten path. As soon as some Psyduck saw us, Shade told them that there was some training going on. That didn't seem to make them feel any better until they realized they weren't going to be training dummies. Relieved, they went back to playing in the pond. While Shade wandered off to get the stuff I needed, I took in my surroundings yet again. Fruit covered the trees while there were some large rocks on the side of the pond. With a powerful ram, one tree didn't have fruit anymore.

I watched the Psyduck play until Shade came back with a decent amount of fruit wrapped in a ball of string. Maybe he had a Weedle use String Shot to help him. He bit some strands and the fruit rolled all over the place; he sighed as if that's not what he wanted to do first.

"This will do I guess. Okay Ruby, I want you to start by picking up this apple." Is he serious? I'm not that bad with my powers. Whatever, might as well. My eyes started to glow and the apple easily came up to my head before I dropped it back down. "Alright, pick up the apple and the pear." Again, a piece of cake... err, fruit I guess. "Now, pick up nine pieces by you." Fine, I don't see how this is helping me. Glowing eyes and all, I picked up the fruit.

"How is this going to help me again?"

"Hold on, hold on. You picked up one… two… three… four… sixteen pieces. This is a major problem."

I dropped the fruit and tilted my head in confusion. "Why? I can pick up more than you told me. I'd like to think that's a good thing."

"One factor in you getting tired from using psychic powers is using too much energy." I still looked lost so he kept going. "You have to survey the area and limit how much power you use. Combination attacks are sometimes launched so it's best to know which ones to go all out on. After countless lab tests, I've learned that conserving your strength is better than trying to end the battle in one hit whenever possible."

A light bulb popped in my head. I realized I was got tired against Kingdra because I panicked and wanted the most protection possible so I used more energy in the shields. It probably didn't help that I used one shield on that Hyper Beam attack. Now I'm glad I told him everything about that horrible battle. But still, there has to be more than this.

"So now what Shade?"
"Do it again, nine pieces." This time it was a success. Surveying the area, I focused on the pieces I wanted to pick up and it was done. He came over for the second step of the exercise. "I'll be calling out two numbers in a row. Lift the first number then drop the second number."

"But wouldn't that get me tired faster?"

"Yeah, but you'll be eating some fruit to regain energy. The point of this is to see how well you can react to changes. Sometimes I'll be calling out the numbers fast, other times I'll wait a little before calling out numbers. We won't be doing this for too long."

I was a pro at this new game Shade planned. I could almost predict the number I had to drop until he changed speeds. The longer I waited, the more likely I was going to drop the wrong amount. The worst was when he went from a high number like eleven to a number like six. I took longer so I wouldn't drop the wrong amount; sometimes I took too long and Shade would say the round is a failure. Fatigue was starting to set in, so I ate an apple to get some energy back. The second wind helped and I could do the drill flawlessly.

After he said the round was over, I was pretty confident. "Not bad for a beginner, right?"

"I guess, now we're going to a new exercise."

"What's tha…" Shade tossed a soft berry at my face.

"Add a moving target this time," Shade answered, smiling at his handiwork. "I'm going to throw some fruit at you and see if you can stop it. I'll start easy but I promise I'll make it harder." Oh wonderful, I might smell like fruit juice but it makes sense to give me something harder to do. Shaking off the result of his sneak attack, I readied myself for the fruit salad coming at me. By this time, the Psyduck were really concerned that they were going to be a part of this so they left; Shade apologized as they left. He may be strong, but he does have a kind heart.

Placing fruit on the ground next to me was pretty easy when it was one at a time. And then he decided to throw multiple pieces at me. Still, nothing reached me. He saw I was picking up the concept quickly so he made it even harder. A pile of thirty pieces seemed to come at me so I stopped them all.

"Is that the best you got?" I asked with a smirk on my face. He just shook his head and walked over to me.

"You did it again Ruby."

"What do you mean? All of those were going to hit me."

"Not exactly." Confused, I looked around my area for any clue as to why I made the same mistake as last time. My face was all he needed to see to tell me what I was not getting. "Take a look at the large pile in front of you. There are only twenty pieces there. Five are rolling at a Slugma's pace and five are so high up, they'll fly over your head. You've wasted energy on things that won't even touch you and that can be the difference in battle. I know something that will make this a little more interesting. Wait here."

All I could do was sigh in annoyance. Damn, I'm wasting energy again. But it's not my fault. There's no way I could have seen those ten pieces being useless because the blob of twenty was coming straight at me! More importantly, what was this extra thing he was going to add? Before long, Shade came back with a Geodude beside him.

"I'm confused Shade, what's he doing here?"
"My Geodude partner here will be helping for this round. He'll be throwing rocks at you while I throw fruit at you." A jaw dropping statement for someone who wanted to "help" me. Can't wait to hear the logic behind this one. "This represents combination attacks. Fruit is the thing you should dodge while using Confusion to stop the rocks. It's pretty simple. Now watch out for a rock and a piece of fruit coming at the same time. It's possible to hold your concentration while being attacked but you might not get the hang of it so quickly. After this, we'll have one more drill."

Before I took my battle stance, I noticed that the Geodude wasn't too powerful. It was actually smaller than a normal one, but that doesn't mean those Rock Throws are going to hurt less. Still, I want no interruptions during this round. When in doubt, get hit by the fruit and avoid the rocks but don't stop the fruit. Okay Ruby, you can do this. What's a little rock to a combination Surf attack or a fully charged Hyper Beam? Nothing at all.

Once I was ready to go, Shade threw the first fruit. After I dodged it he turned to Geodude and nodded; that's when it got chaotic. Rocks and fruit were coming from all directions until I calmed down and used my psychic powers to stop some of the rocks. Nice, I can stop these things but what about the fruit right behind it? Better duck. Wait, the rock in front of me dropped to the ground? Damn, I guess I can't hold my concentration. Oh well, I want to finish the exercise without stopping.

The onslaught continued until Shade ran out of fruit and the young Geodude couldn't throw rocks anymore. I smirked as Shade sent his partner away; this exercise was a complete success. Ah, he's coming over to talk about what's going to happen next.

"Wow Ruby! That was one hell of a show, and I didn't see anything easy being missed. I saw you drop a rock when you went to duck, but that's something to work on for later. Now for our last drill, you have to battle me."

"I guess, but why? You're better than me in every way when it comes to battles." Well then, things from zero to light speed real quick. Battle him? There's no way I could win. He has more speed, more power, more experience in battle, and most importantly type advantage.

He took a deep breath before answering me. "You know how I was experimented on by those people? They were dumb enough to give me a really strong move with my typing so it's even more powerful. I want to see if you can stop it or at least deflect it. I know that we've been out here awhile training and all, but I just want to see what you can do." Somehow, I managed to nod after hearing that I have to stop a super charged attack from Shade.

Like a duel, we stood tail to tail and counted off steps until we were a good distance away from each other. In my panicked state, my steps were larger so Shade asked me to come a little closer to him. He let me start our little battle whenever I was ready. There was no point to waiting, so I told him to go.

Shade drew a sharp breath before launching a blast of pure darkness from his maw. I readied myself by building up power and as it came to me, I let it go. Eyes glowing, I held the blast in place before tossing it aside. Despite being tired from the previous exercises, I managed to deflect it? He smiled at me from across our makeshift field and got ready for a second one. This time, I knew I couldn't fully stop it but I could deflect it. As the move was deflected, Shade was getting a new one ready. How long can I keep this up? Unfortunately, not for too long. I made a shield around myself as if I was facing Kingdra again for the third attack but the fourth one connected and I was sent backwards toward a pile of fruit. Shade knew it was time to call it a day as he trotted over.

"Hey Ruby, I think we're done for to..." I nailed him with a few pieces of fruit.
"Revenge is sweet, but not as sweet as the fruit juice on you right now," I said with a smile on my face, admiring them as they were smashed on the top of his head.

Shade waited until the juice came down to his mouth before licking it off and then smiled at me. "Touché, but I did it first so that make me better. You used more than once piece of fruit so that's cheating."

I helped clean him up before we finished whatever fruit wasn't destroyed in the training. We started to walk back to the den once we saw the sun was starting to set but I was too tired to keep up with Shade. He had me get on his back just like the first night so I started to fall asleep, but he kept his rings glowing so I couldn't go to sleep. Before we were too deep in our sleep, I could feel one Pokémon near our den. All I could sense was that it was not like the ones near us. After we settled into bed, Shade sung his lullaby to me so I could fall asleep peacefully.
Chapter 7-Danger

That first training session went well, so we decided that we would do something different every day to improve. A daily routine was nice to get into because it gave both of us a sense of time (and something to do) out here in this dense forest. Ruby has gained some confidence in her abilities and she finally knows why she can't just use her power freely while I've gotten stronger with my dark energy blast. I was told by some poison types that my purple substance was from a move called Toxic. After an explanation, I realized why all of the guards dropped to the floor during my escape from the lab, but didn't give up right away. Unfortunately, I still don't know the actual name of this powerful dark blast but I do know it's cool to use. Fingers crossed that it's a cool name.

Like in weeks past, Ruby is always tired when she is done with her training. However, she keeps telling me that there is a Pokémon that isn't like the other ones here and that it's really close to the den. I heeded her warning and asked around for any suspicious Pokémon, but nobody had an answer for me. Other than that, life has been pretty good so far. Memories of Tom and Quilava occasionally come back to me but I have to deal with the fact they're gone; I'm not sure if I ever can. I don't know if I'll ever get the chance to battle for a badge again, but there always room to get stronger.

Ruby woke up after me as usual so I waited for her to finish eating before we headed out for our training. Today was going to be different. We were going to see if we could handle larger boulders with me trying to break them and seeing if Ruby could move them.

"Hey Ruby?"

She took a moment to finish her berry. "Yeah?"

"We're going to Mount Mortar today to see if our skills have gotten better. You up for some hiking?" As soon as those words left my mouth I cringed. Probably should've phrased it better than that but she was on board with the plan anyway. Luckily for us, my territory was big so we could get to the base of Mt. Mortar without too much trouble.

After a long time trying to maneuver through my territory, we got to the exit. Beautiful hills met us at the base while the rocky terrain was showing in the distance. Nature has a way of showing off so we're returning the favor with our training. Before we pressed onward, Ruby pawed at me. A look of concern was on her face.

"Shade, I don't know the last time you left the forest but you have to watch out for trainers." Huh, I hadn't thought about being caught ever since the escape but I would be furious if I was caught by surprise.

"Then let's go higher up. There will be more caves to hide in and bigger boulders to train with; sounds like a win-win to me."

Climbing Mt. Mortar wasn't that hard which meant we could enjoy the view on the way up. Despite it being hot down by the base, it cooled down once we got to a cave to train in. It was surprisingly empty cave considering Zubats practically own any cave. Seeing the large rocks
hanging from the ceiling and the massive boulders scattered around, it made sense that nobody was home; any Zubat would have a hard time communicating with all of that interference. The only question is how much time we should spend here.

"Ruby, we won't stay here too long even though it's almost midday. I want to make sure we can get down the mountain with the sun still up."

She nodded in response. "That makes sense. Plus we have to watch out for trainers on the way back too." We finally have a plan. Perfect, now let's get down to business.

I pointed to show her where to start. "See that icicle looking rock hanging from the ceiling right over there? See if you can break it off with your psychic powers and move it over here."

Turning to me, Ruby put her head down, smiled and shook her head. "Tsk-tsk Shade, they're called stalactites. You may be stronger but it looks like I'm the brains here," she said jokingly. I was at a loss for words, standing there dumbstruck; she eventually snapped me out of my trance. "Aaaanywayyyyyy, I'll give it a try." Her eyes glowed as the rock, I mean stalactite, cracked and floated over to us. Ruby didn't appear to be exhausted at all but man this thing was heavy.

"Not bad. Could you do it to another?" Yet again, she broke off a huge one and placed it beside us. "All right, this one's even heavier. How are you feeling?"

"Fine, I'm not tired."

"Good, now I need you to help me."

"What do I need to do Shade?"

"I need you to roll some boulders away from the wall and put them in a more open area. Now you can watch me for a change."

One boulder was rolled into the center of the large cave as I took a deep breath. Ruby trotted over next to me, obviously not wanting to get hit with my attack. I launched my attack and the boulder crumbled into hundreds of tiny little pieces. I wanted something more, something I haven't done in a long time. I motioned for bigger boulder to be placed in the same spot. Instead of my new move, I opted for my strongest move. I charged it up before Ruby stopped me.

"Hold on Shade! You can't be serious can you? Running into that thing could kill you!" I stopped and turned to her, putting on a gentle smile. "I've gotten rusty with the move that gave me good memories. Let's see if I still have it." Oh boy, she's sweating like crazy right now; time to put an end to that. I charged up my Faint Attack and sprinted forward. When it was all said and done, I stood on the other side of the cave panting heavily. The boulder turned into a fine powder and Ruby's jaw dropped. Describing the drill as successful would be an understatement.

"S-s-shade… what was that?" she whispered.

I tried to play it cool since I'm guessing she's seen that only one time, and that was when she was teetering on the edge of death. "Thaaaaaat was my Faint Attack," I said playfully. "It's my strongest move, not the one those bastards gave me. Sure they gave me a nice ranged attack or two, but Faint Attack never fails to get the job done."

Once she pulled herself together, I did it again. We both got a nice workout for the next two hours. Ruby kept moving large rocks around while I got the satisfaction of making my attacks stronger.
Those scientists tried to manipulate my moves and they somehow made it so I could remember more than four. Unfortunately, my Bite attack wasn't that strong so I opted not to go after any rock with that attack. Quick Attack fell under the same category. Realizing that we were running out of rocks, we walked near the entrance and sat down. Afternoon shadows were being cast over the land below; what a relaxing sight. That and turning to see Ruby placing her head on my neck was pretty relaxing too.

"Can we please stay here a little longer Shade? It's too beautiful to leave right now."

"Ummmm no." She frowned; too easy. "I'm kidding Ruby. Honestly, I've never seen something like this in my lifetime. Tom would have loved this." I swear I'm going to make her hate me one day. For now, it's time to stare at the world below.

Once it started to get a little colder, we decided to head back down to the forest. Heading down was just as easy as climbing up except for the occasional trainer scaling the mountain. Every large rock was our friend because trainers couldn't see us from a distance and most of the rocks were really off the path. To be fair, hiding behind a sleeping Graveler works just as well. Honestly, who wants to deal with an angry Pokémon in an area that's not stable? We made it to the base of the mountain and made a mad dash for the forest. Ruby made it but I couldn't make it to the forest fast enough.

"Oh wooooow! A wild Umbreon! Let's see if I can get it," the male trainer said with a smirk on his face. Ruby was trembling in the bushes, but I just gave her a head nod. He must have been inexperienced because he only had one Pokémon. A ball landed a few feet away from me and out came a Beedrill. Okay then, show time.

"Fury Attack, let's go!"

It came at me slower than previous opponents but I didn't take it lightly. Easily dodging, I rammed it with a Quick Attack. Taken aback, the trainer ordered a Twineedle hoping the super effective move would deal some damage; it found its mark and I felt it. Wincing in pain, I tried my long ranged attack. Beedrill just flew side to side. I guess it was going to be a close combat match.

"Twineedle again!"

It came at me for round two and I decided a Bite attack would scare it off. Beedrill didn't appreciate getting bit and tried to attack again; he flinched.

"Get away and use Pin Missile!" Damn, I didn't want it to get away from me.

Beedrill shook me off and fired a shower of pins toward me. Dodging was out of the question since the attack was coming from all directions. The barrage hit me for some decent damage but it wasn't enough. I decided to end this battle with a powered down Faint Attack because the one during training would have to be reserved for dire situations. My move hit and the battle was over, or so I thought.

"Beedrill return. Great Ball, go!"

What? Is this trainer stupid? He knows the risk he's taking. He knows I can come straight at him and injure him with his only Pokémon down. Well, it doesn't matter because I can use Quick Attack to dodge the ball. A second one came a little too close for my comfort so I decided to book it. Ruby saw me sprinting toward her, so she took the cue to flee into the woods. We kept running until we were too tired to run.
Ruby wanted the first word after we stopped. "Are you alright? I saw you take some damage back there."

I checked my body for anything serious. "I'm all good. A berry would be nice but it's nothing I can't handle." I scanned the area we just entered. Oh no, this isn't the same area of the forest we exited. That damn trainer made me run into another territory. "Ruby, I need you to listen to me very carefully. We're not in my territory anymore. Stay close to me and look straight ahead. Do not show any signs of being scared."

Her eyes went wide "So now what?"

"Finding our way back won't be easy, but I know it when we'll be nearby. You have to trust me on this."

Navigating our way through the area was a tedious process. Some Pokémon gave us a blank stare as we were walking by which didn't surprise me. Others pretended not to notice that were outsiders. Sunlight was fading away while we continued to walk. Soon, we were really off the beaten path with no Pokémon around.

"I know you're not from around here," a voice said from the bushes. I turned to the side to see a Pinsir coming out. "It's been a long time... you freak."

Uh oh, it's that same Pinsir from a long time ago. "Likewise. What do you want?" Ruby started to show signs of nervousness.

"You see, since that defeat I've wandered the forest trying to find a new home but I realized I couldn't rule like I used to. So, I decided to be an asset to the ruler of this territory."

"And you are special how?"

He turned to Ruby. "I'm the executioner for my fellow bug type ruler Ariados. You see, he really doesn't like outsiders. Frankly, I was going to kill you both in your den but your whining kept me from doing it. Now I finally have my chance." Ruby really was shaking at this point. "My dear, you look quite nervous. I can get rid of that feeling for you... and all of your other feelings."

That's it, the gauntlet has been thrown. "Ruby, stay back." Now she was on the verge of breaking down. I turned to her and pressed my head against hers; it calmed her down. "That promise I made earlier about you getting hurt again is no joke. I love you."

Pinsir had no choice but to chime in. "Awww how sweet, you're willing to die for her. Good news for me considering she's going to die anyway, so why not add you too?"

Wow, he really doesn't get it. "Since I'm a kind ruler of my territory, I'll let you in on a secret: do not give me any extra motivation. It's the dumbest thing you can possibly do." Ruby backed up and I let my rings get brighter. Did I care it was giving Pinsir an advantage as the sun set? No. This is so Ruby knows I'm alive.

"Here's my secret: I'm not from Johto. My idiot trainer left me here when I couldn't win against a gym leader. Allow me to introduce you Brick Break!"

He came at me with fists glowing; Brick Break looked intimidating. A Quick Attack was the best option to dodge, but it wasn't fast enough as I got nicked near my hind leg. This wasn't the same Pinsir mentally speaking, so I thought about how to attack. He's obviously going to hit me hard every time so let's see how long I can stall to tire him out. Can't afford to be reckless unless the time is right. Again, he came at me with arms crossed but my leg tweaked a little so dodging would be
an adventure. This time I couldn't fully dodge the new attack and it made the barrage from that Pin Missile feel like nothing in comparison.

"It's your unlucky day you freak. That X-Scissor hurt didn't it? Last time I checked, I only have moves that are super effective against you but never got a chance to even attack last time we met. What my other two moves? If you live long enough, then you'll find out." Time to shut him up for awhile.

I fired my ranged attack and to my pleasure, it hit him for massive damage. Staggering back from my move, I used Quick Attack to make sure I knocked him over. Combination attacks work very well. It's too bad Ruby was on the receiving end of them from a gym leader. He struggled to get up, but it was a good bluff; he came at me with even more force than before. I shook my head to regain my senses after he slammed me into the ground.

"Revenge. It's not just a word you know. Thanks to your stupidity, my attack power doubled."

Yet again, he came in for a Brick Break so I decided to fight him head on with Faint Attack. I can't afford to hold back anything. Calling it a collision would be a disservice to the amount of power that radiated from the area. We both were head to head with our skulls ready to break, but I had the better angle so I used the force to slam him into a nearby tree. He may not admit it, but he's taking some massive damage. Killing him seemed easy in his state so I went in with Bite. He saw what I was doing and prepared his X-Scissor; I backed off. There's no reason to take that risk. Not when I have that ace up my sleeve.

"Not much of a talker are you? It doesn't matter because you showed me your hand. I know all of your moves so I can prepare my counters for the rest of the battle. I hope you enjoyed those hits you got on me because you won't get a fatal one or possibly another one."

I grinned. "Don't say things like that unless you know it's gonna happen."

He looked over my shoulder then flashed an evil smile. "Then you won't mind me telling you that your friend is about to enter a world of pain that's far worse than my world. I kill my prey really fast while Ariados loves to take his time."

"Shade, help!" I turned around to see Ruby being dragged away into a denser part of the forest by a thick web.

Calm down Shade, think for a second. If I go after her now, I guarantee Pinsir will not focus on me and go after her while she's defenseless. On the other hand, Ariados would probably torture her slowly until she broke. The best option isn't pretty but it's my only chance to get us out of this with as little damage done as possible.

I have to finish this fight soon and hope Ariados takes his time.

I hope Ruby can hold on long enough.

Damn. It. All.
Chapter 8- Brutality

I had no idea that someone could hit that hard in a battle. Brick Break, Revenge, and X-Scissor are all moves that are super effective against Shade but Shade has nothing super effective to hit Pinsir. I also had no idea that Shade could hit harder. This is what happens when your life is on the line; how I wanted to have a fraction of that power so I could defend myself without getting tired.

I watched them go at it for minutes until Shade went in for the kill. Compared to him, I really wasn't that wild of a Pokémon. I've never thought of killing anyone but what about Shade? He hasn't told me anything about his fights out here. Wait a second, he stopped? And now they're talking? I guess that X-Scissor scared him off. I see Pinisr's looking at me now. No… he's looking past me.

The web caught on my hind legs before the mystery Pokémon started to drag me away. I screamed in the hopes that Shade would look over and save me. As he turned back (or so I hoped) I was already out of his sight because I was being dragged across the forest floor like a chew toy. Right now, I fear Shade won't make it in time so I might as well scream to see if I can get anyone to help me.

A cold voice came from the Pokémon dragging me. "I can't have you screaming and attracting some unwanted attention or anyone wanting to play hero." Before I could even get the chance to reply, I was hit with a Night Shade. Despite the pain from the attack and being dragged along, I managed to lift my head up to see Ariados.

I tried to keep my voice sounding steady as more cuts were added to my back for each foot I was being dragged. "What do you want with me?"

He stopped and turned to me. "I don't have time for questions but I guess I'll give you an explanation. Shade may not know it but he owns a large amount of land. What does that have to do with me exactly? It's simple: I want it and I'll do anything to get it."

"So you really had to kidnap me?"

"Yes. No doubt he'll come after me since I took you. However, he should be barely be able to stand before me after my executioner is through with him." He got closer to my face. "I know that meathead Pinsir can't beat him but if he does, then I'll simply carry… no, drag his corpse around to prove my point. That will show the Pokémon I am king of this entire forest. And as for you, you can be my queen. You can cover my weaknesses and I will cover yours. Together we will have a powerful reign."

What a savage with no regard for life. Dragging the corpse of the only living being to help me through the forest as some kind of trophy? I'd rather die. I fired a wave of psychic energy at him; it hit but he seemed unfazed. I wanted to make sure my point got across so I spit his face after I got my head high enough.

"There is no way on Arceus' green earth that I will ever become your queen." Not saying a word, he turned around and continued to drag me for only a few more minutes before we reached our
destination. It was a medium sized area with trees forming a tight circle. The entrance to the clearing was very narrow and near the back middle of the circle, there was one tree that was severely cut up.

Ariados stopped yet again before moving deeper into the clearing. "Hold on." He wrapped me up in his web even more before placing me on his back. "We can't have our special prisoner under the influence of poison can we? I want the chance to put on a show for Shade." As he moved toward the tree, I looked down and didn't see a single blade of grass. Toxic spikes gave off a glowing purple aura along with a poisonous mist.

"What is this place?"

He continued to walk "Again with the questions? Tell you what, I'll answer this one shortly and then you won't have a chance to ask another." Once we reached the cut up tree, he used Spider Web to make a detailed web and placed me in it. One more shot from his Spider Web attack landed on my mouth. "Now that you can't interrupt me, welcome to my execution area. Toxic spikes cover the ground while this tree is where all the action takes place. Nobody has ever come out of this area alive although I've seen a few escape my web."

My eyes went wide as he cut the webbing on me so that I was exposed yet still unable to move or talk. "Don't worry about anything yet because Shade's glow still radiates through the darkening forest. I'll wait until it dims down to start the show but first, let me steal some energy with Leech Life so you'll struggle more." Ariados left me to stare at the yellow glow in the distance by myself. I found myself getting tired and nauseous from the lingering smell of poison. Please Shade, keep lighting the darkness. Show me you're alive.

Falling asleep was something I was used to, but I somehow did it under the most unusual circumstances. Upon waking up, I faintly heard bushes bristling and was eventually met with Ariados again. Only this time he brought three Arboks along; I guess they were his bodyguards. All four of them looked at me for a minute before talking amongst themselves then looking at me again.

Ariados was the one who spoke to me. "Well, it seems Shade's battle is over since there's no light radiating. Now it's a matter of who's coming back to this area. I have no doubt Shade will find you here, but how much strength will he have left? Will he even be alive? I'm not a fan of surprises but I can make an exception. The look on his face will be priceless if he makes it in time." He motioned to an Arbok who moved within thirty feet of me. "Now it's time to start the show. Use Poison Sting."

Shade was right; there were no limits out here. I screamed but it was obviously muffled by the web and panic started to set in. This is how they killed anyone who defied Ariados; this tree is their grave and Poison Sting is their favorite method. Hold on, I think I can put that training to good use and stall for time. Regaining my composure, I used my psychic powers to suspend the poison needles in midair before tossing them aside. Confused as to why I wasn't struggling, another round was fired at me. Again, I deflected the needles away from my body. So far so good, I'm not tired.

"I don't think that will work for too much longer," Ariados commented. He nodded to his second bodyguard while pointing at me. Now two Arboks stood in front of me ready to fire but I didn't want to try to stop all of the needles because that would be wasting power. A shield would be a better option since I wasn't sure if I could accurately counterattack them. The needles bounced off my shield but now I was starting to feel the fatigue kick in. Leech Life and toxic fumes finally were starting to affect me. Arbok number three moved into position and fired with the other two. My shield went up again but it was much smaller than before. All of them looked back to Ariados.
"Boss, it's not working."

"You're right, try the second option."

"Sir!" I only saw the middle one start to attack so I stopped all of his needles but I had to throw up my shield to stop the other two rounds. Staggered attacks? Now I'm in trouble because they can attack at random. Luckily, they kept attacking me in rapid succession before Ariados became frustrated.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You know what? I'm all for a slow and painful death but this is taking too long; I'm joining in. We'll make this quick."

Those words signaled my time was up. No more stalling. No more last second miracles. No more guessing games on who's going to attack when. No more hope. Wrong, I still have one hope. One Arbok turned to his partners and all four of them took the formation of a firing squad.

"Ready! Aim! Fire!" Poison Sting attacks from all four of them came straight at me. I managed to throw up a shield to block the barrage; that was my last one. All out of energy, I can only wait for the next round and take the full attack. My one hope is still out there and I can hear bushes moving close by while they're getting ready to fire. Please make it in time.

"Again. Ready! Aim! Fire!"

With Ruby gone and Pinsir getting a second wind, I need to end this. So far I've only seen three of his moves which means he has something else in his arsenal. Could it be fatal to me? Hard to guess since he really doesn't want to use it. Thinking about it can wait since a Brick Break is coming. So reckless with his attacks.

"It's been fun Shade. Ever since I lost to you, I've been waiting for this exact moment but I think I want to watch your girlfriend suffer as well. Ariados does a good job with breaking his prisoners. Maybe I can pick up some tips on how to slaughter anyone who opposes us." Arms crossed, he charged at me with an X-Scissor after his attempt to break my concentration. I used Quick Attack to try to get behind him but that nick from earlier slowed me down to the point where I couldn't counterattack. To my surprise he did it again. Time to use the ace up my sleeve.

Quick Attack gave me the speed to get behind him. Following up with Toxic never felt so satisfying as he checked himself for damage, only to find liquid poison all over his body.

"Checkmate."

Pinsir was furious when he realized at what I just did. "How is that possible!?!" As the poison went to work, he tried to conserve his energy. "We don't have the ability to remember more than four moves."

"I just gave him a straight face. "You said I was a freak and unfortunately for you, you were right. When I first met you, I just escaped from a human laboratory. I won't bother you with the details but yeah, I can remember more than four moves."

Enraged, he came at me with reckless abandon with his arms outstretched. This time I was clueless on what he was going to do since he wasn't glowing. Bite seemed to be the best option, but he picked me up and tried to slam me on my head. A second attempt followed with the same result happening. The poison seemed to be taking too long for my liking as he charged with arms wide open again. Not this time. I met him with a Quick Attack and sent him back.
"Seismic Toss should have killed you two times over. How did your neck not snap?"

"No clue." Probably not the answer he wanted to hear. Truth be told, he wasn't that far from killing me.

I could see he was getting weaker from the poison so I charged in with Faint Attack as he charged in with Seismic Toss. There was no doubt with this collision. Pinsir was sent into a tree with so much force, I heard a crack before the tree fell over. Upon further inspection, I saw his spine really out of place in addition to the lack of breathing. Now I have to find Ruby.

Finding her was not going to be easy and I doubt anyone is going to help me. Hmmm, my best bet is to go the way Ruby was dragged and pray that there are no turns on the way. Also, I have to dim my rings so that Ariados doesn't see me coming. Sorry Ruby, I can't blow my cover. Time to get going now that I started down this path… ouch. What was that?

"Watch it ya klutz. I'm trying to hop back home."

I looked down to see a young Pineco. "Sorry but I need to get going."

"You don't understand mister. Now we have to fight since you decided to step on me and for knocking me out of that tree with Pinsir. Put 'em up."

I let out a long sigh. "Fine, if you say so." I just picked it up in my mouth and started walking. "Looks like I win. Now where would Ariados take a prisoner?"

"How would I know?"

"Listen kid, I used to have a chew toy growing up and I have yet to find a good replacement."

That got Pineco very nervous. "I'll take you there but please don't hurt me." A perfect bluff. There was no way I would injure a child and become the thing I hate, especially after Ruby told me her story but I need to stay firm.

"Deal, now tell me where to go."

With Pineco in my mouth, he guided me through the maze that Ruby endured until we got to a clearing with trees forming a circle. Mother of Arceus! There wasn't grass here, only toxic spikes. However, I could make out four figures but no Ruby at first glance.

"Well here we are. Now will ya put me down?"

"Again. Ready! Aim! Fire!" These commands came from the other side of the clearing.

"Once you clear these toxic spikes then you're free to go. You know Rapid Spin?" He nodded.

Pineco did so and bolted into the surrounding trees. The clearing became easier to walk on and I saw a defenseless Ruby being pelted with Poison Sting attacks. Her muffled screams could be heard from my spot near the entrance. Once they sensed the absence of the toxic spikes, they moved toward me after finishing their attack. I saw Ruby in more detail after their barrage ended. The dark couldn't have been messing with me because Umbreon can see perfectly in the dark. She was strung up with a web over her mouth in addition to the numerous red cuts all over her body. The worst was a large gash on her side about nine inches long. Rage finally overtook me when I saw her eyes were closed and her chest slowly rising and falling.

Ariados spoke from behind his three guards. "I knew Pinsir wouldn't kill you. So, what do you
think of our show? Good marksmanship if I say so myself."

Before I lost it, I started counting. My rings returned to their glorious yellow; it was the same as when I rescued Ruby the first time. Adrenaline was rushing through me and I became a blur. My dark blast attack knocked an Arbok into a tree with tremendous force. Like Pinsir, the impact was too much for it to handle. The second one met the same fate, but with Quick Attack as my move choice. As for the third one, it tried to launch a Poison Sting but my Bite was faster. I quickly found its neck and dug in with my teeth until I heard a satisfying crack. I then shook him like a common chew toy to make sure the job was done.

I turned to Ariados. "You're next."

Ruby started to open her eyes as my rings turned the darkness into something out of a fairy tale. She saw Ariados go for Leech Life while I went for Faint Attack. I felt my energy being sucked out of me but it didn't matter because the force I hit him with was enough to shatter bones without the help of a tree. Once I located his crippled body, I jumped as high as I could and used Quick Attack while aiming for his head. The move connected and I knew he wasn't going to say another word to anyone; 57 seconds was the final time.

Still on the adrenaline rush, I sprinted over to the web that held Ruby. I bit through the parts that held her and removed the web over her mouth by nibbling at it very carefully. It eventually went away and she immediately started to kiss me.

She was holding back tears and shivering as she broke the kiss. "S-s-s-s-shade! Thank Arceus!"

All I wanted to do was embrace her but I was afraid of hurting her more. "I'm right here. Please Ruby, we have to go home now. I'm getting a feeling that we are close to my territory. I promise when we're there, we can… we can…” I couldn't find the right words to say.

"You're right, but I can't walk. Can you carry me?" She said very weakly.

I tried to keep the panic in my voice to a minimum. "That was never in doubt. Are you poisoned?" She nodded. "Damn. Ummmm, hold on one second. I'll be back in a flash." I really didn't want to leave her but there has to be something around here. All I could find were berries that restored energy not cure poison. Doesn't matter, she needs something to keep her alive.

Ruby tried eating the berries but was in too much pain after the first one. However, some of her smaller cuts started to heal. I went to pick her up and noticed she had a fever. If I wanted to keep her alive, we needed to get back to the den soon. Our berry collection should have something to cure her.

"Hey Shade?"

"Yes Ruby?"

"Please, keep your rings bright."

"I have to dim them a little for you. I don't want anyone coming after us."

"I was scared when you dimmed them. Ariados waited for that moment." Damn that spider. He knew that I didn't want to give my position away.

"Alright, but it's going to be a bumpy ride. You sure about this?"

She smiled at me. "I want them bright so I can officially call you my knight in shining armor."
Wow. Even facing the very real possibility of death she finds a way to smile while cracking a joke, even if it's cheesy.

I nuzzled her forehead and kissed her one more time before I placed her on my back and sprinted back toward our home.
A Desperate Situation

Chapter 9- A Desperate Situation

Darkness. For some Pokémon, it's something that is to be feared. For me, I'm in my element. Most forest Pokémon are asleep by now but I'm wide awake. Darkness is providing me the perfect cover to get Ruby home alive. Only problem is that my rings are lit up. She asked for it and for her, I'll keep them bright. Besides, I'm fast enough so that anybody who saw my streak of light couldn't catch me. I didn't think about it at the time but keeping my rigs lit makes it harder for her to fall asleep.

There is no way I could say I'm tired right now even though I've fought in two brutal battles. Pinsir fought to kill me. Ariados tried to steal enough energy so that I would be forced to watch Ruby suffer even more. It didn't matter that I took massive damage or that I got nicked in the leg, what matters is having enough energy to sprint back without stopping. For if I stop at any time that energy would go to waste.

My territory was closer than I expected so that was one less thing to worry about once I was actually in it. The edge of my territory was pretty vast and open which allowed me to sprint at full speed while looking back at Ruby occasionally to make sure she was still alive. She was still conscious which was good, but her breathing was becoming more labored. How I wish there were berries that cured poison right in front of me.

"Shade, how much longer?" Ruby said very weakly.

"Can't be much further." Now I was starting to sprint even faster. Adrenaline is the only thing that I feel. No pain. No fatigue. No guilt considering I just lied to her in her disoriented state.

Grassy plain turned into dense forest as Ruby was starting to close her eyes. To make matters worse, the wind is picking up and it's getting cooler; a thunderstorm is coming. Taking cover would be risky because Ruby isn't getting better anytime soon and there's no guarantee of any medicine nearby. The dense forest makes it so I have to slow down while turning corners. Unfortunately I'm losing my adrenaline rush and the pain is starting to seep in. At this point I need to rely on my willpower to keep going.

I made yet another right turn, but not before I saw an orange glow on the other side of some thorny bushes; can't chance jumping them with the circumstances. After going up a dirt path, I made the left turn to head toward the orange glow. I planted the hind leg that Pinsir nicked and I heard a loud pop; easily a dislocated hip. Ruby flew forward toward the orange light as I immediately dropped to the ground.

"Ooooh it hurrrrnts," she moaned in pain. Losing consciousnesses was going to be easier after she hit the ground.

My calm demeanor was shattered. "Shit! I'm sorry Ruby." I could only crawl in her direction. Now the pain was going away in favor of adrenaline but it doesn't matter since I can't walk anymore.

That orange glow was a campfire. Next to it, a human was sitting on some kind of tripod stool. By the looks of it, the human had four Poké Balls on his belt but nobody was next to him. Oh
Arceus… it's a trainer. It stood up once it saw Ruby fly into his line of sight by the campfire. I crawled even faster and somehow managed to get in front of her. The trainer almost looked like Tom in the light. He was about six feet tall with short brown hair wearing a beat-up windbreaker and dirty hiking pants.

"Arceus, what happened to you two?" he asked as he continued to approach; I growled hoping to get him to back off.


"Ruby please! Wake up! We have to get out of here."

"Mmmmmmghhh." Not the reply I wanted to hear. Well, I have to keep my promise from earlier. I will fight like hell to move her and I will die trying to protect her. Maybe I might join her standing in front of Arceus since there are no berries around and the poison is taking its toll. The trainer bent over to reach inside his bag. My instinct was to bite his forearm because I expected the worst. I expected him to fight back or call out one of his Pokémon to finish me off before doing who knows what to Ruby. The trainer didn't seem to register pain despite my teeth digging into his flesh. Actually, he was rubbing my head. Was I that weak right now? Or was he sucking it up for now? He winced for only a second after I bit him and he doesn't seem bothered by it now.

"Based on what I saw in the past minute I know you care for her." He looked at me with concern in his eyes. "Please, let me see if I have something, anything in my bag. She's got a high fever and labored breathing, signs of poison." Arceus dammit. We're in a bad spot but I have no choice to trust him and let him potentially hurt Ruby. I let go of his arm and he went back to digging through his bag.

He dumped his bag after not finding what he wanted fast enough. Man, this guy has a massive collection of items. Finally the item came out that would save Ruby: an antidote. I turned toward her and noticed her breathing was extremely quiet. The trainer gave it to her and she immediately was rolling around in pain and coughing; I was growling even louder than last time.

"Easy, easy. It'll take awhile before she'll be fully healed. I promise her poison will go away with some rest." I stopped growling. How long had it been since I've seen an item made by a human? Guess they take longer to work than berries. Regardless, she'll live. Now the question is what to do now? I tried to stand up to get closer to her.

He noticed my obvious struggling and eventually found out why. "Your hip is out of its socket. I need to put it back in so you can at least stand up." I didn't even fight it as he turned his attention to me. "On three I'll pop it back in." This is going to suck. "One. Two. Three." My hip went right back in as I yelped in pain. Checking his work was pretty easy even though I couldn't stay up that long.

"Shade," Ruby called over to me semi-consciously. I limped over to her and knelt down beside her. "I can't move at all. That poison took too much out of me. Even if you carried me back to the den, I would keep falling off. We have to take cover for the night."

"It's a long shot but we need to trust this human. He has four Pokémon on him and based on how we are now, he might try to protect us if something comes by. The den is still too far away and I can't battle wild Pokémon to protect you in my condition." She started to cry.

"I just want to go home!"
I tried comforting her. "He saved you and popped my hip back in place instead of immediately catching us. When he went to get the antidote, I bit him yet he didn't panic or fight back. I'm not leaving your side and you know I'll fight if I have to."

He came over to us after a drop of rain landed on the ground and he tended to the wound I have him. "The rain's coming. You may be headed somewhere but you're in no condition to be traveling. You're staying in my tent tonight. I have some some help if you get out of hand, but I don't think you two are in a position to do anything right now." The general consensus was that Ruby and I were okay with this trainer. Now I know we made the right call. Still, I was nervous about what would happen throughout the night.

Rain was coming down so I went to get Ruby on my back. Once she was on, I tried walking to the tent but collapsed from the pain of the previous battles as well as the pain from the actual hip dislocation; I started to cry too. I hadn't cried since Tom picked me up from the ranch. Never before have I ever been this helpless. There was too much on the line and I couldn't do anything about it. Come to think of it, Ruby has never seen me cry before. Soaking wet and exhausted, he picked both of us up like newborn Pokémon before walking us over to the tent. It felt like that day I met Tom all over again. Something inside made me feel comfortable despite our current situation.

A two-person tent was what it felt like on the inside. Roomy for one but I had a feeling something else would sleep in here on occasion. A sleeping bag with some blankets was in the middle of the tent so we were placed in there after we were dried off. Ruby was already sleeping while I was still trying to get comfortable. I immediately hugged Ruby once I found my spot and nuzzled her. She nuzzled me back in her sleep. I turned to our host and tilted my head. Where would the trainer sleep?

"I have some blankets so I'll be fine sleeping on the side of the tent." Although the sleeping bag was warm, I wasn't sure if I would be warm enough. Pawing at him got his attention. "What's wrong?" I tried to grab him to bring him closer. "Alright, I'll come over. I thought you two wanted space." Ruby and the trainer were on the outsides while I was sandwiched in the middle. Perfect for me because I can hold on to Ruby and he can keep me warm.

Ruby mumbled in her sleep. "Don't let go of me Shade and get some sleep."

I teased her. "You need it more than I do and no, I will never let go." Then I gave her one more kiss before I heard our host talk to me.

"You can sleep as long as you want. I can't imagine what you went through." His touch was so soothing on a rough Pokémon like me. He tried to pet Ruby but I gave him a low growl with Sara in mind. "Okay okay I won't touch her". He went back to petting me. I actually purred before I fell asleep as the rain continued to fall outside.

Darkness. It's not always bad for someone who can't see in the dark. Not being able to see while resting your body and mind is a wonderful thing. The past 24 hours have been nothing but a fight for survival. It's refreshing to close your eyes knowing you'll live to see another day. Honestly, I was worried that even back in our den we would be far from okay. Sleeping easy was possible because of his act of mercy.

Neither of us woke up until the sun was directly overhead. For the first time since I met her, Ruby woke up before me and was nuzzling me very gently as she was sitting upright over me. She spoke softly while smiling at me.

"Good morning my hero." Okay, that was a first. I guess that knight in shining armor line was still
in her head.

I scanned the tent to see if anything else was in it, but it was just the two of us. "Good morning my queen." Ruby cringed at that word. A dull pain was running through my body so I had to move very slowly to sit up.

"Oh no, just lie down."

"I'm fine, are you okay?"

"The poison's gone but this scar isn't going away anytime soon." Yup, that nine inch red line on her side was a grim reminder of what she went through. "What about you?"

"Sore. I wish I could tell you how I kept moving last night but I have no answers other than instinct."

Ruby looked uncomfortable. "I-I'm sorry you went through all of that for me."

"Don't be. Remember the promise I made?" She nodded. I mumbled. "I couldn't keep it. You practically died."

"How fast did you kill those four?" My heart sank like a stone. She actually saw me slaughter them? I had hoped she didn't see that.

I had no choice but to answer her. "It took 57 seconds."

She hugged me even tighter. "You kept it. You said anyone who hurt me that bad wouldn't last another minute." It took me awhile to register what she meant. My eyes went toward the floor.

"I should never have to start counting."

"I don't care. Even if it took you over a minute I wouldn't care. What matters is we're both alive right now and I'm not ruling beside Ariados."

"What does that mean?"

"He would let me live if I became his queen and ruled beside him; I told him I'd rather die."

Boom. Her words hit me in the gut. She chose to die instead of living a life of fear. "I'll never use that word around you again."

She shook her head. "No. I couldn't become his queen because I'm already yours. You've treated me like one since the day we met even if you don't think you're a king."

"Are you going to be okay?" I'm concerned with how this will affect her from here on out.

"With you next to me, absolutely... my king."

We just lied there in silence until the trainer came back to the tent. He immediately went to grab something in the tent and left without acknowledging us. I was starting to wonder if we should go along with him.

"Ruby do you think we should go with the trainer?"

"It's tough. I want to live peacefully with you but after last night I'm not sure if we can anymore." She was right about wanting to go back home. Not only that, but I think she's hiding the fact that
she has a hard time trusting humans. Living peacefully won't be happening for her anytime soon.

"I'm fine with either choice." It was the truth. Why should I hold on to a title I didn't want just so Ruby could be targeted? On the other hand, the forest provided freedom for both of us.

"Maybe he's different Shade. You were right about how unselfish he was and how he didn't even catch us. We can run away right now and escape, but I have a feeling he would be sad."

"Alright. Then let's see if we can convince him to take us."

We exited the tent in the hopes that our potential master was nearby. He restarted the fire which was in the same place as last night despite the puddles surrounding it. I leaned on Ruby for support as he looked over at us. His Pokémon were nowhere to be found just like last night. Maybe he didn't want to scare us with his team.

"Hello you two," he said with a light smile on his face. A blank expression came over my face; I don't know what to do now. Ruby looked at me and then walked toward him. He remained cautious since the last two times Ruby was involved, I growled. "Well someone's feeling better!" Ruby was slowly rubbing up against his leg before turning to me.

"Come on. You need to do this too."

Look, being all warm and fuzzy is something I do a terrible job of. Maybe not terrible, but Ruby has been the only living thing to make me act like that. Even when I was an Eevee I couldn't get any girls at the ranch to warm up to me; probably had something to do with the fact that I beat them so many times in battle. *Sigh.* Time to give it a try.

Guilt riddled me since all I did last night was threaten him. He still treated me with kindness once Ruby encouraged him to keep rubbing our heads by pressing her head into his hand. Eventually we both put our front legs on his stomach realizing that we were really thankful we were alive; Ruby even licked his face. "Looks like you both want to come along with me. I don't see why not. But before you're in it for the long haul, I want to show you these."

Flashbacks from that day Tom met me came back to me instantly. The badge case came out and inside contained the trainer ID as well as four badges. "I never introduced myself last night. My name's Mitch." Huh, a nice name. Not as nice as those four badges. Upon a closer look I realized they were the same four badges that my previous master had won. I started to tear up once I realized that I could battle for badges again. A lot of scenarios ran through my mind. New teammates to impress, badges to be won, fun challenges, et cetera, et cetera.

Ruby took it differently. She was having second doubts until I put a paw on her back. "Mitch is strong. He has the same badges as Tom which means he can protect us from anything. I don't know how many Sara had but I can assure you that he earned those. Her eyes turned confident; she nodded back at me. "I'll be right by your side."

Mitch went to his pocket and pulled out two red and white balls. "I don't have enough money at the moment to get the proper Poké Ball so these will have to do." We were both confused as to what that meant until I saw Mitch had four black balls with a yellow and red stripe around the center as well as the top. However, we both backed away because we haven't been in one for months. "It's okay; I'm not going to force you in. Are you ready to go? The next town isn't that far away."

The forest has been our home for quite some time. Leaving it feels so… weird. I had no problem leaving my so called throne behind and I certainly had no problem taking Ruby with me. Most forest Pokémon were pretty indifferent towards me with the exception of a small group who looked
up to me. I did have a problem with her telling me that I should be carried in Mitch's arms. Protesting wasn't going to work since I kept falling over from the lack of strength in my hind leg.

A dirt path was practically guiding us out of the forest but Ruby went toward our den instead with a little help from me. It was only fitting to say farewell to our old home. However, there were no more berries. Ruby's eyes went wide after she searched our den for just one berry and found nothing. Soon she lied flat on the ground and put her front paws on her head in shock. Her snuffle turned into a sob and the sob turned into crying for minutes.

Nobody made a peep on the way back to the dirt path or on the way into town.
Chapter 10- Old Wounds

Talk about a change of pace. I went from four Pokémon to six, a nice city to a tough forest, having an Umbreon bite my arm to letting me carry it, and most importantly a near dead Espeon to a healthy one for the most part. All of this in the span of 24 hours. The concept of time is an amazing thing and it seems to slow down when a lot is happening.

Ecruteak City was such a friendly place to visit. Every building had some long history lesson attached to it and I enjoyed the stories associated with them. That being said, the most important building in that entire city was Morty's gym. A badge is never easy to get especially when your opponent's Pokémon can hide on you. I won 2-0 but both my remaining Pokémon were exhausted. Since I now had my fourth badge it was time to make a decision on where to go next. I heard Mahogany Town was home to the ice gym so off I went the next morning.

The mood from Ecruteak didn't follow me too far in the forest near Mount Mortar. Pokémon out here weren't exactly friendly or diverse. Most of them were bug types that either hid from me or tried to battle. Luckily for me, Ember is a good attack in doing damage and sending a message since I don't want to set the forest ablaze. Once I made it more than halfway to Mahogany Town, the sun was starting to set so I collected wood to make a fire.

"Alright let me see. Wood… check. Food… check. Water… check. Tent set up… check. Fire starter… coming up." I grabbed a ball and casually called out my loyal companion. "Growlithe I need ya buddy." Flashing energy lights scattered after it was outside of its ball.

He didn't look too tired, but I had a feeling he was a little annoyed with being the go-to member of my team for this trip. I just pointed toward the wood pile. He used Ember, I ruffled his fur, he licked my face, and I called him back. All of my Pokémon had eaten earlier which means I'm on my own for this meal. Even though the smell of food could draw wild Pokémon I banked on the fire keeping them away since they were all bugs; I was right. Honestly, I didn't want to drag out my three other Pokémon after a tough gym battle. Growlithe was going through a pseudo gym in the form of this forest so I wanted him to have his rest.

Based on tradition, any new trainer would get one of the obligatory starters at New Bark Town; I broke it. Growlithe was a wild pup when he decided to "break in" to our house near Violet City to get some food (to be fair I forgot to lock the door that night). He was surprisingly friendly so I did my best to show that I wanted him. My parents weren't exactly on board because money was an issue; that changed once it started to obey all three of us. Both of them worked but the money just wasn't enough. As a result, I had to wait a little longer to get started on my journey.

The Pokémon League moved the official minimum trainer age to 16 which was (and still is) an unpopular decision a few years back. You could apply for the gym challenge if you were younger but the tests were rigorous. It didn't matter since I left when I was 20. It was worth it when my parents surprised me with a bag filled to the brim with traveling essentials plus a tent and 1,000P.
Money wasn't an issue when I first started out because I won my first dozen battles all with Growlithe. I made sure to watch it carefully since I'm on my own. Trainers are all wearing the latest trends while I'm in a beat up windbreaker and hiking pants. Still, they're comfy and easy to wear. Once I had to start buying items I knew saving my money was a good choice. The first item I splurged on was a Luxury Ball for Growlithe. He had no idea why it was a big deal until I smashed his old ball. My logic is pretty simple: you go one step further for your Pokémon, they go one step further for you. It's worked out so far.

Since that purchase, I've caught my team in Luxury Balls. However, mart owners were hesitant to even show them to me. My first guess was that it was based on my looks until one cashier flat out said it to my face. I kept a poker face each time I pulled out the 1000P and they gave it to me with no questions asked. Unfortunately, the time after I bought them was spent in the Pokémon Center receiving what I call "pity" items from the Pokémon League via Nurse Joy; it felt wrong to take them unless it was food for my team.

I wasn't really looking for new Pokémon anytime soon which meant I had a little extra money to spend on myself. Despite that I still bought hot dogs for dinner and roasted marshmallows for dessert because it just felt right. Normally I would have had everyone out by now, but it was getting late and I covered some serious ground. Oh yeah, there was a thunderstorm coming too.

An Espeon flew by the fire seemingly out of nowhere and it was in horrible shape. Then an Umbreon came crawling in front of it; something was obviously wrong with both of them. My Pokedex gave me all the info I needed on both of them; I swear it said Umbreon had five moves. Taking care of Espeon would be hard considering Umbreon was growling at me and even bit me. It hurt like hell but I couldn't have a knee-jerk reaction; a wounded Pokémon is something you don't want to upset, especially if it's caring for another one.

By the grace of Arceus I managed to cure Espeon's poison as well as figure out Umbreon's problem without having to call out anyone. There was no way I could let them go in their conditions. Umbreon tried to carry his friend but he was just too exhausted. When I walked over to pick them up I was shocked to see Umbreon crying. Their space was important so I opted to sleep away from them but Umbreon wanted me next to them; he still wouldn't let me touch Espeon but he gave me a nice purr before he fell asleep. He's not bad at all, just scared.

They woke up and actually sought me out the next morning. Espeon was the first to walk over to me yet I was hesitant to do anything in order to avoid another bite from Umbreon but he seemed to be okay with me petting her, even around her cuts. How could anyone do such a thing to a beautiful Pokémon like her? That scar will have to be looked at though. Soon they both were trying to climb on me which meant they were thankful. I guess I had no choice but to have them come along for the ride.

Umbreon's eyes sparkled once he saw the badge case; I guess his previous master was on the same path as me. Espeon seemed indifferent but Umbreon somehow convinced her to tag along. Despite the obvious dirt path out of the forest, Umbreon kept motioning to Espeon and soon we were at their old home. I let them Espeon look around but she came out of the den and dropped to the ground in shock; Umbreon started to tremble too. My guess is that they were headed here last night. I had no clue why they were acting like this but I still consoled them regardless.

Mahogany Town is the smallest I've seen in awhile yet it has that homey feel to it, especially when the sun is setting. Pokémon Center here we come. It was just like all of the other ones except for a candy stand in the corner selling the local delicacy. Only one other person was in the center but she seemed very interested in the newspaper she was reading. I walked up to the counter cradling
Umbreon while Espeon was walking by my side as Nurse Joy saw me.

"Hello! What can I do for you?"

"I would like my Pokémon healed please. These two need more than the machine." I pointed to Espeon. "She had a bad case of poison last night and has a large scar on her side." I then went to hand over Umbreon. "He had a hip dislocation last night as well. I think they were running from something."

She looked back at me in confusion. "So these are wild?"

"Not exactly. They wanted to come with me but were scared of the Poké Balls I offered. My guess is that their last contact with humans was weeks, maybe months ago. Can you take care of them? Please? I'll buy them a proper ball once I get to the mart."

Nurse Joy thought it over for a little while. Espeon thought it was taking too long and jumped on the counter. The sight of the scar probably persuaded her to look at them. "Alright, but they will belong to the town if anything is broken because you can't call them back. Is that clear?" I gave her a serious nod before she took them away in the back in addition to my other four team members.

"Wow this is fantastic news!" The woman in the corner of the center screamed.

Jeez lady, you scared the shit outta me. "What do you mean?"

She turned the paper to me after walking over to me. "Team Rocket's getting weaker and weaker. Yesterday they officially lost one of their bases in Kanto. It had something to do with manipulating Pokémon instead of just selling them on the black market. You can read it now since my Pokémon is coming out now."

I watched the woman take her Ledian from the counter and walk out. A front page article was staring me in the face so I decided to read it. It spanned three pages and took me about 15 minutes to digest everything. About three quarters of the way down on the last page I was interrupted by Nurse Joy.

"Your Pokémon are in good shape. The two you gave me have been healed to the best of my abilities. Umbreon should be fine with two days rest while Espeon's wounds have been healed for the most part. However, the scars on both of them will not be going away anytime soon."

They both sat obediently on the counter before I went over. Once I started to pet them, they starting acting like kits and begging for me to shower them with love before I let them wait by the door. "I have a question for you Nurse Joy."

"Go ahead."

"I was reading this article about Team Rocket and was wondering about this manipulation plan. Would you happen to know anything about it? Any trainers coming here talking about it?"

Nurse Joy took an eternity to respond. "Months ago we had a shop that acted as a holding area for Pokémon. Lab work was done underground. It was discovered by a trainer and Lance of the Elite Four and was destroyed. It was supposed to be about evolution and the Lake of Rage, but there were reports of something else going on."

"So there was a base here? What else could possibly be going on in the underground labs?"

"That manipulation plan was here as well. Trainer's Pokémon were usually taken because they
were stronger than wild ones and they were shipped here. Nobody in town had their Pokémon taken because it would raise suspicion. However, Ecruteak was the prime target because it is the closest area with a gym. Rumor has it that grunts would wait until after Morty's battles to snag weakened Pokémon from their trainers. They would eventually be sold to anyone willing to pay or sent to a ranch to be held."

"So how did the base get exposed?"

She looked over my shoulder and pointed to Umbreon. "Your Umbreon was in a lab underground. On the night Lance and the mystery trainer came there was a huge hole in the wall along with several injured guards. Once it left the scene Lance came in. I think he was trying to figure out a way to get in before Umbreon made the hole."

"There's something about a ranch in here too."

"Oh yes, I never explained that. It used to be a day care but the owners passed away. A younger couple purchased the property shortly after. After the base went down, that ranch by Goldenrod City was connected to the base. They held some Pokémon that had potential, but anyone could buy a Pokémon if they had enough money. Based on its location, the prices were high so that only grunts could buy them with an executive's money. You would have to spend only 100P before you couldn't afford the cheapest Pokémon."

"Last question about this topic I promise." I looked her straight in the eye. "What was done to him?"

"I don't know. I also don't know how the experiments will affect him." Then she smiled at me. "But I know you'll be a great trainer for it. Just give him time. He already has a friend over there, maybe even a mate." I turned to see Espeon was starting to doze off using Umbreon as a pillow.

"Thank you for healing them. Goodbye." I was halfway to the door until I remembered about the gym. "Before I go, do you when Pryce takes challenges?"

"Unfortunately he's going to be out of town for the next week or so. I would recommend Olivine or Cianwood for the next gym." With that information, I decided to head out to Cianwood after reading up on the two leaders. Espeon is a perfect matchup against fighting types. Wait a second; I never introduced the rest of my team to them.

We all exited the center after I purchased one piece of the local candy. The sun starting to set was a sign that I should introduce everyone when they can actually see one another. All four of my Luxury Balls were tossed in the air in front of the duo.

"It's time to meet the rest of the team." They stood apprehensively once Growlithe, Furret, Ampharos, and Gyarados materialized in front of them. Growlithe and Furret went over immediately and were very friendly towards them; Furret got along with Espeon better because Furret was a female but was a little nervous around Umbreon while Growlithe got along with Umbreon but was hesitant of Espeon.

Ampharos was about as neutral as you could get as she walked over and said hello. She also has a knack for poking things so Umbreon's rings and Espeon's jewel were treated like a button; it didn't seem to bother them. Gyarados on the other hand was the least friendly, but not in a bad way. He's more into battling than making new friends. In fact it took him awhile to warm up to everyone despite being the second member of my squad. That being said, he introduced himself and didn't do much else.
I recalled them all before we headed back to Ecruteak. There was a boat headed back that way so I jumped on with Espeon and Umbreon instead of using Surf; might as well save their energy and they still didn't want to go in their balls. The boat docked outside the city gate about half an hour later as the sun was finally down.

The city looked beautiful at night considering the streets were well lit ever since the base in Mahogany Town was taken down. We only took a few steps before Umbreon stopped in his tracks and immediately bolted towards Burned Tower. Espeon cried out to him, but he didn't turn back and she went after him; I followed close behind.

After navigating the streets, we finally approached the base of Burned Tower. Because of how unstable it is, everyone usually stays away from it. However, there is a cemetery right next to it. Morty told me ghost Pokémon who are neglected or lost usually come there and he finds a way to help them.

There were no ghosts there. There was only Umbreon wailing uncontrollably at a headstone with his rings glowing very brightly. Espeon was also hugging him from behind while rubbing his back. The headstones from other plots were for residents of the city and their Pokémon were buried next to them if it had passed as well. I slowly came up behind him and saw the full text of the headstone.

"Here lies Tom and Quilava. Their courage in the face of Team Rocket shall never go unnoticed in this city," I mumbled as he started to dig at the dirt.

I took a deep breath. The only reason Umbreon would do this is obvious: it was his previous master. The one who actually fought back instead of just handing over his tired Pokémon to a criminal organization. The one who cared for Umbreon. The one I could never hold a candle to no matter how hard I tried. Would Umbreon really want to stay with me knowing his old friends are not coming back?

Footsteps came up from behind me. "I was looking to see if any ghost Pokémon showed up tonight. I'm sorry for interrupting your Umbreon mourning. Well, it looks like your Umbreon for now." I turned to see Morty standing with his head down.

"It's alright. Umbreon just came running here after we entered the city. I'm sure you know the story."

He looked up to face me and spoke softly. "I do and I feel awful. I had no clue that this was going on otherwise I would have escorted all of my challengers back the Pokémon Center." We both stood there in silence, listening to Umbreon cry out and pound the grass with his paw. He turned to leave. "I'll be going. Please, take care of that Umbreon. I have never seen any Pokémon defeat Gengar without receiving a command." After all of his battles, he still remembers one specific event from one specific Pokémon. That is something Umbreon should be proud of.

I watched Espeon start to tear up too after Morty left; she couldn't take it anymore. I called out everyone again but neither of the two heard everyone else come out. They were a little confused as to what was going on but it didn't take long for them to put the pieces together.

I didn't have to do anything. One by one they stood beside them and eventually formed a circle around the grave. Still crying out, Umbreon looked up to see Growlithe, Furret, Ampharos, and Gyarados all bowing their heads in respect. Espeon followed suit and soon Umbreon calmed down. My hand met his head.

"I had no idea. You've gone through hell and back. I don't want you." He looked at me. "I want to
make sure you want me."

He really thought it over. As far as we're concerned, he's still wild and could run away right now. It took some time for him to bury his face in my chest and cry. Tough decision to make? That would be an understatement. All I can do is give him a hug.

Espeon came over and consoled him.

Then Growlithe.

Then Furret.

Then Amphanos.

Then Gyarados, the most emotionless member of the team, came over and wrapped himself around us for support.

"You don't have to face the future alone. I'm not sure if I'll be as good as Tom but I can guarantee I'll try my best. You will be fed, sheltered, and loved if you stay. You have an entire team to support you as well. That is a promise." Umbreon looked up and nodded with tears in his eyes.

After staying like that for awhile, Umbreon was good to get back to the main part of the city. I recalled everyone and started walking to the Pokémon Center. Once we got there, I wanted to get a room before heading off to Cianwood. My room was pretty standard: two beds, a dresser, a desk, and a PC.

I showered up and got ready for bed. Once the lights went out I was almost out. Umbreon and Espeon kept pawing at me. The bed was way too small for all three of us so I got up and pushed the other one next to it. I let them get comfortable before I hopped next to Umbreon. I gave him a nice belly rub; he purred. I went to pet Espeon but Umbreon didn't growl. In fact, he nudged my hand closer to her. After enduring a tremendous amount of physical, emotional, and mental pain they slept like newborns.

I'm glad they chose me.

Chapter End Notes

Now that the male OC is in the picture, I'll say this.

Disclaimer: I do not own Pokemon, but I do own my OC.
Chapter 11- Party of Six for Cianwood

Last night's sleep was much needed for everyone. Something in my gut tells me that these two were almost caught in a never-ending cycle of despair if they survived that night. It was no surprise to me that Espeon was the first one up with her being the Sun Pokémon and all. Umbreon on the other hand was surprised she woke up so early. This leads me to believe that I'll never understand these two no matter how hard I try.

We all took some time to get moving before I hopped in the shower. Even though it was only a short time in the forest, how could I turn down a hot shower? Plus, my mind is pretty clear when I'm taking one. I still have to get to a mart as soon as possible to get some Luxury Balls. I can't just let them walk around without actually owning them. What if they're severely hurt in battle? Would my opponent be able to hear me call a switch? Forget battles, any pinch would be easier to get out of once that red beam touches them. Then there are the little things like how dirty they'll get. I don't think they'll enjoy taking baths frequently.

Once I got out of the shower, I changed my cloths and attempted to clean my windbreaker and hiking pants in the sink. Espeon wanted to help me by licking the dirt stains off of my jacket while Umbreon brought over my pants from the bed. Unfortunately the soap from the bath and Espeon's help didn't do too much for my jacket. My pants needed some actual detergent, not this weak soap. Now I have to be even more charismatic if I want the cashier to think I'm serious..

Our room was cleaned up of our belongings as we headed out to the main lobby. Again, the issue of the two walking beside me came up again. It's not unusual for Pokémon to be walking alongside their trainers anywhere in the region. However, I can't go around bragging that I have wild Pokémon that obey me because someone else could, scratch that would catch them. Nobody batted an eye at us on the way to or inside of the local mart; dodged a bullet there. I made a quick withdrawal from the ATM before I walked up to the counter.

"Excuse me I'd like to purchase two Luxury Balls please." Let's see how this'll go considering they're on the top shelf. "Do you have any?"

The clerk casually looked from behind her newspaper before continuing to read. "No. Get lost."

Compared to getting the other four, this clerk was generous. Still, I kept a level head. "I have the 2,000P to purchase them."
She didn't even look at me. "I told you no. What part of that do you not understand?" Time to be a smartass.

I placed my money on the counter. "I'll take the two behind you please."

Now that set her off after she put her paper down. "Listen here you sad excuse for a trainer. No way I'm going to sell these to trash like you. At least come back looking half-decent." She looked at my belt and then back at me. "I should call the authorities because you probably stole the other four." Umbreon was getting tired of the disrespect so he jumped on the counter, growling softly to illustrate my frustration for me. I appreciate the support but can't have him scaring the clerk in addition to the other customers nearby.

I settled him down quickly before pulling out my badge case. My tone turned harsh while remaining quiet. "You listen here lady. I have four badges to my name and am willing to dish out the money. You're obviously not too smart are you?"

We locked eyes until she finally conceded defeat. She put on a fake smile as a customer came up behind me in line. "That'll be 4,000P in total."

Ha! Artificial inflation. Come on lady, this trick didn't work in any of the other marts because I knew it would happen every single time. At least one cashier swallowed their pride and sold them at their actual value. One even got creative and said there was an import tax since they weren't manufactured in Johto. I'm not made of money but I know damn well how to manage it.

I whipped out another 2,000P and slammed it on the counter. "Deal. I'm pretty sure they're on the top shelf." She had no choice except to retrieve them with the line of customers getting longer. Once they were reluctantly given to me, I exited the city via the west gate.

It was much more open than by the east gate. Now was the time to see if they would hop in their new Luxury Balls. Instead of throwing it at Espeon and Umbreon, I placed them on the ground to see if they would activate them for me. I thought of it as their last chance to change their mind. Espeon sniffed it for a little bit until she decided to tap the middle circle with her paw; the ball didn't shake once. Umbreon on the other hand simply put its paw on top of the ball. He looked at me with passion in his eyes before trotting down the path and crouching at me.

"You want to show me your stuff? Nurse Joy said you should wait one more day before doing anything like that." He pouted and stomped his good leg in protest. "Well I guess I can't blame you. Furret! Let's go!" This wasn't going to be a cakewalk. If he can crawl in front of Espeon with a dislocated hip no problem, he's something special.

"Quick Attack, Furret!" She was off to meet Umbreon as he also used Quick Attack. They both rammed each other head on before jumping back. He wasted no time firing a Dark Pulse and it wasted no time finding its mark.

"Don't worry Furret. Time to use Dig." Luckily for her the dirt below us wasn't too hard to dig through. Now Umbreon was flustered. His head movements were sporadic as Furret finally decided to hit him from below. Umbreon staggered back; he finally was realizing that this wasn't some run-of-the-mill forest Pokémon. This was one who has had a lot of experience in battle.

His fangs started to glow as he came in for a Bite attack. "Use Slam!" I thought Furret's tail hit him first but he managed to drag one of his teeth across her body as he was hit. Another Bite was coming but I took a defensive strategy. "Dig to dodge." Just like last time, Umbreon was very nervous when he couldn't see his target. Furret didn't wait that long to counterattack from below.
By now I could tell Umbreon wanted to end this battle. Slowly but surely he charged up his Faint Attack as a follow up move. He wants close combat? I'll give him close combat.

"Charge in and use Return!" Return was Furret's most powerful move and a move she would never hold back on. Since Return's power is based on how friendly the Pokémon is with its trainer, it always hit hard. In fact, it was a practically a knockout blow against an average trainer. Obviously rock or steel types resisted it but it was undeniable how much she believed in me. It came down to how hard Umbreon would hit.

Yet again they met with heads rubbing against one another. The result was in my favor as Umbreon was knocked back on his side; that was enough. I took out my ball and rolled it over to him. If he wanted to run, he had better do it now because there was no turning back after he was caught. I know deep down he wants to be with his deceased owner, but that will not happen. Would he rather be free knowing Espeon made the decision to stay with the rest of the team?

The tension in the air was cut once Umbreon called out to Furret and tapped the circle of the ball with his paw. I bent down to pet Furret for a job well done. After we walked over to pick up the ball she looked at me and yipped.

"What's wrong girl?" She pointed to the ball then started to flex like a bodybuilder. "If he stays with us there's no doubt that he'll become stronger. Although you already know that, don't you girl?" I scratched just under her chin. Most Pokémon want something after a critical win. Some want piles of food, some want a new fashion item, some want a new toy, some want a break for awhile. Nope, Furret just wants her chin scratched every time. And every time she acts like a baby Sentret.

We walked along the path until we approached a farm with Miltank all over the place. A small girl was sitting on the front porch with a Growlithe while she called out to us. "Hey mister! Would y'all like some MooMoo Milk? It's only 25P a bottle!" I really am glad it's cheaper from the farm considering that clerk forced an extra 2,000P out of my wallet.

"Alright! I'll be over there in a minute!" I yelled back to her. Furret and I walked up the steps to pay the young girl for six bottles.

"Oooooooh your Furret is so cute!" she squealed. "Can I pleeease pet it?"

Before I could answer her, an older couple came out of the house. "What did I tell you 'bout askin' strangers to pet their Pokémon?" The thick accented man was probably her grandfather.

She hung her head in shame. "Sorry granddaddy."

Furret wouldn't have minded anyway but I had to jump in. "Oh no, it's fine with me. I just bought six bottles for my team." I bent down to her eye level. "Would you like to see them all?" Her eyes sparkled. I called out the remaining five members and gave them all their bottle of MooMoo Milk. I turned to them sensing Umbreon and Espeon were a little nervous. "Okay guys, this little girl wants to meet all of you. Play nice now." I ushered her to Growlithe first since he loved attention.

"That's a fine lookin' team ya got there," the grandmother commented.

"Thanks, I'm taking the gym challenge right now and have four badges."

She looked at her husband and smiled. "We used to be great trainers back in the day. It's nice to see young faces doing great things."

The husband extended his hand. "Name's Nick. My lovely wife is Laura and my granddaughter's
name is Marybeth. Growlithe's a big help out here too. No much of a battler; damn good herder though."

"Pleasure to meet you. So you guys sell MooMoo Milk for a living?"

Laura nodded. "Yup. Some officials from the league come and buy our milk so it goes all over the region. What brings you to these parts?"

"I was passing through to get to Cianwood. I have another badge to get over there."

Nick looked past me to see Marybeth piggybacking on Ampharos. She then used Gyarados as a slide, much to its delight. "You sure they don't mind being jumped on like that?" I shook my head. "Anyway, I wanna tell you 'bout the market in Olivine since it's comin' up. Every six months, folks from all around come to sell or trade stuff for two long days. Heck, there's even battles in the town square."

Now I need to see this for myself. "When is it?"

"Shoot, I forgot to tell you. It's in a few days."

"I appreciate it. Will I be seeing you guys there?"

Laura was a little hesitant to answer. "We weren't gonna go but maybe we should. It's costin' more to set up shop this year."

"I'm sure you guys will make the decision that works for you."

I had to get moving so I let Marybeth say her goodbyes to my team. Honestly a little surprised Gyarados was sad to leave. I knew he had a heart underneath that icy persona, but I won't bust his chops for it. I made sure to recall everyone so that they could get their rest. My parting gift was a free glass for myself because most trainers buy it and are back on the road. Some were rude to Marybeth when she asked to see their Pokémon which is why Nick acted like he did.

I really didn't have time to deal with trainers on the outskirts of Olivine so I used the forest to hide until the main archway to the city was over my head. A port town on the sea, what a place to live. Boats everywhere, people bustling about, the feel of a cool breeze, all Pokémon being friendly with anyone who walks by, just perfect. Unfortunately for me I have to take a ferry to Cianwood first.

The ticket window was empty when I stepped up to get my ticket. I took a second to open my badge case and really reflect on what I've accomplished so far. Falkner was no match for Growlithe and neither was Bugsy; a complete sweep on both parts although I had Magikarp as a backup plan. Whitney was a little tougher but Furret took care of her Clefairy while my Magikarp evolved before the battle into my best trump card. Morty truly pushed me to the edge with his Pokémon. Ampharos was crucial to slowing down his ghosts as Gyarados cleaned up. However, he managed to knockout my Growlithe and pushed the other two to within one hit of fainting.

My flashback was interrupted by the ticket salesperson. "Where would you like to go?"

"Cianwood City please."

"I'll need to see some ID." I do have Surf as an HM disc, but I don't want to get rid of any moves that Gyarados knows so I'm willing to pay to cross waters if need be. "Okay, you are taking the gym challenge and have four badges which means you qualify for a deal."
"What kind of deal?"

"I can offer you a pass at no cost but you're only allowed to use the Pokémon Center, gym, and enter some specific shops. If not, then you'll have to pay for a tourist pass. The center always has basic things for people with these types of passes so there's no need to worry." I can't argue with that. Olivine has the whole market thing so I'll buy my stuff there as opposed to Cianwood. Still, it feels like I'm trapped once I get there but oh well.

The information was sent to my destination and I hopped on the small ferry. I literally could lie down across all the seats plus call out my Pokémon if I wanted to. It feels great catching the last ride of the day. The driver revved up the engine and we were off. I just stared into the ocean on the way over thinking about what to do against Chuck. It was going to be 2 on 2 which means Espeon gets a spot automatically while Furret and Umbreon are out of the discussion. I guess I'll play it by who's out there for him.

Our ferry arrived in the docks after a short navigation through the sea. I was handed a blue wristband by a sailor working in the ticket window. A blue one was for the people who are here for the gym while a yellow one was for tourists so I guess it makes sense to have me wear it. The gym was within sight of the Pokémon Center as soon as I exited the dock area. Thank Arceus I don't have the chance to wander off.

Most Pokémon Centers do a good job of catering to both trainers and casual people strolling through. This one really favors a trainer which works for me. Although to be fair, this city has better lodging options. Nurse Joy greeted me before healing my squad and telling me when my match is which surprised me. She explained that the ferry system can put trainers in time slots for Chuck at random. My only problem is that the only open slot was 9:15 am. It's not bad but sleeping in sounds better.

Rooms here were equipped with the standard things found in other centers only they were bigger. The most notable change was the size of the bed as this one was a king size compared to the standard twin. Everyone was called out inside the room. Gyarados didn't really like the room but he eventually found a way to get comfortable. I let them relax as I went to take a shower; Espeon got Furret and Ampharos huddled up and pointing to the other three members of my team before I shut the door. No matter what I thought of, I still had doubts on who would be my second Pokémon. I was honest to them about my strategy for this upcoming battle after I was done. Espeon seemed to be cautiously optimistic despite my support for her. Since we were essentially stuck here, we waited until it was late to go to bed.

Four of my Pokémon managed to fit on the huge bed so I let them sleep on it after trying to make sure everyone was comfortable. Umbreon and Espeon obviously slept next to each other; Furret cuddled up next to Growlithe. Ampharos felt sorry for Gyarados so she snuggled up next to him on the floor. He has some serious faith in her, letting the electric type sleep next to him like that. Still, she was a warm and fuzzy sheep. A Luxury Ball isn't known to make Pokémon act this way so I'm going to say Espeon had something to do with this.

I missed having all of my Pokémon sleep outside their balls like this. It's the little things like this that make the journey worth it.
Chapter 12- Gains

By the grace of Arceus I woke up at a reasonable time for my gym battle today. Instead of the alarm from the clock by my bed, I was woken up by four wet tongues. Apparently Furret, Growlithe, Umbreon, and Espeon didn't want to be late to the gym either. Ampharos wanted in on the wake-up call so she jumped on me… all 135 or so pounds of her. Eventually Gyarados managed to make his way over and shoo everyone off so I could get ready for the day.

The preparations were made after I hopped out of the shower. All six of them were recalled so I wouldn't give Chuck any clues as to who I'll be using. He obviously doesn't have that advantage because the Pokémon League is very open when it comes to gym leaders and their Pokémon's type; they never reveal the Pokémon themselves. Still, it can be intimidating to know what you're up against and still not be ready for it.

Nurse Joy healed them up one more time before I stepped outside the center. A gorgeous sight of the sea as well as the cool breeze put a little extra energy in me for the upcoming challenge. Finding the route to the gym was easy. Escaping temptation to go into the shops was not. Beautiful stores lined the street which leads me to believe that they do this on purpose. Either your concentration or your wallet will take a hit; neither of mine did.

"Hey man, wanna buy some nice items for the trip ahead?" I kept walking past the group of people. "Come on, I know you're going for the gym. My items will help guarantee a win." Still not acknowledging the loudmouths, this frustrated them. One of them let it out. "I hope you lose you rude asshole!" Nothing was more irritating to me than a person who tries to force something on you, especially if you're tight on money. Also, it was too early for this. I continued forward while giving the nuisance the one-fingered salute.

Cianwood's gym looked like the others on the outside with the exception of some statues. Beautiful bronze statues of the Machop family lined the short walkway to the entrance. Probably was a scare tactic for those who were unsure of their team because these things were massive. The automatic door opened so I walked in.

A gym is supposed to reflect the personality of the leader and what I saw definitely did that. The gym was actually a gym. Various pieces of exercise equipment were scattered throughout the gym as well as some medicine balls. Pokémon and trainers alike were working on their bodies in the massive area. Ummm, where was the field?

A voice came over the loudspeaker. "Attention members, there is a challenger scheduled to battle in ten minutes." As soon as the message ended I was greeted by a younger student.

"Hello. You are Mitch yes?" I nodded. "Welcome to the Cianwood Gym. I know what you're thinking and the battle area is in the back. We announce a challenger so that the students can watch if they want."

Once we arrived at the battlefield, I noticed there were about a dozen students milling about, waiting for the battle to start. This was the first time a crowd was watching one of my gym battles; certainly a change of pace from the huge yet empty gyms. Chuck soon entered alongside an older
student. Chuck was an older looking man wearing karate pants and a black belt. Clearly he has gone through extensive training to earn that belt. There was no doubt his Pokémon did the same.

He bowed towards me before going over the pre-battle information. "I am Chuck, leader of the Cianwood Gym. Here we strive to train our mind, body, and soul through exercise. I see you are on time. Very good considering most trainers dread the first battle of the day." Look man, I didn't want this time slot. Hell, it took five Pokémon to wake me up; one of them being a 135-pound body slamming sheep (no Ampharos, you're not fat). "The rules are two Pokémon apiece and only you can substitute. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Now I'm curious, how many students of yours are going to watch?" I don't mind spectators but I do mind them coming through the door in the middle of the battle.

Chuck paused for a moment. "This room is designed to fit all of my pupils but everyone that wants to watch is already here. Let us take our places in the trainer's box." One of his oldest students served as the official and went through his spiel before we called out our first fighter.

"Primeape you're up first!" The pig monkey Pokémon was raring to go with some phantom jabs.

"Espeon time to shine!" My newly acquired member kept a good poker face. It must have been her first gym battle. The two locked eyes for a minute until Espeon darted into an empty corner. I wandered over to see what was wrong but she managed to get back to the field. I didn't have to go too far to see a small pile of vomit; poor thing, getting nervous like that.

"Is your Espeon going to be okay?"

"Yes." Truthfully, I have no clue whether or not she can battle so I'll give her a quick pep talk. I gently stroked her head. "It's okay girl. Just go out there and trust me. I wouldn't send you out there if you had no chance." She managed to calm down and face her opponent.

Our judge finally had his chance to speak. "Espeon versus Primeape for round one." The flags flew up. "Begin!"

Mitch was mumbling something about a match being really early so I wanted to make sure he'd be up. The room we stayed in before we had to head out was huge! What's even better is that the bed is huge. Maybe he'll let us sleep on it. All we did was relax until Mitch went to take a shower. Before he closed the door, Furret and Ampharos walked over to me.

Despite being the shy one, Ampharos was the one who started the conversation. "Umm, I'm sorry I poked you both." It really didn't bother me at the time but I accepted it anyways. "I was a little worried about talking to Umbreon when we first met because you two seem to really like each other and I didn't want to come off as trying to take him." Wow. That escalated quickly.

"It's a long story about how we met but you can talk to him. I know he's going to stay by my side and I'm going to stand by his. Believe me; I don't want to ruin any bonds you guys might have."

She seemed relieved but then took it a step further. "We want advice on how to get closer to Gyarados and Growlithe." Both of them were as red as a Magmar by this point.

Furret jumped in. "Growlithe is so loyal and warm towards all of us, but he goes that extra step for me. I can't explain it but he seems to stay by me and watch over me the most."

Ampharos had to explain her situation. "It's hard to understand for the average Pokémon, but I really like Gyarados. I was saved by him when I was a Mareep after I fell into a lake and my wool
was too heavy to swim in; I've liked him ever since. He's icy on the inside, but every now and then
he opens up to me whenever he's in a slump." I swear Mitch was going to have to call the fire
department because their faces were getting hotter by the second.

Now I'm not really a matchmaker but I see where they're coming from. I don't think it would be
helpful to mention that Shade and I met by pure accident and that staying by my side was more
than just a phrase. Any advice would still be good though. "If we all sleep outside our balls tonight,
go sleep near them."

Mitch came out of the shower and told everyone about the plan of attack. I was the first option but
he had no idea on who was the second option. But man, I'm back in the gym battle lineup again.
Sara immediately came creeping in my mind but I realized that I'm stronger than last time and I
have a type advantage. Plus Mitch isn't Sara in terms of how he acts, but I can't be too sure.

He let us all stay out and my little plan started. Shade and I obviously slept together. Furret was
nice and cozy next to Growlithe by Mitch's feet. I guess he liked her being close by and sharing his
natural body heat. Ampharos was willing to sacrifice the comfy bed for Gyarados since he couldn't
fit on it. Still, he didn't seem to mind her presence. I give him credit for letting an electric type
sleep in the same room as him, let alone right next to him. Who am I kidding? it's obvious that he
likes her and is playing cool.

Morning came and I convinced the four of us on the bed to lick Mitch's face to wake him up. I'm
sure he set an alarm but what fun would that be? Once we were ready to go he recalled us all so it
was time to do some sightseeing from my ball. The city is so beautiful, there are shops
everywhere… oh wait. Why is my master holding up one finger while he's walking? Whatever,
we're here at the gym. Someone obviously loves fighting types to have these huge statues on
display.

I was nervous for this fight once they were face to face. Not eager. Not excited. Just nervous. I
couldn't make out what Mitch's opponent looked like until I was called out of my ball. Most
Pokémon look confident in battle. Me? I had the blankest expression on my face; it was even
blanker than the time Shade tired to warm up to Mitch. Some would call it a confident poker face
while I like to call it a "not ready" face.

The nerves finally hit me and I sprinted to an empty corner to vomit. I didn't want to have him see
me like this for too long so I sprinted back to the field. Regardless, he gently stroked my head
while giving me words of encouragement. Deep breaths Ruby. The judge gives us the go ahead.
Let me at 'em.

"Primeape use Fury Swipes!" It wasted no time charging at me with full speed ready to scratch me
up.

"Counter with Quick Attack!" Mitch was trying to match power for power but why? I'm not
physically strong by any means. Still, I went for it anyway. The result was pretty surprising to me
since it ended up flying backwards. My guess has to be that I was naturally faster and by increasing
my speed I increased my power. Mitch knows some science.

Chuck didn't bat an eye. "Rage." Yet again it came aggressively at me.

"Use Confusion!" A beam of psychic energy met the charging Primeape and him square in the
nose.

There was a little more power behind Chuck's command. "Again!" Primeape looked even more
furious than last time after he got up. I panicked at the sight so I used Confusion on my own to hold
it in place. Despite my hold, it still thrashed about until I threw it against the hard ground.

A scream echoed through the room. "Again!" Rage for the third consecutive time forced Mitch to make a decision.

"Quick Attack to dodge then fire a Confusion!" No matter how upset it is, I'm faster than it. A successful dodge was followed up by a shot of energy that nearly missed him. I felt fatigue set in after I landed.

Damn. That training we did on Mount Mortar was with small fruits, not a raging beast with a blank mind. I still have a long way to go if I want to get stronger. Wait… what are the chances I even stay on this team long enough to get there?

"Come on Primeape! Rage!" His students kept a straight face in the wake of Chuck's tone. I on the other hand, was intimidated of Primeape and Chuck. It was coming way too fast for me to move out of the way; a solid impact left me on the ground.

No time for a break. "Karate Chop! Keep up the pressure." Its right arm glowed and met the middle of my back. Fighting type attacks shouldn't do a thing to me but it's hard to defend myself when I'm still on the ground and the power from Rage is still radiating from it. The onslaught continued until Mitch ordered a Swift.

Chuck folded his arms while looking at my master. "I'm very surprised that your Espeon is standing after that. I've faced many psychic Pokémon, but they all have once glaring weakness: a lack of defense."

My master acknowledged the praise. "She's a fighter for sure. Now it's time to wrap this up. Confusion!" No move has ever been so weak. The weakest Caterpie in the region had a better Tackle attack than what I shot out at Primeape.

"Fury Swipes!"

"Quick Attack!"

It was just like the start of the battle. However, I took two sharp scratches before I sent it to the floor for good.

The judge took a second to make the call after he saw me heavily panting. Maybe he expected me to faint too? "Primeape is unable to battle. Espeon is the winner." Unbelievable. I won a round in an official gym match. Someone tell me everyone saw that through their balls. I'm not ready to go down yet.

Mitch’s opponent let out a laugh. "That is an impressive victory for sure. Let's see how you handle my most trusted partner. Poliwrath, you're up!"

Mitch called out to me as soon as he realized I was still panting. "Espeon, can you still battle?" I nodded in response. What an act to put on. There was no way I could take an attack or dodge one. There was also no way I was going to pack it in. I have to show I'm strong otherwise I'm as good as gone.

Our judge was at the ready. "Poliwrath versus Espeon. Begin!"

Chuck seemed less intense than last round. "Let's change things up. Poliwrath, use Hypnosis!"

Shade soon appeared in the arena so I called to him. "Hey! I need some help in this fight." No
response. I sprinted towards him and I stopped inches away. "Shade?" He turned around with an emotionless face, cocked his scarred leg back, and punched me across the face. I was ready to cry until he did it again a few seconds later. It occurred to me that Shade would never do that. Hypnosis wore off as soon as I thought about it more.

"Looks like someone is awake and still able to fight. Tell me Mitch, how can she take two Dynamicpunches and still stand?"

Mitch took that as an insult. His face turned serious. A venomous tone came from my loving master. "I told you... she's a fighter."

I rose to my feet as Mitch was reaching for my ball and stared down Poliwrath. I refuse to be substituted. "Alright Espeon, Swift." He knew Confusion wouldn't do anything to it with how weak it was last time and going in for close combat wouldn't be good either. My consciousness was being lost too fast for me to respond to the jump by Poliwrath and the third Dynamicpunch in a row that followed.

"Espeon is unable to battle. Poliwrath is the winner."

I heard footsteps come toward me. No... not again. Images from my last battle crept into my head. How much abuse would I have to endure this time around? He's picking me up by my neck and... my lower back. And his hand is underneath both of them? He's not forcefully grabbing at my fur either!? I felt weightless so I turned to see my master but couldn't keep my eyes on him for long.

"I should've switched you out earlier. I'm sorry." I dared to look back at him. "I didn't know your limits. Next time I'll do a better job. For now, take a good rest... my scrappy little fighter." The entire room remained silent as he carried me back to our corner, petting me the entire way as I whimpered in shame. His voice was really soothing. "Don't cry. You've done a lot more than you think."

A red beam hit me and I found myself back in my ball. Arceus dammit. I couldn't even land a single hit to give my teammates a chance to win. It's over; we lost because of me.

Chuck broke the long silence. "I see you respect your Pokémon very much. Certainly you've earned the right to hold my badge, but this battle isn't over. Let's have a good final round."

Poké Balls of all types allow for us to see the outside world but I really didn't want to witness what my weakness created. It's not fair though. Everyone has probably made mistakes on this team but did they turn their backs when the chips were down? That's right! Mitch isn't Sara. Mitch cares for me despite my horrible past. Why should I turn my back on him? He said he let me battle because I had a chance to win. The least I can do is watch.

"Gyarados!" The strongest member was out there looking ready to win. He didn't even notice that Poliwrath was perfectly healthy.

The official threw up his flags "Gyarados versus Poliwrath. Begin!"

"Use Thrash." That tone was very similar to Clair's when she called for that Hyper Beam. That was the tone of someone going for a knockout.

"Hypnosis!" Poliwrath tried to put Gyarados to sleep with his body swirl; the thrashing Gyarados didn't even pay attention to it and delivered a heavy hit before going after it again."Meet it halfway with Body Slam!" Chuck was trying to match power for power but Gyarados was too strong and tossed it aside.
It was clear that this got Mitch out of his cold state once he saw the second hit. "Come on Gyarados keep it up!"

"Mind Reader followed by Dynamicpunch!" Poliwrath closed its eyes as if to track Gyarados' movements. Once he was being charged, he threw the strongest punch of the match. Poliwrath landed the uppercut under the chin and was still slammed to the ground. Gyarados is an absolute monster.

"Poliwrath is unable to battle. The match goes to the challenger Mitch from Violet City." Once the flag was raised I was called out of my ball. Mitch went to the center to meet with Chuck and all of his pupils to receive his badge. All I could do was stand there and soak it all in. After they exited I was alone with Mitch and Gyarados. He praised my teammate before both of them turned to me.

"Espeon come over here girl." I trotted over very slowly minding my injuries. Mitch showed more affection once I finally got over there. "See this? You earned this badge Espeon." I pawed at it, admiring the shiny brown fist. So this is why Shade loves badges.

Gyarados is normally quiet so it came as a surprise when he spoke to me. "You've got guts. Sheer power is only a small part of battling. I happen to be blessed with a lot of it." It took some time for him to find the right words to continue. "You may not be strong now but as long as you have guts, you'll always have a spot on this team. Believe me, everyone else was paying attention to that battle. I'm sure you've earned their respect too."

Never in my life have I been validated like this. I used to be the problem Pokémon wherever I ended up since day one of my existence. Not anymore. Here I have a loving home. Not just with Shade, but with four other teammates who want me to succeed. Most importantly, Mitch is the loving trainer I've always wanted.

I can finally start being an Espeon.
Chapter 13- The Woman in White

Chuck was gracious in defeat after the judge made the final decision of our battle. He motioned for me to come over and accept the Storm Badge while his pupils were surprised to see that their instructor lost a battle. It was a teachable moment on what he could do to improve his skills so everyone listened to what Chuck had to say. Everyone went back into the main part of the gym once he was done with his lecture. It was just Gyarados, Espeon, and me.

Since Gyarados was next to me, I gave him my thanks first. Fighting type moves are generally not very effective against flying types, but Gyarados took an accurate Dynamicpunch to the chin and followed through on his attack. His power is practically limitless which is why I use him in a pinch as opposed to regularly. He would pulverize smaller Pokémon even if I told him to ease up. If he were to lose his mind, it would take an army to stop him. Maybe Ampharos could do it since she's a powerful electric type but the main thing is that he knows his power.

Espeon was still standing in the trainer's box still trying to comprehend what just happened. "Espeon, come on over here girl." That broke her out of her trance. That and the nice belly rub made her feel refreshed; still had to be careful around that scar though. Damn thing is a terrible reminder of whatever she went through before she wanted to join the team. Surprisingly, no attacks hit that spot. Maybe Chuck was avoiding it on purpose. Maybe he didn't even see it. Anyway, I showed her the badge once I was done. "See this? You earned this badge Espeon." She'd probably never seen one before which is probably why she pawed at it in awe.

The Pokémon Center was my one and only stop before I wanted to take the ferry back to Olivine. The huge market festival was tomorrow like Nick said. Maybe there'll be something worth buying since I didn't buy anything here so far. However, there is one more thing I had to take care of.

I took the same route back… that same route with all of the fancy shops and the group of people that wanted me to lose. "Hey guys." They all stopped talking and looked at me.

"Well well well, look who it is. I'm guessing you need some help after a crushing defeat?"

I slammed my palm face down on a display table before I stared them down. "Suck it." My Storm badge stood out on the white table; they looked at me in disbelief.

"How did you win on the first try? It usually takes three tries to beat his fighting types."

"Guts. No guts, no glory." I scooped up my badge and walked away.

Healing my Pokémon was pretty easy considering I only used two of them. Still, it never hurts to have everyone healed by the machines. I asked the nurse on duty if there was any Pokémon food available while the balls were sitting in the machine because even though that MooMoo Milk was delicious, it might not have been that filling. Unfortunately for me, the shipment for the center wasn't due to come in until evening. I wasn't about to stay in Cianwood wearing this blue wristband though. The docks were the only place I could feel comfortable so I made my way there. Ferries were scrambling through traffic to find their spots while the spot that was for the trainer express was still empty; might as well catch up on some sleep.
A loud motor and a voice woke me up. "Hey, you going back to Olivine? Do you have a blue wristband?"

"Yup." It was more of a speedboat than a ferry; so much for sleeping on the way back. Four trainers exited after somehow managing to fit in the small boat on the way over. Bow seating is usually not my style which means stern seating it is. Also, there's only one spot to sit up there. Before the boat revved up there was a woman's voice coming from the docks.

"Waiiiiiiiiiiiit!" Dammit… I wanted the boat all to myself.

The driver looked confused. "Ma'am, you need a blue wristband to use this express."

"Oh yeah, I have one right here." She pulled out a wrinkled blue wristband from her bag.

"Frankly, I'm surprised that nobody noticed you without a wristband in a tourist area. Not my problem though, hop on board." This is something I probably should have done once I got to the Pokémon Center.

She took her seat next to me once everything was all cleared up. Really though? Out of all the empty spots on this small boat, you still sit next to me. We all waited for another five minutes until there was nobody else coming. After some time navigating through the traffic, we were on the open sea with the sun directly overhead. I will admit she did look beautiful in her white dress.

Everything was smooth sailing until we ran into a whirlpool. Our driver turned to us and killed the engine. "I'll have to turn around and take a longer route to shore. Sorry about that." No big deal for me, but the woman was a little unnerved by that statement.

Once we backtracked, there were no whirlpools to be seen but now there were wild Pokémon to deal with. Tentacool and Remoraid practically owned this part of the sea. However, they could care less that we were passing through. Our boat sent them swimming away if we slowly approached a school of them. I'll give our driver some serious credit not to just blow through these waters like I probably would do.

Slowing down was something that made the woman visibly nervous. Conversations usually help people calm down, right? "You look nervous." Well, maybe not if you start it with that.

She sighed. "Yeah, I need to get back to Olivine to bring this medicine to the lighthouse."

A bottle that had numerous labels was pulled out of her bag. "So this can't be bought at any mart?"

"No. This medicine is too strong to use on common battle injuries. It's a mix of herbs that can cure anything but the side effects are too much for a Pokémon that isn't severely ill. Think about it like this: do you need surgery every time you get a small cut?" She's got a point.

"May I ask what it's for?"

"You see, a few months ago the lighthouse Pokémon was severely ill and was struggling to breathe. A trainer who also was taking the gym challenge offered to get the medicine to fight the illness. I thought it got better, but sadly the illness has returned. This time I went and got the medicine and some other items for keeping the illness away for a long time." Her bag was filled with standard items you'd see at a mart along with more herbal supplements.

Waves rocked the boat in the middle of her explanation of what specific herbs do. Lo and behold, a Tentacruel stood in our path. The driver sent out his Pokémon to persuade it to move. "Corsola, see if you can get it to move please." The pink spiky Pokémon jumped into the sea for a chat. It looked
like it was going good until Tentacruel fired a Bubblebeam at it; there goes the negotiation. Poor thing was instantly knocked out and now we were being eyed. No choice but to fight now.

My arm instinctively reached for Ampharos' ball. "Come on out Amphar…"

The woman grabbed my arm. "Stop!"

"Why?"

She looked really concerned. "You'll be hurting innocent Pokémon and you'll be electrocuting us if you use electric attacks. Think, man!" Shit. I forgot one of the most basic things about water for a split second: it conducts electricity. Also, we're on a metal boat. My mistake almost caused some serious collateral damage.

"Do you have Pokémon that can help?" She shook her head in defeat. So her Pokémon can't do anything, diver's Pokémon is out cold, I can't use Ampharos. Come to think of it, Growlithe isn't useful surrounded by water while Umbreon only can hit it with Dark Pulse. Espeon may not be ready to battle so suddenly despite being healed and Furret is meant more for close combat on land. Looks like it's Gyarados by default.

"Gyarados, we're in a pinch!" It's unfortunate that I have to use him again so soon, but I'm all out of options. Luckily for me, Gyarados didn't have to break a sweat against Chuck. Tentacruel didn't look like it didn't want to back down. Tensions were running high as the woman and the driver had hopeful expressions on their faces. It didn't take long before the water types started going at it.

Wrap seemed to be its only chance to beat the one thing keeping us alive. Massive waves rocked the boat as any remaining water Pokémon fled the scene. Using Thrash would endanger us so I went to a better move. "Use Dragon Rage!". An orange ball of energy was fired from close range and it was forced back; its tentacles had turned purple once it shook off the attack.

"Oh no… it's Poison Jab. It must've drifted in from another region." I turned to see the woman drop to her knees with her hands folded. Why was she praying? I have a few antidotes in my bag that will make poison go away.

"Dragon Rage again!" I finally let out a sigh of relief once the move made Tentacruel faint before it could even touch my bruiser. A little concern came over me once I took a closer look at our surroundings. "Come on, let's get going! Put this thing in high gear!"

I probably sounded like an asshole, but some dark clouds are starting to form on the horizon. Our driver gunned the engine so fast that both of us flew back into our seats with me ending up on all on her stuff. My body should stay like this because I don't want her to lose any of her medicine. She on the other hand, can sit upright and enjoy the ride.

Speedboats and ferries alike were all trying to get to their own boathouses at the Olivine docks once the first few drops of rain hit the water. Once we were found shelter in the boathouse, the woman and I thanked the driver for maneuvering the tough sea before both of them thanked me for being their bodyguard. More importantly, the woman didn't lose any of her medicine to the sea after checking her bag. They both left in a hurry which made me want to lie down in the boat for a little bit to decompress.

A bottle covered in labels was wedged in between a seat cushion I tried to sleep on. Oops, looks like she forgot the medicine. I tried to look for her, but the area was empty. Damn, I didn't even ask for her name so I could at least have a chance of finding her. She did seem pretty shy and felt kind of guilty for jumping in the boat so late at Cianwood which is why she didn't want to talk. I needed
to get to the lighthouse as soon as possible.

The streetlights were already on as the thick clouds and steady rainfall covered the entire city as well as into the country side. Not a single person was on the slippery cobblestone street on my way to the lighthouse. I arrived on the doorstep of the lighthouse and knocked on the door; there was no response so I let myself in. Powerful gusts of wind shut the door behind me once I took a few steps in.

My worn-out windbreaker didn't do a good job of keeping me somewhat warm or dry so I called out Growlithe for some warmth. He's always willing to be carried and I really willing to get warm before I get sick. It was a little dark which meant Ampharos was on duty too.

An elevator was nearby but I wanted to explore. Taking the stairs started out okay until Ampharos was getting tired of walking on her stubby little legs after about six stories up. Who could blame her? This damn staircase seems to go on forever. A doorway was to the right after we finally made it to the top so we walked through it.

Tall was a good description for the room we entered. A ceiling that was almost as tall as the ones in the Bell Tower and some complex looking equipment were the first two things I noticed. A sound of moaning echoed dully from the other side of the room. Bed ridden, the Pokémon seemed to be calling out to its master and panicked when it saw me instead; so Ampharos was the lighthouse Pokémon. My own Ampharos tried to calm it down, but it was no use.

Roaring came from a corridor off to the side. "Schteeeeee!" A very upset Steelix slithered its way next to the sickly Ampharos. My own electric sheep wasn't too fond of the roar so I recalled her leaving just Growlithe and me to see the huge steel snake.

Growlithe was squirming in my arms ready to protect me. "No no no, it's fine. It's fine."

Obviously it's well trained otherwise it would have sent me packing already. However, that didn't mean I was off the hook. The medicine was in my pocket so I slowly reached for it. Steelix had a low growl going on until I gently placed the medicine on the floor. "Just dropping it off, I'll be going now." If I've ever learned anything in life, it's that you never turn your back on a Pokémon that isn't yours unless you're willing to risk your life. The moment you do, you're in trouble. I made it about halfway until the sickly Ampharos rolled around in pain. Steelix started to glare at me thinking I made its condition worse; this isn't looking good for anyone in the room.

Light started to cover its tail. I have to find a way to defend myself without hurting it or Ampharos. "Ember at the base of its body!" Confused, Growlithe went for the weak fire move in front of the huge snake. My goal was to indirectly attack it so that we could run away safely. So far we were off to a bad start. Iron Tail came at my loyal partner while he was still spitting flames. "Jump!" Almost didn't call it out in time. That sideswipe would've left more than a mark.

"Keep shooting Ember in front of it. We don't want to attack it or the Ampharos directly."
Growlithe did as he was told. Unfortunately, Steelix didn't get the message and I was afraid we were going to duke it out in a place where there's a sick Pokémon.

Fast paced footsteps were coming up from behind me. I took a risk and turned around to see the same girl from the boat. "Steelix that's enough!" It stopped its attack on a dime. The woman sighed as she walked over to it. "I did tell you to watch over Amphy but this person meant no harm. What would've happened if his Pokémon were severely injured?" The raging beast turned away in embarrassment. "It's okay Steelix; you can go back to your spot now. I'll explain everything." Just like that, it made its way back to the room it came from with no further complaining.
"So you're its trainer?"

She nodded. "Yes, and Amphy here is technically mine but he doesn't battle."

"I see. So it just sits here in the lighthouse and guides ships?"

"That's correct." Her facial expression changed before going on. "Oh I'm sorry, I never introduced myself today. My name is Jasmine."

"I'm Mitch."

I was an asshole to the driver of our boat and now I was being an asshole to Jasmine by coming in uninvited; I should stop talking but I had to clear some things up. "I apologize for barging in, the storm got out of hand really fast and I was trying to get out of the rain."

"It's fine. I do feel a little guilty running off from the docks once we got back. I had to pick something up for Amphy before I came here." Jasmine pulled out a thin blanket with a Mareep pattern on it to show me.

"An extra layer never hurts."

Jasmine went over to Amphy to do a quick physical before rummaging through her bag. "Where is it? Where was that medicine?" She became more worried. "Did it fall into the ocean when we escaped the Tentacruel? If he doesn't get that medicine…" Her panicking had me worried until I remembered it was somewhere in the room.

"I found it in the boat and was going to bring it here since you mentioned it on the way over." Jasmine immediately turned to me and I pointed to the spot where I placed it; she slowly picked it up and was shaking while walking over to Amphy.

Her voice was shaky. "I-I- I owe you."

"No. It's not a problem, really." Amphy sat up to take the medicine. This Ampharos is very important in more ways than one. Arceus knows what would happen to Jasmine if this thing died. Herbal aromas filled the room once she finished treating him. Apparently the combination of the herbs made him sleepy.

"My little Amphy, you'll get better soon. You just need time."

I stood awkwardly behind them, trying to see what its condition was. Jasmine just knelt down and placed the blanket over her partner as she gently rubbed his side. The room was silent for what seemed like hours until I broke the silence.

"I need to get to the Pokémon Center for the night."

A forlorn look appeared on Jasmine's face. "You can't get a room there this late. It's all booked up for tomorrow's Market Festival." Nick was right; it was coming up real soon. She was thinking of what to do. "The rain isn't going to let up until the morning and I'd hate to see you stay outside in a tent tonight. You can stay in the lighthouse."

Good point. Tent or not, that rain would be a problem if the downpour continued. "If you don't mind, I'd like to do that."

Again, she looked a little sad. "The only beds here are the one Amphy is in and my bed where Steelix is."
If someone offers you a place to sleep away from the harshness of nature, you find a way to make it work. "Don't worry, I have a sleeping bag. The only questions I have are can my Pokémon sleep outside their balls in here and is there Pokémon food?"

"Of course. I trust you because you showed compassion for my Pokémon even though Stellix attacked first." Wow, that was a fast response. "We have some food for everyone too."

Dinner time wasn't much later after I called everyone out. After we were all done eating, we all wanted to call it a day. Jasmine went to her room to give me one pillow while she got ready for bed. Honestly, I can't remember the last time I went to bed this early. All of my Pokémon slept with their usual counterparts with Growlithe and Furret right next to me. Those two never fail to keep me warm. Gyarados, Ampharos, Espeon, and Umbreon all decided to sleep near the foot of my sleeping bag.

Jasmine turned on the lights. "Hey Mitch?"

I was almost asleep. "Mmmmggh, yeah?"

"I'm sleeping in here tonight. Amphy wants me to sleep next to him since you're sleeping next to your Pokémon."

"Do whatever you want. It's your lighthouse."

The lights were turned off after she climbed into bed. I tried to fall asleep for good, but I ended up replaying the events of today in my head. What if I did use Ampharos? Would she have let me stay here tonight? Then there's the whole medicine incident that just happened. Scenarios played out in my head until I started to drift off.

I couldn't wait for the Market Festival tomorrow.
Chapter 14- Olivine Market & Battle Festival

Sunlight flooded the room where we were sleeping on the day of the Market Festival. Amphy was still sleeping soundly but Jasmine had already left by the time I woke up. I wandered around the room because all six of my Pokémon were still snoozing. A few desks covered with papers were the only things to look at while everyone started to stir. However, one desk had hundreds of flyers in numerous stacks for today's big event.

"Come to the Olivine Market Festival! The two day event will be filled with vendors selling specialty goods. Also, test your skills at the Battle Square for a chance to win a special prize package" I mumbled out loud. Nick was right about the whole thing being a big deal.

Espeon was the first member up after a good rest so she took it upon herself to make sure everyone else got up soon. She poked everybody a few times in the hopes that they would wake up; it worked. That's incredible; they're never that alert in the morning. Apparently I wasn't too alert since I knocked over a massive stack of flyers and Espeon trotted over to help me pick them up with her psychic powers. She went back to everyone else and dropped one from her mouth in the middle of their circle. It didn't take much to get my team itching to battle, but they knew it was going to happen.

All my Pokémon were called back as I quietly left the room. Despite my normal walking pace, I still wanted to tiptoe my way down one flight of stairs. I'd really hate to see Steelix if Amphy woke up because of me. Once I reached the floor below me, I opted to take the elevator the rest of the way down. Nobody's got time to walk all the way down when there's a huge festival. My wallet was still full from my trip to Cianwood and a victory against a gym leader pocketed more money so even feeling my wallet felt good.

Olivine was bustling more than usual as vendors lined the streets selling their overseas goods or the Mahogany Town woman from the Pokémon center selling her local chocolate bar. I'm pretty sure it's just chocolate but they're cheap, so I took seven. One of these days I'll get actual food for my Pokémon instead of this junk food or cheaper dry food. Maybe once the festival is over I can get back to my normal habits.

What I really wanted was the battle atmosphere and experience. Only problem is that I have no idea how to register. Where would I have to go? Is there even a map of this festival? Aimlessly wandering around is my best bet as dumb as that may sound. More vendors were shouting into the crowd to pitch their products until I noticed a worn out pink and black sign. A familiar voice was heard above everything else.

"Howdy son!" Nick was under the beaten sign. It wasn't just that, he owned that sign. Hell, he owned the whole booth.

"So you guys made it this time? That's good to hear."

"Yup, we weren't sure if we could make it. Laura 'n Marybeth are wanderin' around right now. I don't need nothin so I'm watchin' the stand."
"How's business? I know it's early in the festival."

A forlorn look came over his face. "We haven't sold much son. We'd have to sell 100 bottles before we start makin' money." Damn! It cost 25,000P to set up a stand this time? I could see why Laura was having a tough time making a decision.

I handed them 1,750P. "I'll take seven bottles please."

"Ya don't have to do this…"

I cut him off. "No it's fine. Your milk helped me get this." I pulled out the Fog Badge in front of him. "Beating Chuck was a little easier thanks to you." I know MooMoo Milk heals Pokémon right after a battle but it's still nutritious when everyone's well rested. Buying it for 250P was and still is a great investment.

Nick just stared at it. "Cianwood's always been a fightin' type gym. I even battled Chuck's daddy way back when. Without a doubt the hardest gym I've ever fought at. Anyone from that family's hard to beat." He then handed me my seven bottles.

"Could you tell me where to sign up for the Battle Square?"

His finger pointed over my shoulder. "Right behind ya." Well, I feel like an idiot. I thanked him for everything and wished him good luck for the rest of the festival. The line for the battle registration was about thirty or so trainers long. Perfect for me since most of these trainers look like scrubs with their long faces.

My turn came around after about ten minutes. It was literally the easiest thing to sign up for. "Please sign here. Your number for the bracket is 57."

"I'm sorry, what does that mean? And what are the rules?"

"Since this is a popular event due to the prize every year, the first 64 participants who sign up get to compete. It's a bracket style single elimination tournament. The round of 64, the round of 32, the round of 16 and the round of 8 are all one on one battles. The semifinals as well as the finals are 2 on 2 battles. Your judge will explain more rules on the field."

"So who will I be battling?"

"The lovely lady behind you." So my number is based on when I signed up. I owe Nick a favor after this. "Please feel free to enjoy the festival, but come back to the battle area before you're pairing is called otherwise you may be disqualified." I'd probably be better off staying put with a rule like that.

My opponent found me after she registered. "Ummm, I'm kinda nervous right now but what's your name? I'm Ashley." She looked very young; probably a newer trainer.

"I'm Mitch, nice to meet you. Is this your first time doing this?"

"Technically, yes. I live nearby so I watched people win for years. Now that I'm finally old enough to take on the gym leaders, I want to see how good I really am." Her expression changed once a light bulb went off in her head. "But Cory's almost impossible to beat."

Kid, work on your confidence… please. How are your Pokémon going to like that attitude? "Let me guess, he's won this multiple times?"
Ashley nodded. "Four times in a row." Arceus, this Cory guy is the reason why the rest of the field looks depressed.

"The streak ends today."

She smirked. "Not if I have anything to say about it." There. Right there is something all young trainers should have. Confidence in your skills is a decent chunk of the pie chart to winning battles.

Battles from the earlier rounds didn't really impress me. Most of them were more like who would make the least number of mistakes as opposed to who was more skilled. This pattern worked in Cory's favor because he has some skill. His Electrode easily took care of his opponent's Machop with one Thunderbolt.

The PA announcer's voice came over a loudspeaker. "Let's give a round of applause for contestants 55 and 56. Contestants 57 and 58, please report to your trainer's box." Ashley must've stayed close by too because she was already in the box before I took a single step. "All righty folks, we're almost at the end of the first round so let's get ready for another battle! Please listen to instructions from the judge."

Our judge came out from the crowd and stepped into position. "Only one Pokémon per side and you must throw out a ball on the count of three. The match is over when one Pokémon cannot battle. In the event of a double knockout, both trainers will be eliminated." So they really want to get through this huh? I'm sorry Ashley, but I don't plan on losing. "One. Two. Three!"

We both threw out our Pokémon at the same time. I went with Ampharos while Ashley went with Kingler. A local Pokémon for sure, the giant crab looked intimidating with its sharp pincers. It was going to be a slightly more difficult to win since Thundershock was my ranged attack and it was pretty weak. No doubt I'll win.

Ashley wanted the first move. "Vicegrip!" The crab started coming toward my sheep which is exactly what I wanted.

"Big mistake. Thunder Wave." Ampharos did its job paralyzing the Kingler so that it couldn't defend itself against my next attack. "Tunderpunch!" Her arm turned a bright yellow and sparks started to come out of it; poor Kingler never stood a chance.

"That's it! Kingler is unable to battle. The victory goes to contestant 57!" That was probably one of the fastest battles I've had in a long time.

My opponent slumped down to the ground in defeat after she recalled her partner. I approached her after we left the battle area. "That was an unlucky draw but don't worry, I'll beat Cory. That streak may be legendary around here. However, I don't care about what he's already done."

All she could do was take my comments in stride. "I guess. Besides, you're more strategic than most people here." Something still troubled her. "About Cory, I've watched a lot of championship battles over the years but I feel like every time he won it was a fluke." I asked her what she meant by fluke; she said that his wins just didn't feel legitimate.

The rest of the battles in the first round in addition to all of the battles in the round of 32 were still boring. I tried to scout out Cory to see if he would use anything different; his Electrode was obviously his number one team member because he didn't use anyone else. Also, his style was still the same: Thunderbolt everything that stepped out onto the field.

Once I was scheduled to battle again, I took my place in the makeshift box. The crowd seemed to
get a little bigger since my last battle too. To my surprise, Ashley was in the crowd. Cory was on the opposite side scouting this fight as well with a group of what I guess would be his friends. I thought she might have left to enjoy the rest of the festival and I hoped he wouldn't be watching me; you can't win 'em all. Now is where the lights start to shine a little brighter. The judge was a different one than last time but the rules were still the same.

My opponent either didn't pay attention to my last battle or didn't even see it because I used the same strategy on their Raticate. Another win for me meant that I was in the round of 16. Unfortunately for me, my strategy is too obvious at this point. Someone else is going to pick up on this and it's going to cost me.

Since there were fewer participants, we were given more of a break before the round of 16. I needed it because I need a replacement for Ampharos. She's been doing excellent, but now I can throw everyone for a loop. Bracket matchups were rearranged so that the higher numbers battled the higher numbers and the lower numbers battled the lower numbers. However, the lower numbered people would battle first. A perk of signing up first was to scout out the competition. Well played organizers, well played.

The battle area was still looking good despite the sheer number of Pokémon used in a short period of time so maybe I could use speed to my advantage. The judge rambled on until he gave the signal. Matchup number three for me was Magneton versus Growlithe. Ha! I knew someone would try to pull a stunt like that; I was extremely lucky that it wasn't a ground type. However, I will give credit to my opponent trying to force a double knockout because two electric types would take a long time to knock each other out.

"Sonicboom!" Oh, it's not using a stronger electrical attack? Fine with me.

"Flame Wheel!" My loyal partner charged ahead and nailed Magneton right in the middle of its body. No way a move like that was going to be stopped by a weaker Sonicboom.

"Aw no, I'm not going down that easy. Tri Attack, let's go!" Finally, someone who can last longer than one attack. A glowing triangle found its mark since Growlithe was too close to dodge. He went to get up until ice slowly started to cover its body. "Don't let it move! Thundershock!" One more attack hit Growlithe before he completely froze over.

I have to thaw out now otherwise I'll lose. "Flame Wheel now!" Ice turned to water as he went for the same spot as last time. This time, Magneton was down for the count. Hey now, this is what I'm talking about in terms of competition. Cheering from the crowd put a hop in my step on the way out of the battle area.

"Some fine battlin' young man." I turned in the direction of the voice and was met with Laura and Marybeth. Their Growlithe was busy eating some food until he saw me.

"So far so good. I'm getting really close to the finals." Laura waved over to her husband. "I thought Nick was watching the stand."

"Well we do have family here so we asked 'em for some help. Someone's runnin' around sayin' that a person's winning in one move. I had a feeling it'd be you." Nick never saw her wave her hand, so she went to get him along with Marybeth. She screamed back toward me. "We'll be back for your next round!"

Before the next round started, the PA announcer made an announcement. "Now that we are getting closer to the end, I'd like to welcome a special guest. Making her appearance today, the gym leader of Olivine, Jasmine!" My jaw dropped. I turned to the elevated platform and there she was sitting
right next to the announcer. That shy woman in the lighthouse is the gym leader here? You honestly couldn't tell me that and expect me to believe you.

Only seven other trainers stood in my way of that prize once the round of 16 ended. It was just a matter of who I had to face. I'd bet all the money I have that Cory and me will be in the finals. For now, I have to focus on the person in front of me.

Ashley managed to find me in the huge crowd. "Hey there Mitch, I like what I'm seeing." It's like memories of our previous battle weren't even in her mind once she came up to me.

"Thanks Ashley. I'm feeling like Cory won't be a problem because I have a nice counter for his Electrode in my Growlithe. It's small, fast, has close combat moves and ranged moves."

She pondered my thought process and nodded in agreement; her facial expression changed after that. "I've got a feeling why Cory has won in the past. I think his group of friends entered this too and they're losing on purpose whenever they face him." An interesting thought. "Look, they win early on so that it's just them and him in the later rounds. However, you beat one of his friends last round. Also, there seems to be less of them compared to last year."

"I have the first battle of the quarterfinals, but after I'm done I can look into that."

Afternoon light was starting to burn so we were set to resume. The crowd was now taking up some serious space yet I could still point out the whole ranch family, Ashley, and Cory. Quarterfinals matchup was Clefable against my Furret. This should be good; normal versus normal.

"Use Return, Furret!" She sprinted toward the enemy Pokémon and landed a powerful blow; it shook off the attack.

"Metronome!" This person has to be insane. A move like that should be a last resort, not something you start out with. Its entire body began glowing brightly but I had no idea what the move was.

"Quick, use Dig to hide!" Furret somehow dug her way through the cobblestone street to avoid the attack. What she felt underground was a tremor so she instinctively went back up to safety fearing an Earthquake attack. Unfortunately for her, it wasn't an Earthquake. She popped out of the hole. "Furret get down!" That tremor was the start of a powerful Explosion attack.

The audience gasped once the dust settled. Clefable fainted while Furret was still standing albeit panting very heavily. Come on judge, call the damn match! He didn't make a decision yet even though Clefable's been out for almost a minute. I was about to scream at him until I heard the magic words.

"Clefable is unable to battle! The victory goes to number 57."

In order to avoid him changing his mind, I called back Furret as soon as possible. Arceus dammit, that moron's insane for making me wait that long. Another fear crossed into my mind once the other battles started up: what if the judges are trying to favor Cory?

I took Ashley's warning to heart so I watched Cory's battle and it was actually true albeit a little more subtle. Whenever Cory would attack the opposing trainer wouldn't even call out anything; neither an attack nor a dodge command. Electrode took some weak hits too which leads me to believe that they're practically feigning this battle or at least doing as little damage as possible so Cory can breeze on through.

After the final battle of the quarterfinals was over, Jasmine spoke over the sound system. "Let's give a round of applause to the final four participants. Remember, the prize is almost within
Yet again I strode into the trainer's box only to see that my opponent was absent. I scanned the crowd for anybody that might be plowing through to get to the battle area, but I did see something that got me furious through all of the commotion.

My competitor was near the front of the crowd along with Cory. He was handed a wad of at least 2000P and given a pat on the back. That son of a bitch. He was paying one of his friends to lose on purpose. The official had no choice to declare me the winner by forfeit. Once Cory's battle was announced, I expected him to win with Electrode yet again. However, his partner didn't show up either. He must have paid him off earlier rather than do it when the spotlight was on him.

I guess he wanted an easy path to the prize. Too bad he'll be going against a strategy that I've only used in desperate situations: the no mercy strategy.
Chapter 15- Underdog

Money has always been something that I've been tight with. I spend it sparingly and when I do, it's usually on my Pokémon. I don't care how wealthy you are, using money like that is always a waste. The worst part is that nobody caught it or nobody cared. Someone could say something but there would be no proof; if I were that guy, I'd take my wad of money and run now. Jasmine and the announcer don't care who wins, so they aren't in on this which means everyone's in for a roller coaster final.

The announcer sounded flustered when he spoke over the loudspeaker. "L-l-l ladies and gentleman, this is the first time we've had forfeits in a semifinal round but rules are rules." Slowly the energy came back. "This is the finals of the Olivine Market Festival! We have number 1 versus number 57 in a 2 on 2 battle. Let's give them a hand!" The crowd circle was enormous to the point of people piggybacking just to get a glimpse of the action. Despite the amount of people, Ashley and the entire ranch family found their way to the front to watch and I acknowledged their presence.

The judge came forward and called us both in to go over the rules. "Alright gentlemen, this will be 2 on 2 with no substitutions so choose wisely. The lower number will throw their Pokémon out first." Wonderful, so the battle is basically decided on who faints first. However, I give the organizers credit for hyping this up. "This round will have a tiebreaker in the event of a double knockout." He turned to go to his officiating area while Cory gave me a nudge.

"Tell you what, I'll do it. However, we have to give the people a show."

Cory beamed once he heard those words followed by the money exchanging hands. "Alrighty then, let's get to it." He can't be that dumb, right? We walked back to our respective boxes so that our little meeting didn't seem too suspicious. The roar of the crowd was nearly deafening as the judge signaled the battle to start.

"Growlithe, you're up!" I had him to lead off because I probably knew what was going to happen.

"Electrode!" Yup, just as I thought, Electrode is faster but Growlithe is more agile than that ball.

Before the judge signaled the battle to start, sparks flew toward my partner. "What the hell man?"

"Sorry, it sometimes discharges electricity when it's pumped for a battle." I didn't buy it and the judge didn't care about what he just saw. This just confirms that I'm on my own in this situation. No mercy was my strategy and now it's time to put it to use after the flags went up.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Ember!" I had to be careful if I wanted to charge head on because Cory's unpredictable. The
electrical charge struggled with my flames until a smokescreen covered the area.

"Bite!" Electrode didn't see it coming and took some heavy damage from my puppy Pokémon. Growlithe never let go until he was zapped by a stray spark. "Flame Wheel!" Smoke still covered the field as a ball of fire rammed into the red and white ball.

"Come on Electrode, Sonicboom!" Normally it could dodge that, but the gap between our two Pokémon was too small. A bombardment of waves came at it until I ordered a Flame wheel. That call took Electrode off guard so it stopped firing. Looks like Cory isn't that good as he thinks he is, letting his Pokémon get caught off guard.

"Get some distance and use Ember!" Growlithe retreated to the edge of the area and fired his flames. All of the flames found their mark and left a nice burn as a gift.

Cory was getting furious that the act was serious. He seemed to take his eyes off of the fight to look into the crowd; he grinned. "Thunderbolt!" He pointed in the opposite direction and the electricity went to Marybeth's Growlithe.

"Quick, jump in front!" Without hesitation or regard for its life, my Growlithe stepped in to take the hit but the bolt was too large and both Growlithes dropped to the ground. Right then, I knew that my "no mercy" strategy wasn't going to be good enough. The only option is to beat Cory's Pokémon into submission so bad that a Pokémon Center wouldn't be enough.

A triumphant look was on his face. "Looks like I win round one."

I kept my composure. "Not yet." My Growlithe stood back up with flames in its mouth. "Ember!" A massive shot of flames was hurled at the Electrode. That wasn't an Ember; that was a bona fide Flamethrower. It rolled out of the way just in time to dodge the move but still felt the burn from before. Before another attack was ordered Growlithe fainted from exhaustion.

"Growlithe is unable to battle! The winner is Electrode."

Shit, now I see what Ashley meant by fluke wins. Although I have to believe that he didn't attack anyone in all of his tournament wins. I took some time thinking about who to send out next. Everyone who battled earlier is out of the running; I need someone who's fully healthy to take on his second Pokémon since Electrode is about to faint. Gyarados would be risky and I can't put Espeon in a pressure situation like this. Umbreon is the best choice for now and I know he's itching to battle.

Marybeth was wailing from the sidelines as people went to work on her fainted Growlithe. I walked over and consoled her. "Don't worry, just give it these." I took out one revive and some potions. Her grandparents did their best to make her feel better. "I promise that I'll make him pay."

She still didn't want to look at me or calm down so I made sure to tell Nick and Laura to watch the rest of this battle.

"Go… Umbreon." Its demeanor was that of an assassin; ready for battle even before I even grabbed my ball. He looked around in the direction of the wailing and recognized what had happened. The response was to let his rings illuminate and baring his teeth.

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girl was crying because my opponent hurt her Pokémon that wasn't even fighting. I know way too much about collateral damage to let that slide.

Sparks flew toward me before we were given the chance to attack by the judge; now I know it's playing dirty. Once he threw up the flags, my master was hell bent on finishing what Growlithe started. "Quick Attack." That icy tone was enough to make me cringe. Never before have I even sensed that Mitch had this side to him. I guess he doesn't appreciate it either. My body felt lighter once I charged ahead and slammed into my target with a decent amount of force. Considering that it was knocked out, I waited for a switch. I turned to see Mitch so that he can give me a command. Mitch was confused and so was I as to why that Electrode was on the field. Clearly it had no energy to move yet the judge didn't seem to care.

Mitch was a little upset. "Come on judge, you know that it's knocked out." He seemed to check it over again but refused to acknowledge it. "Since you won't call the round, I have no choice but to keep battling until I've been told it's unable to battle or Cory switches. You do remember that if you switch you lose the round, right?" No response. "I will not apologize for what is about to happen then."

I didn't have to wait much longer for a response. "Umbreon... beat it into submission. Use any moves you want. Make sure you hit it hard because it's not knocked out yet. Do you understand?" Oh I understand master, but you've never been this upset before. My attacks came one after another but I didn't use Toxic because I have to keep the illusion I have four moves. The crowd started to jeer and I started to hate myself for attacking a completely defenseless Pokémon. Even if it hurt another one, it should at least be conscious. Upon listening closer to the jeering, I got a different feeling.

"What are you doing ref?"

"Can't you see it's out cold?"

"Come on kid! Call your Electrode back already!" I was relieved that they weren't going after Mitch or me, but I still felt a little bad.

Dark Pulse was the last move I used before the corrupt official stopped the round. "Electrode is unable to battle. Umbreon wins." Damn right Umbreon wins; this was over on the first Quick Attack. A Donphan was sent out in its place after Mitch and his opponent were done yelling at each other.

"This is it. The winner of this round wins the whole thing. Begin!" Sneak attacks didn't start the battle this time which was a plus for me. Donphans aren't all there in the brains department, but they make it up with those tusks.

"Horn Attack!"

"Dark Pulse," Mitch ordered in a monotonous tone. Speed also doesn't seem to favor the elephant either so I can dodge with ease as I launch a counter attack. My attack sent it back a few feet but it was up on its feet scraping its leg on the ground like a Tauros.

"Fury Attack!"

"Bite." No emotion behind Mitch's commands at all; he really wants to prove a point. My teeth stopped some of the blows but I still took two hits. What's a little poke to me? Another assault but this time I took four out of five hits. Maybe this thing isn't as slow as I thought.
"Well I think it's time to end it here. Rollout!" Donphan curled up into a ball before rolling at me much faster than I ever would have expected. Jumping over it seemed like the best way to go until it turned around and hit me when I landed. Yet again it rolled around for the third hit; that armored body is something not to mess around with.

I was completely clueless until Mitch had a plan. "Use Dark Pulse to throw it off course." Good plan, since taking that thing head on seems like a recipe for disaster. It was coming too fast for me to hit it directly. However, I could hit around it to break its concentration or send it flying. Nobody expected it to go that high in the air once I created a divot in the ground for it to launch off of. There was a decent impact from the fall, but it still kept doing.

"You're an idiot for giving my Donphan more speed like that. I want my money back after I cripple your Pokémon too!" What was my opponent talking about? Didn't matter since I couldn't afford to take this Rollout attack.

"Faint Attack, don't hold back." Oh boy, I'm not sure if Mitch knows what those words mean. Still, he has to have a good reason to order an attack like that. I charged up my deadliest move and went straight for the rolling elephant. The impact made the crowd cringe; some even turned away in horror of what I just did. Hell, did I even do what I just did?

It seems like the only way to win this fight is to truly beat Cory's Pokémon into a pulp. Electrode was obviously unable to do anything after one hit from Umbreon but after the beating I gave it; it will definitely need more than a Pokémon Center to heal those injuries. Nobody placed the blame on me which was what I had hoped since it's my job to fight until the judge appropriately steps in.

Cory screamed over the crowd. "What's your problem asshole?!"

Should've kept your mouth shut. Now it's my turn to be a smartass. "No problem here. The judge simply ruled that it wasn't knocked out and you didn't want to recall it so I kept going. Like I said, I'm putting on a show." I know I'm not wrong.

That got him furious. "Donphan get out here!"

We went back and forth for a while until I made a mistake giving it more speed on a Rollout attack. Cory was still running his mouth about the money. First, did you honestly think I would throw this battle? Why would I throw any battle? Second, you're an idiot for giving the money before the battle. Even if you backed out on me, I'd beat the money out of you. Third, you attack a Pokémon that is in the opposite direction of mine on the chance you could say it was a mistake. All of this could've been avoided if you kept your mouth shut.

I kept my composure but still remained cold hearted deep down once I ordered an all-out Faint Attack. Without a doubt that was hardest, most gruesome impact I've witnessed. Almost everyone in the crowd shut their eyes upon hearing the sound; silence filled the air. There was a legitimate chance that I may have just killed a Pokémon. After a minute the judge had uttered a word.

I let my feelings be known. "Sir, there is no way on Arceus' green earth that this Donphan can battle. I'm seriously surprised that it's even breathing. "I can wait all day but that Donphan needs more than a Pokémon Center immediately. Come to think of it, Electrode needs it too. Cory has nobody to send out since it would be a violation of the rules. Face it, I won the battle." There was no response from anyone. "Let me get this straight, you are practically giving me permission to murder a Pokémon in front of all of these people."

"That's enough!" Jasmine's voice came from the announcer's booth. "Number 57 err, I mean Mitch
is the winner of the tournament."

Once she descended to the bottom of the stairs, Cory finally spoke. "That's a load of crap! I can still fight. I have more team members to send out and claim my prize." Jasmine tried to calm him down but he was too upset. "I should get the victory because I paid him to lose!" Checkmate. Whatever happens after this should be good.

Jasmine went from disappointed to furious in a heartbeat. "You did what!? Leave Olivine at once or I will call the authorities." He recalled the almost dead Pokémon and just left in the silence of the crowd.

Umbreon looked at me with sadness in his eyes so I walked over and stroked his head. "It's okay boy. You did nothing wrong and I'll take any punishment. I'm proud of you for battling." He just sat down as the gym leader came over to us with a microphone.

She whispered into my ear before she made an announcement. "This will be dealt with later." She put the microphone up to her mouth. "Everyone, let's give a big hand to our champion!" A roaring ovation echoed throughout the city with the teary-eyed ranch family running to me.

Nick was the first one to talk. "Thank you so much son! I can't believe what I just saw."

"No problem. Now do me a favor and take this." I handed him the 5000P that Cory gave me. "This should help you turn a profit as well as help with additional medical care for Growlithe."

"Is this…?"

"Don't worry about it. Umbreon, come over here." Marybeth was still upset about the whole ordeal so I could take her mind off of it. I bent down to its eyes. "Play with the little girl again please. I know you're tired but you can cheer her up for a little bit." There was no argument from him as he let her pet him. Minutes went by until Jasmine stood next to me after she had gathered some items.

"Now that the tournament's over, I'd like to present our champion with the prize package. First is the prize money with a value of 10,000P. Your second prize is a super discount for all of the vendors at the festival. Your third prize is a battle for a gym badge with me at the conclusion of the festival tomorrow night." The crowd was deafening once she was done with the presentation.

I took the time to stick around and mingle with people who wanted to talk to me. By now it was getting dark, so I wanted to explore the rest of the festival before it shut down for the night after I called Umbreon back; everyone was healed on site. I played a lot of carnival games before I took advantage of the super discount.

Some vendors gave me free items while others slashed their prices so that I could purchase their items. Everyone got a specialty item for their recent hard work that I kept in my bag ready to give to them at any time.

Furret had a Silk Scarf.

Ampharos had a Magnet.

Gyarados had a Mystic Water pendant.

Growlithe had a chunk of Charcoal.

Espeon had some Odd Incense for later.
Umbreon had a pair of Black Glasses.

All of those items were really expensive. However, they had heard about what happened and decided to reward me for my decision making by giving some of them to me for a discounted price except the Silk Scarf; it was free. An overabundance in another region caused the price to plummet and the vendor wanted it out of their inventory.

It was one of those nights where I wanted to sleep in my tent alone. It's not that I was mad at my Pokémon; I just needed to be alone for the night. Tomorrow was going to be another big day. I can't wait to prove that I deserved my title.
Chapter 16- The Main Event

For the first time in a while I took the liberty to sleep in. Sunshine was still creeping into the tent so I finally gave in and packed everything up to go into town. Day two of the huge festival was just as busy as day one except for the lack of trainers this time around; they were replaced with tourists. Like yesterday, I walked through up and down the aisles of booths to see if anything new was there but I found nothing. As I was about to go down another row, a police officer approached me.

"Excuse me, are you the winner from yesterday's tournament?" Jasmine said that incident would be taken care of. I guess he wants to talk to me.

"Yeah, is there something you want from me or…?"

"I don't want something from you. However, our city's gym leader does." Well I do have some time to kill before the important gym battle. The officer led me to the gym after maneuvering through the waves of people. It was a little out of the way but it was still a sightseeing exhibit. A few people were wandering about the inside to get a look on how a gym runs. Jasmine was waiting for us in the back of the gym by her office. Once the door shut after the officer left, I felt like it was going to be a long conversation.

We both looked at each other awkwardly until she spoke up first. "Do you have any idea what's been going on since yesterday?" I just shook my head in denial. To be honest, I want this whole thing to be forgotten but I'll let her speak. "We've gotten all kinds of feedback from spectators but most of it was negative. Some people even want you to go to jail."

"Woah woah woah what? That's a bit much don't you think?"

She leaned forward on her desk. "Well you kept attacking his Pokémon even though they were knocked out. Also, the other trainer had to take his Pokémon to the ICU ward of the regional hospital, not the Pokémon Center. What do you have to say for yourself?" I'd say mission accomplished since that was my plan; there was to be no mercy, especially after the battle started.

"Maybe you couldn't see the battle from your perspective but Cory wasn't exactly fighting fair. His Electrode got off a free hit before we started. He attacked my friend's Growlithe who was on the other side of the battle field." Jasmine backed up a little bit; I started to raise my voice. "Our judge had to know him because he wouldn't say Electrode had fainted. I can't assume it's knocked out so I hit it with everything I had because I apparently wasn't hitting a defenseless Pokémon; the same goes for Donphan too. And on top of it all, he paid me to lose which led to all of this." Now she was leaning back in her chair. "I said it before on the field and I'll say it again: I will not apologize for my actions."

Back to square one with both of us starting into each other's eyes to get a feeling for what the other person was thinking. She took my words into consideration before responding. "This… money he gave you. Where is it?"

"I don't have it." She shot me a dirty look as if I pocketed it which I would have done if not for the cheap shot. "That money was given to the little girl's family to pay for Growlithe's medical
expenses; it's a Pokémon that herds Miltank as opposed to battling. It's clearly not meant for full effort battling. I'm willing to bet a Pokémon Center wasn't enough for it either." Yet another long and awkward pause. "Look, I can bring you to the booth they run to verify my story if you want."

"That won't be necessary. I just wanted to know why you did what you did. As for your opponent, he has been penalized by the Pokémon League after some officials were in the crowd and caught up to him before he left town. I don't know his punishment but I can tell you that we can put this behind us. That will be all. I'll see you tonight." Finally! I walked out of Jasmine's office knowing this won't be hanging over my head.

Upon exiting her office, I saw a group of construction workers assembling some extra bleachers on the top row of the gym concourse. So this whole shebang is that important. I mean, would anyone want a dishonorable trainer battling the beloved gym leader on the biggest stage in the city? To my surprise, Ashley was waiting outside the front door for me after I was done picturing the huge crowd ready to watch us go at it.

"So how'd it go with Jasmine and the police?" Huh? I highly doubt that anyone told her I was in some kind of trouble.

"Good I guess. We cleared everything up and I still have a gym battle at the end of the festival. Cory received some type of suspension from the Pokémon League."

She took a second before letting out a deep breath. "I probably shouldn't do this but I just trust you. Also, you beat the type of trainer that I'm looking out for." The hell does that mean? Ashley reached into her pocket and pulled out her wallet. A large silver badge was front and center. "I work as an official for the Pokémon League." Okay then, my day just got really interesting. "It is true that I've lived near Olivine but my parents both work for them as well. Since I'm 17, I applied for a position like any normal trainer could do, although most officials are much older than me. I'm also near the bottom of the totem pole but I'll move up eventually."

I'm so confused. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I can't stand when trainers try to weasel their way into the Silver Conference. The reason that I'm here is that one of the prizes was a gym battle; if that wasn't part of the prize then I wouldn't be here. Someone noticed how easy he had it one tournament so we looked into it. What got the ball rolling was that he had six badges yet still couldn't beat Jasmine." A paper filled with numbers was pulled out of a folder. "He had faced her the traditional way twice along with his four tournament battles but still lost. My job was to beat him until I ran into you but I will give you credit back at the league office."

"Uhhh thanks I guess?" Giving credit where credit is due is a good reason to trust someone.

She looked back at me before walking off. "I don't necessarily agree with what you did to his Pokémon, but your actions were justified considering the circumstances. If another trainer described what you did to me in a normal battle, you'd probably have your trainer license suspended at the very minimum."

Killing time at the festival was the one of the many things I've been missing in my life. Traveling all around the region is exhausting so it's nice to relax in one place for a few days. Just thinking about moving on to the next gym is a depressing way to live the trainer life. Experiences I get from Olivine will be carried throughout my journey; I owe all of this to Nick.

More booths were visited with me not buying anything because I took care of that last night. Everyone was released from their balls so they could eat before the grand finale. Trying to plan for
Jasmine is both easy and hard because she uses steel types. There aren't too many out there but I have to watch out for secondary typings. Steelix is part ground so Ampharos is out. Espeon isn't good for this gym either and Furret only has Dig as a decent attacking move. Umbreon's moves aren't that good but after yesterday, I'm willing he'll still hit hard while Growlithe has a natural type advantage as well as Gyarados. Looks like the boys will have a field day for this battle.

I gave everyone the usual pep talk before walking in unison to the gym after the sun finally set. There was no set time that I had to arrive but judging by the amount of people flocking to the gym, I'd say I was on time. Nobody made a scene when I casually took my place in the trainer's box except for an event coordinator who shooed me off to some kind of tunnel.

A voice boomed over the loudspeaker after everyone found their seat or standing room area. "Ladies and Gentlemen, the moment you've all been waiting for, the grand battle of the Olivine Festival!" Thank Arceus that the retractable roof was open otherwise I would've gone deaf from the cheering. The voice continued. "It is with great pleasure that I introduce our gym leader and Festival Queen, Jasmine!" The noise had to be getting into the balls of my Pokémon because it was somehow even louder than before.

The shy woman that I met on the boat who wore a modest dress came onto the field wearing an elegant white and silver dress. "Thank you to all who showed up for this season's festival. Without you there would be no chance to show off so many unique items all in one spot. Whether you purchased or bartered for them, I hope you appreciated what different parts of the region have to offer. Now it is time for the main event. The winner of the tournament has the right to face me in an official gym match and I accept his challenge. Mitch! Please step into the trainer's box and face me." I was given a slight push by the same person who shooed me off and I came out of the tunnel like some kind of athlete. It looked and felt so different now that I was seconds away from facing her. The field was pretty standard given the circumstances so at least I have that going for me.

I'd like to think I do a good job of hiding my emotions with a good poker face, but a little bit of nervousness managed to break through. Luckily for me, nobody seemed to notice the trembling in my fingers as I listened to the judge. "All right, this is an official gym match with each side using three Pokémon. Only the challenger is allowed to substitute and the battle is over when all three of one trainer's Pokémon are unable to battle. Ready? Begin!"

Jasmine started off with a Magnemite while I opted for Growlithe; might as well see how far I can get before I run into that steel leviathan. She ordered a Thunderbolt so I countered with Flamethrower. The moves collided in midair resulting in a thick cloud of smoke which allowed Growlithe to flawlessly execute a Flame Wheel. To the average person watching, it was no surprise that Magnemite went down in a heap. Also, it was no surprise hearing boos from some sections because Jasmine is beloved here. Our legitimate judge called the round quickly and ordered Jasmine to send out her second Pokémon.

"Magneton, time for battle!" The evolved form of any Pokémon is obviously stronger but last time I checked, it was still a steel type.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Flamethrower!" It was déjà vu all over again with a longer time period before our attacks turned to smoke. I'm not willing to use Flame Wheel like last time since Magneton has a wider variety of attacks. My suspicions were confirmed as the smoke cleared; a Tri Attack was waiting for Growlithe. No more jumping in close. "Get some distance and use Flamethrower!" Extra space between us may have confused the audience but based on what I've seen, Flamethrower doesn't lose power over a short distance like that. Flames engulfed it and it was ruled unable to battle.
Crowd noise went up once Jasmine recalled her Magenton. You could cut the tension with a butter knife yet everyone knew what was coming. It's completely unfair to suggest that her previous Pokémon were weak; a gym leader doesn't have weak Pokémon. It just so happens that a strong move can get the job done. Now is the time where almost every trainer would get cocky considering fire dominates steel types.

She looked down at her most trusted partner. I could only imagine what they've been through together besides the whole Amphy scenario. Maybe fire types didn't intimidate Steelix since every trainer would pack one for this gym but I still have to use mine to my advantage. "Go Steelix!" Another deafening roar came over the stadium at the sight of Olivine's protector. Knocking this thing out is going to take some serious teamwork and a whole lotta luck. Growlithe looked healthy so I left him in. The flags went up. We both remained silent for some odd reason. Nerves? Couldn't be, she's been in a lot of tough battles and I'm not one to freeze up in key moments. Gauging the other person? Most likely.

"Flamethrower!"

"Rock Throw!" Ah hah! So that's how she deals with fire types on offense. A little surprising to reveal that strategy so early in the round; that move decimated her other Pokémon so it's not like she wanted to risk it. Growlithe did a nice job of maneuvering through the falling rocks and landed the move albeit a much weaker one.

A risky move wasn't my style, but I want to see if I could catch her off guard. "Flame Wheel!" Rock throw is a little harder to execute if a running fireball is coming for you even if you're a gym leader's last line of defense.

"Screech then Rock Throw." A monstrous roar came from Steelix that stopped Growlithe in its tracks and silenced the entire audience; she is well prepared for fire types. Another barrage of rocks soon followed with most of them hitting my loyal partner. He looked exhausted but shook his head when I pulled out his ball. A switch would save him now, but he wants to push himself. Steelix went for round two so Growlithe retorted with smaller Flamethrowers in the hopes that one would hit. One boulder went through the fire move and hit Growlithe square in the chest. Before he fainted he fired one last burst of fire; it found its mark.

"Growlithe is unable to battle. Steelix is the winner!" It was a good ride considering I never knew Screech was a near perfect counter for physical moves. Using Gyarados now would be risky since Umbreon would have to finish it off if Gyarados didn't damage it enough. Honestly, Umbreon might like a challenge like this to get stronger. Experimented on or not, he still wants to succeed.

A gym battle shouldn't be this easy. Growlithe made Magnemite and Magneton look like scrubs while taking no damage; Steelix is more than a step above those two. I still remember the time I was scared of steel types because I had a type disadvantage. This time around, being scared isn't a choice. Fear almost claimed me until I broke free from the lab. It had me until I saved Ruby from Ariados. The day Mitch found us at our darkest hour was the day fear lost its stranglehold on my life. Now it's my turn to put a stranglehold on fear. Mitch said that the boys were going to play today and his hand is coming for my ball. Showtime.

Battle stances shown by us are a good indication as to how ready we are. Some Pokémon like to keep a poker face while others like myself favor the aggressive stances 100% of the time. This time was no exception despite the massive steel snake in front of me.

"Rock Throw!"
"Snack time Umbreon. Use Bite!" Falling rocks aren't exactly delicious or nutritious but it beats getting hit by them. Most of them were easily dodged while I bit into the ones that were smaller.

"Iron tail!" About eight feet of tail turned to shiny silver before being swung at me. Shit.

"Jump to dodge then follow it up with Faint Attack!" Easier said than done. Jumping back was better for me compared to jumping up but I had to travel longer to hit it. On most Pokémon, my attack would have dealt severe damage. However Steelix is a living tank so he took it quite nicely.

My opponent took a second to talk to my master. "You have an interesting strategy Mitch. I expected that you would use a fire type but nobody here would think to use a physical style or an Umbreon."

I dare not take my eyes off of Steelix. "I prefer to weigh my options beforehand. My team isn't exactly built for something like this so I improvised. Umbreon has a distinct battle style that is overlooked by everyone. I'm wondering if you'll find out what it is. Dark Pulse!"

Black energy came from my maw before Steelix could get a chance to defend itself; scored a critical hit. Another powerful move and the same result but I noticed some smoke coming out of a rut in its body. So Growlithe left a nice gift for me, I'll be sure to take advantage of that last-ditch Flamethrower.

"Iron Tail, sideswipe it!" There was no dodging this one because I was too close. Nothing has ever hit me harder. Pinsir with super effective moves didn't deal that much power in one blow. Gasping for breath hurt along with trying to stand up. "Screech." That painful roar found its way to my ears while it went for a regular tail slap; I moved out of the way.

"Faint Attack!" The rut in its body was my target but I wasn't prepared for its defense.

"Counter with Sandstorm!" Tornadoes of sand acted like a shield to protect it from harm.

Mitch wasted no time coming up with a new plan. "Faint Attack and Quick Attack to break through!" Our audience gasped at what Mitch just said. It sounds like suicide because going head first into a tank like that can cause serious injury. Since Steelix has that rut from earlier, its outer level is much softer.

Sharp rocks buffeted me as I went in for a monster hit. After all I've been through, does thing really think a sandstorm is going to slow me down for a second time? After I landed the hit, probably not. Moans of pain came from its mouth which meant I hit the sweet spot; now we're talking. "Okay Steelix finish it with Iron Tail!" Again, I was caught too close to it so I went with Faint Attack to minimize the damage. I roared as we collided but it seemed like no use; I was tossed aside and couldn't stand.

"Umbreon is unable to battle. Steelix is the winner!"

Son of a bitch… I lost. So this is what utter defeat feels like. Walking back to Mitch is something I can do to prove that I can show how tough I really am. Just like the time we met, I stumbled towards him and collapsed with tears in my eyes. Does this mean I'll lose every single gym battle from here on out? Ruby did a good job against Chuck but I did nothing. That was the worst battling I think I've ever done in my life even though I had a huge type disadvantage.

A voice came from behind me. "Just relax." My master walked out onto the field to pick me up and carry me back to the box. "Umbreon, look at me." Looking at him seemed like the wrong thing to do considering I just lost. "Please, look at me." Disappointment was written all over my face until
he whispered in my ear. "You took advantage of Growlithe's work and now it's time for Gyarados to take advantage of your work." I tilted my head in confusion until I saw that my last ditch Faint Attack left a nice mark on its tail.

The crowd was cheering louder than ever before I was sent back to my ball. Gyarados has his work cut out for him.
Chapter 17-Fireworks

It's funny that trainers use the phrase "we have to scratch, claw, and fight" to describe a hard battle. This is not some normal cliché; my previous two Pokémon have done just that to Jasmine's Steelix. Nobody sees the fruits of Growlithe and Umbreon's labor quite yet because that rut on Steelix's tail is not that big. The exterior level is weakened so all I need is a few strong moves from Gyarados to wrap this up. Will Sandstorm cause me some problems though? I had to order a Quick Attack just to get past the makeshift barrier let alone get a move off. Gyarados ending this would take more than brute force like in Chuck's battle. No doubt that Poliwrath was strong, but it wasn't a giant metal leviathan that was practically immune to Thrash.

For the first time on my journey I felt the sense of failure hanging over my head. Gyarados can't be finishing up all of my battles even though he doesn't seem to mind. If I don't win, I have to do a serious self-evaluation to see if I have a chance to stand on a field at the Silver Conference. Deep breaths Mitch, take a look around to clear your mind. There's Ashley near the top of the bleachers and the entire ranch family somehow got VIP seating. Our eyes met and Nick gave me a look of confidence with a nod to boot.

"I choose Gyarados for our final round." The ball rolled onto the field and out came my own leviathan. No fear was shown by my most battle tested Pokémon so I knew I had a chance to really send a message to everyone here. Jasmine may be the festival queen but it's time to dethrone her.

Jasmine wasted no time on her defensive strategy. "Iron Tail, let's go!"

"Bite!" Was that call really the best decision? Under normal circumstances, no. However, she wants to go full out on offense which means I can continue to make that tail weaker. It just becomes a matter of if she can knock me out first. Regardless of what people in the stands thought, Gyarados took notice of the rut and dug his teeth into the steel snake's tail.

Concern started to creep into Jasmine's voice. "Shake it off and use Rock Throw!" Somehow it managed to get off a flurry of small rocks. It wasn't nearly as devastating compared to Growlithe's batch. She still hadn't noticed the reason why its attack was weaker than before.

I had to divert attention away from the tail to keep her mind occupied. "Dragon Rage!" A blast from Dragon Rage would have a harder time directly hitting a small rut; might as well deal damage head on. Getting a decent on this thing is still damn near impossible because it shrugged off my attack like a joke. Now I'm starting to wonder how different this battle would be if I didn't have a single spot to attack.

"Screech then Iron Tail!" Audience members went to cover their ears once its mouth opened. Unfortunately Gyarados doesn't have that luxury nor was he able to dodge the weakened but still powerful Iron Tail. He was pushed back and I ordered another Dragon Rage; Sandstorm was the counter.

My plan was going to be harder to be harder to execute after Jasmine saw her Sandstorm attack was much weaker than before. She put her hand on her chin while pondering what to do next. "Well this is something that hasn't been done before. Steelix has never been in a battle this long before
“I wouldn't expect anything less from the festival queen.” She turned red in the face after hearing that but it's not like I was wrong. "We've both been through a lot up to this point but I think it's time for this battle to be over. Dragon Rage!"

"Steelix, use Iron Tail!"

Dragon Rage was seemingly cut in half by the Iron Tail, but the rut was too deep and too big to ignore; the pain had finally seeped its way deeper into Steelix's body. He let out one more Screech along with its tail glowing before a massive thud was heard throughout the arena. Down for the count.

"Steelix is unable to battle, Gyarados is the winner. This match goes to the challenger!"

Cheering rained down from the nosebleed seats as more people stood up to congratulate us on a great finale to the festival. An usher opened up the VIP section of the stands so that everyone sitting there could come onto the field for the post-match ceremony. Men in suits were guarding a trophy as well as a case containing the Mineral Badge. In addition, there was a sheet of paper underneath both objects. It seemed like a story of some sort. Jasmine took the microphone once the spotlight was making her dress glitter in the light.

"Thank you all for coming to the grand finale. It is with great pleasure that I present this Mineral Badge to Mitch!" Somehow the crowd got even louder after I was given the hardware to prove my victory. After I raised my hardware the retractable roof opened, the lights were turned off, and everyone went silent before Jasmine started her tale. It was just all of us and the starry night sky.

"Long ago, Olivine was a poor port city with people struggling to survive. A wandering traveler made his way into town by way of the north from a faraway land and noticed the despair. He took it upon himself to build a lighthouse so that ships carrying goods could come in at any time. Slowly but surely, the people helped this man finish what he started. It was finally complete when the man placed his Ampharos on lookout to illuminate the treacherous sea. Olivine immediately became prosperous but the people could not find a way to repay the man for what he had done since he politely refused their money. The man had stayed in the lighthouse to care for his Ampharos and watch over the city." A spotlight shined on her.

"Two children had visited the man one day with a Mareep saying that the man had done enough and they were going to do the man's job so he could relax. The man smiled and said that the town could help raise it with care. Only then, would he retire. Once the Mareep had evolved, the children took it back to the man in the lighthouse. Just like every other day, the man was up at the top and was delighted to see the town-raised Ampharos. It was at that moment the children told him to go downstairs. Upon exiting with his Ampharos, he was greeted by the entire town. Everyone told him how grateful they were and that Olivine was his home knowing full well he had never had a place to call home. It was now time to retire and enjoy his stay here knowing his legacy would live on. The whole city threw a party that night to commemorate all he had done. Ever since that day long ago, we have honored the nameless man with this festival to make sure his work is not forgotten."

A deafening silence continued to overcome the large crowd until the first firework was shot into the air. Ooohs and aaahs were heard throughout the gym as there were many patterns and colors lighting the sky. A nudge came from my left along with a signal to let out my Pokémon from Jasmine. Honestly not sure if they like loud noises but what the hell? It's a celebration. All six of my hard workers came out to see the nice show. By this point in my journey I had seen some unique behaviors from my Pokémon but watching the couples snuggle up next to each other
showed how much I had truly missed the signs. Espeon has helped me understand everyone on a whole new level so far.

Fireworks ended with an Ampharos-shaped one followed by the outline of Olivine. Lights were turned back on so the audience could leave the stadium. Most did leave while others made their way to the field to meet up or talk with Jasmine. I can't blame them since she's a superstar while I'm just some scrappy looking trainer taking the gym challenge. Who would want to waste their time on me?

"Howdy!" Well, Laura doesn't think it's time consuming to talk to me. "I'm so proud of you!"

"How's everyone doing?" It had been quite a chaotic two days with the milk stand and the whole incident during the tournament.

She looked forlorn. "Marybeth's been lookin' kinda down these past few days and she won't snap out of it." Makes sense, a small child witnessing a cheap shot on arguably her best friend would cause her to become reserved. "Growlithe's been in a hospital ever since. He's not lookin' too good at the moment."

There. Right there showed me the extent of how low Cory sunk. "Did the money help at all?" Whenever a hospital is involved it's far from cheap unlike its Pokémon Center counterpart, which is free. Milk would have to be flying off the shelves before they could even think about paying the bill.

"Yes. Thank you. We've gotten help from others, but your money helped us get into the hospital."

"Glad to hear. I know you guys have a lot of work to do with breaking down and whatnot but please take this to Marybeth."

I pulled out a stuffed Growlithe from one of the vendors. I personally loved that they would make a stuffed animal out of any Pokémon. On the other hand, my team just poked at their stuffed figures in confusion when they saw the finished product. With animal in hand, Laura said her goodbyes and exited. It was almost barren once my conversation sunk in. I felt two hands slam down on my shoulder.

Ashley had made her way down looking pretty cheerful for a league official. "Hiya! You're not half bad with your six badges."

I'm not half bad? Child please, I could sweep your entire team in six or less moves; I'll let that slide. "I guess not. So you're still here? I thought you'd be on your next assignment by now."

"Not quite. I'm still wrapping things up here. That lady you were talking to was a member of a family who owned the Growlithe in question. I was just getting her side of the story so that the Pokémon League can help her." I gave her a clueless look. "Look Mitch, we're not heartless. We may give special treatment to people taking the gym challenge but a case like this can't be ignored. Imagine if the prize didn't involve a gym. The police would have to handle it and the family would most likely be in debt from bills. Even worse, there could have been no investigation at all."

"What do you mean by in debt?" That money Cory gave me should have covered most of the medical expenses based on my quick calculations."

Ashley gave me a concerned look. "Well you're half right with your math. That money covered only one night in the hospital. Now it got the care it deserved but it needed to be held longer for observation and rehabilitation." My heart sunk and my face reflected it. "This is where we come in.
The league has offered to pay all hospital costs. Honestly, I was surprised when you gave the bribe money to the family considering most would have kept it. Everyone can have peace of mind. I even got them VIP seats for the battle." Slowly the facts sunk in until she went to leave. "The league won't acknowledge this like I thought they would. Since they won't grant you a favor, I personally will. Just give me a call when you need it." Like that, she saw herself out leaving just Jasmine in the gym.

Over the course of two days, I had gone through an emotional roller coaster for each battle and Jasmine offered to talk to me about dealing with battle fatigue. Trainers don't (or shouldn't) take hits but the mental breakdown is almost a given when you battle so much in a short period of time. As helpful as she wanted to be, I declined her offer because she looked like she was in a hurry to get somewhere. We both left the bright lights of the gym to the streets of Olivine where the starry sky was over all of the vendors packing up shop. Still in her festival dress, she walked down the street before I couldn't see her anymore.

Making my way through the town felt like being in a time warp. Stands were no longer there, any merchandise that was there before was reduced price or had a messy display. Just having a chat with some salesmen lightened up the mood a little since they would be back on the road trying to make a living just like myself. Once it was well past midnight, the moon and stars were overtaken by clouds. Rain soon followed which made me dash for the lighthouse because it's probably the only thing open this late on this side of Olivine. There's no way I'm sprinting back to the crowded center.

Luck was on my side this time around since it decided to pour after I got in the front door. Unlike the first time, the ground floor was much brighter. Ampharos didn't have to be my guide this time up the stairs. As I got closer to the top, I heard some shouting between Jasmine and some other man.

"Please thi…"

"No! I'm ruined becau…" Normally it isn't my business to jump in. However, I made it up the stairs to see Jasmine on her knees begging still wearing her festival dress. Only one step into the room gave me all I needed to know.

Cory had made his way into the upper room and looked like he was carrying Amphy out and Jasmine was pleading for him to let Amphy go. Some bruises covered Amphy in addition to his labored breathing but Jasmine looked far worse at first glance. Both arms had some pretty large bruises as well as minor cuts. It was unsettling seeing them continue to argue until Cory stopped mid-sentence to look at me.

To say the look on his face was upset is probably an understatement. "You! My life has taken a turn for the worse because of you." There he goes, running his mouth yet again despite being in a no-win situation.

I didn't hold back. "Listen here you piece of shit, I didn't do anything. I didn't make you attack a bystander's Pokémon. I didn't make you bribe me. I didn't even do anything to turn you in. You shot yourself in the foot."

Did I expect him to understand or even listen? No. Did I expect him to call out his Tauros? Eh, maybe not a Tauros. Either way, I didn't have a choice. "Furret, I need some help!" She seemed surprised that a battle was about to happen so late at night. The sight of a charging bull was enough to convince her to pay attention. "Use Return!" Like so many average trainers before Cory, the move gave him a loss in one blow.
Cory's face turned to utter defeat. "Welp, that's it. I have no more Pokémon that can battle but I need to bounce. I'll leave you with this." He slammed Ampharos on the ground then opened a window to jump out of. Flying away into the pouring rain was his only way of escape but I don't think I've seen the last of him. Jasmine's voice went from loud scream to a whimper. How long had she been yelling and pleading only to have Amphy thrown to the ground in its weakened state?

Furret hopped into her lap and rubbed against Jasmine in an attempt to console her. I just let her pet Furret until she finally looked up. Her face had one more bruise on it while being covered in tears. "What… happened…?" The question was asked as quietly as possible so she wouldn't get any more afraid.

All she could manage was a whisper. "Amphy still needed some time to get better so I came here to check on him after we exited the gym. Somehow the lighthouse doors were open so I made it up here to find Cory hitting Amphy." She was starting to get rattled. "My Pokémon were too tired from our battle so I begged him to stop but he kept going. When I tried to grab his hands, he started hitting me and threatened to use his Tauros to hurt me. I blocked the doorway until you showed up."

A complete prick with no regard for life. I do feel for his Pokémon. "You have to trust me and my first aid skills to heal these bruises on both of you. Espeon!" The newer member stood half asleep in front of me. "Please use Confusion to lift Amphy onto his bed." She did so with little effort despite Amphy struggling. "Now it's going to sting but this will make these bruises go away." Luckily I only needed one bottle of medicine to heal its wounds. Both of my Pokémon were sent back to get some proper rest once Amphy started to fall asleep.

I took the opportunity to work on Jasmine after Amphy was sound asleep. "Why?" It was such a quiet question. "Why did all of this happen?"

No point in lying to her. "I wish I could give you a definitive answer." We sat there in silence as I wrapped bandages around her arms while the rain pelted the side of the lighthouse; it was starting to feel like a hurricane. "These should stay on until morning for sure. Also, ice them when you get the chance." Jasmine looked exhausted from her ordeal but she managed to whisper once more.

"I owe you another favor for tonight. Hell, I owe you more than that." She started to break down. Responding to her hopefully would get her mind on a different track. "Can I please stay in the lighthouse again?"

"Of course you can. I need to stay here too. Follow me." Getting up was a struggle for her but she managed to lead me to her bedroom. "I'm not going to let you sleep on the cold ground tonight."

This bed was probably a queen size, maybe a king but either way it looked so warm. I changed into my pajamas while Jasmine was wandering about the room. "Umm, where are you sleeping Jasmine? Is there another bedroom here?" Despite all she's been through, she cracked a smile and pointed at the same bed. "Are you sure? I can move…"

"No, it doesn't bother me at all. Do you have a spare pair of pajamas?" I took out a fleece pair of pants I had since it was getting colder outside in addition to a short sleeve shirt. "Don't move I'll be right back." I'm not one to question why she's doing what she's doing but I still don't feel right doing this.

A glamorous dress was thrown from the bathroom before she came out in my pajamas. By now she was forcing herself to stay awake, yet she told me to get into bed after she did so first. Before she went to bed, she managed one more sentence.
"Please don't leave me tonight." Just like that, she hugged me before exhaustion got to her.

"I don't plan on it, festival queen."

She found the energy for one more smile.
Chapter 18 - Kindness & Compassion

The events of the past 48 hours resonated in my head once Jasmine had finally succumbed to sleep. I had battled so many opponents in a short amount of time and gained a small reputation in Olivine while avoiding time in jail. No matter how other people perceived me, it would be nothing compared to Cory. The fact that he admitted to paying me off got him on the bad side of everyone in town and the league. As for what he did tonight, I pray I get the chance to pay him back my way. No mercy might have been too lenient considering his actions. Not even the league can protect his Pokémon next time we meet. Maybe I'll hold back if I'm feeling generous.

A serene feeling was felt in our room as rain continued to fall all night long with the occasional flash of lightning. Amphy was sleeping in his own bed while an emergency light was doing his job tonight while Jasmine eventually held me in her sleep. I honestly was afraid to move for fear of aggravating her bruises. The least I could do for her was let her sleep peacefully, even if it meant giving her my warmest pajamas. There were times where she would cry in her sleep but I pulled her closer to me and the comforter up more to keep her warm. She calmed down about an hour later which meant I could get some shut eye.

Rain continued to fall throughout the night and into the morning. Some people say that rain helps you stay asleep and I say yes, yes it does. The peaceful pitter patter on the window is a soothing melody. Waking up with a dense layer of clouds is not really an ideal way to start the day while Jasmine still was asleep. I just sat there in bed wondering about my next badge. Pryce was the oldest of the gym leaders so I expect his experience to carry him in his ice gym. All of the boys had their time which means the girls will take the field. No matter how bad it gets, I can't afford to tire out Gyarados. He's been in too many decisive battles these past few days.

Before I got too deep in thought, Jasmine finally woke up. "Mmmggghhh, good… morning." She realized she had not let go and blushed a little before doing so.

"So how are you doing this morning?" It sounded like I was giving her the cold shoulder but I was more concerned about her arms than feelings.

She poked at her bandages. "A little sore. I think it will get better though." I took the liberty of removing the bandages very carefully only to see the discoloration staring me in the face. Long sleeves may be the way to go because the whole city is probably going to ask what happened. We just stared at the arms until a thought crossed my mind.

"Hey, I know that it's a little tough to talk about, but you need to report what happened last night." She looked down in thought but she was still shaken up. "Look, I can do the talking if it makes you feel better."

Tears started to fall down her face. "I can't. If I do, he'll find out and he'll come back. Before you arrived, he was going on and on about what would happen if anybody found out. Some of those things I don't even want to imagine or repeat." Shit; there really is nothing I can do without her potentially getting hurt or worse. Scenarios or solutions ran through my mind until she hugged me tightly. "I don't care what happens to me. I just don't want anything to happen to Amphy. He didn't deserve any of this."
"Listen to me. It's hard to put your trust in someone you met two days ago, but I promise that I will not do anything to endanger either of you. However, have someone you trust to look after Amphy when you're at the gym. Don't worry about Cory." Big words from someone who wasn't there during the list of threats.

We just sat there for a few more minutes until she decided to let go. "Yeah, if I want to protect Amphy then I should have some help." We both got out of bed to get ready for the day.

Jasmine reluctantly gave me my pajamas back once she changed in the bathroom. Whether she thought about the bruises or not, she was wearing a long-sleeved shirt with a raincoat as her top layer. On the flip side, my raincoat was finally at its limit. The last original item from my first day as a trainer had a hole too big to patch. Before I went to leave, Jasmine had given me a brand new, out of the box raincoat from her closet.

"Much appreciated. Let me return the favor." Ashley had mentioned she owed me a favor so I took down her number that day after my interrogation. "I know you'll do everything to stay safe but here is a league official's number. Her name is Ashley. I don't know how the league interacts with gym leaders but if you call it directly instead of the league offices, something might get done faster. Promise me, do not be afraid to dial it if you cannot find someone to watch Amphy or if you feel you are in danger from Cory."

Her nod gave me the confidence to walk out of the lighthouse knowing she can deal with this. Wind made it impossible to open the main entrance until she came down the stairs holding a remote opener. Just took one step out into the rain before she grabbed my arm, turned me around and kissed me. I didn't care that it was quick; it was something out of a fairy tale. We both blushed before she reluctantly let me go into the rainy city.

Pokémon Center rooms were still full but I took advantage of the empty lobby to use the healing machine on my way out of the city. I don't necessarily like tourists for big events because cities cater to them instead of the average trainer. Honestly, I can't judge them too harshly but that doesn't mean I can like them. From what I've heard, Blackthorn City is the only place where trainers are put second only to its residents. No doubt that Blackthorn will be my favorite place to visit once I get there.

My fortune was slightly turning around as I walked outside. The rain was still falling albeit much more like a mist as opposed to a downpour. Regardless of how bad it was, I still exited the city with mixed feelings. I'd consider the visit an overall success because it resulted in me bettering myself. Nobody can take that away from me as I left the city.

"Hey man, wanna battle? You don't look so tough." I had trekked only a mile or so before a young teenager challenged me to a battle. Skipping him on the way into town was probably a bad idea. A dumb boy making a statement like that could be forgiven if news of my victory wasn't on television or if he wasn't holding a newspaper with an article about me. "When you assume, you make an ass out of you and me, but mostly you. Put up or shut up." Those words got him furious. A Granbull materialized in front of him looking ready for battle; I countered with Espeon. It had been awhile since I used her in battle. A long rest should give her an advantage in this quick fight.

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Ever since the battle against Chuck I've been feeling a mix of joy and sadness. Thankfully Mitch didn't use me during the whole festival or the gym battle. Shade is much better than me at everything but I was still surprised that he lost. Actually, I am glad he lost because it's not about survival anymore. His limits are there but he doesn't have to battle recklessly. The battle against Primape was a great confidence booster. I'm happy I can contribute to this team but I still can't use
my psychic attacks for too long.

What I saw after the gym battle was like Sara all over again. Only this time, it was a male trainer beating up a female trainer and her Ampharos. Times like that make me wish my ball wasn't transparent or at least have the ability to close my eyes. Yes, I still have flashbacks about that day and that incident made them worse and more frequent. Whenever I got to the point of being a nervous wreck, I remember that Mitch would never do something like that. And now I was up against a scary looking opponent still trying to feel comfortable.

"Bite, it'll be a one hit knockout!"

"Fat chance. Quick Attack!" Mitch was right. Not many Pokémon are faster than me, especially ones not owned by a gym leader. His confidence never wanes whenever I'm sent out.

My move worked on defense before I scored a direct hit to its open stomach. "Follow up with Swift!" It had zero chance to dodge from close range.

The other trainer had a grin on his face. "Lick!" Shit. I realized he waited until I got too close.

A long tongue didn't have to go far to slap me. Damn thing was disgusting which caused me to just stand there in disbelief before I got hit again by the super effective move. Honestly, I'm still a little nervous about contact like that.

"Go for Confusion!"

Waves of psychic energy went for Granbull but they didn't seem to work. It charged toward me in a zigzag pattern; got it confused. What followed was head banging into trees and me laughing on the ground. Mitch was probably upset that I let my guard down but come on; my luck has never been that good. It looked like I was cruising to a win until a blast of water hit me from the side.

My master was furious. "What the hell was that?" It wasn't clear cut at first, but a bush rustling caused me to fire another wave into that general direction. Lo and behold a Poliwril came out firing its Water Gun again. "So you wanted to win that bad? Fine, we can take it up a step." I immediately turned back and shook my head. I'm tired of someone bailing me out every time I get into trouble. It sucks that an idiot trainer got me to this point.

The younger opponent didn't look phased. "I knew you won in Olivine but it must've been a fluke. Let's see if you're worthy of that title." Granbull looked tired but Poliwrath's water attacks are powered up in the drizzle.

"Alright Espeon, go for it. Use Confusion!" I went to fire a wave of energy but it was no Confusion. Inner power came from somewhere else this time. Instead of the weaker wave or trying to move my opponent, a rainbow colored beam came from my jewel. Laser like precision helped me hit both of the targets; both of them fainted in less than five seconds.

"I-i-i-impossible. You didn't even have to send out another Pokémon." He just recalled his two fainted Pokémon before running off.

This thrill was something I've never experienced before. It was a victory and I don't feel tired from my use of psychic attacks. Still, I turned to my master and tilted my head. Had he recognized what just happened? Even though I did it, I still can't believe it.

He knelt down in the light drizzle and rubbed my head. "Hey pretty girl." I was shivering from the dampness and excitement yet I still could purr like a champ. "That was a beautiful Psybeam. We'll work on this when it's warmer." Right there I broke down crying. No longer do I need to be
supported because I am weak. He let me get it out of my system before talking to me again. "I'm proud of you." His smile always makes me feel comfortable. Just another reminder that I made the right decision.

More challengers crossed paths with me on the way back to Ecruteak. All of those battles went without a loss or surprise Pokémon in the bushes. Some even congratulated me on my tournament win. Rule of thumb in the region is that only surrounding cities hear stories like this; it means once I get to Mahogany Town, nobody will care. Checkpoint gates in the distance signaled I was on the outskirts of the city.

By afternoon, the rain had stopped falling. However, the clouds were still looking threatening from above. Ecruteak was relatively deserted on the gloomy looking day so I took more time to wander around the city. Obviously nothing had changed in a few days since I was last here except the weather. Before I went to the Pokémon Center I made the tough decision to visit the cemetery. I know that Umbreon is no idiot; he knows where we are. Do I let him out? If I don't then he might hate me for holding him back. If I do then he might hate me for bringing it up to him again. Damned if I do and damned if I don't. Letting him out is something I have to do.

He materialized in front of me with a look of sadness on his face. I knew that he was aware of his surroundings. Just like last time, I let him do his own thing without moving. Umbreon had taken a seat before pawing at the tombstone. No crying, no yelling, just silence. He took one deep breath followed by a bow. I went over to pay my respects as well by bowing. We both sat in silence while I kept petting his head. The moment he started to break down was the moment he wanted to go back. I will never shame him for shedding tears in public or in his ball. He's gotten over the initial shock and acts normal but deep down he will always be hurt emotionally and physically. What if I mess up and use all five moves in a battle? How will my opponent handle it? Will Umbreon be called a freak? Arceus forbid I have him taken from me due to his circumstances.

The graveyard was visited by a few more mourners before I decided to leave the city via the east gate. Many trainers littered the path to Mahogany Town compared to the clear path I took the first time. One by one I beat them with minimal effort although I had used Espeon more to gauge her new Psybeam attack. From first glance it looked like she could handle the added power but battle fatigue set in. Despite that common problem, she seems to fire off a consistent power as opposed to fizzling out. My other Pokémon may be getting jealous considering I use those two more but I do it so that they can feel a sense of normalcy.

An empty Pokémon Center was a welcoming sight considering the sardine-like one in Olivine made me uncomfortable. I don't mind people but I do mind a lot of them in a small area. Nurse Joy recognized my face the moment I stepped up to the counter. We both had a conversation about the events since we last met. She was happy to hear how everyone was doing in addition to me challenging Pryce. He is much different than the other gym leaders in terms of scheduling because he usually takes long periods of time off. It does work in my favor this time around since he is in town.

"So when would you like to challenge him tomorrow?"

I thought about when it would be best. No way in hell would I do another early battle like against Chuck or too late like Morty. "How about after lunch? Say 1:30 pm?"

She went to scanning the page for time conflicts. Her gasp made me nervous until she pointed out that no other trainers would be facing him tomorrow. "I will schedule you in for that time. Good luck!" With an important battle ahead, it was time to plan for victory after I found my room in the center.
Everyone was released from their balls so that they could stretch after being crammed in there for the whole day. The game plan was pretty straightforward: girls are going to have a field day. Reactions differed with Umbreon being disappointed to Ampharos jumping for joy. Most importantly, Gyarados looked relieved. I had been using him too much and hearing that must have made him relax although I have to believe he still wants to battle for fun.

It didn't take too long for everyone to fall asleep on the floor with their "partner". Seriously, what did Espeon do? Anyway, I pulled the covers over my head at the thought of the freezing gym. Then I remembered the jacket Jasmine gave to me sitting on the doorknob. That thing wasn't just waterproof; it was weatherproof and it was nice and toasty.

As I close my eyes, I remember how close I am to the Silver Conference. Intimidating as that sounds to most trainers, tomorrow's gym match is just another battle. I'm coming for that badge.
Chapter 19

Chapter by Just 1 Man Writing A Story For You, Writer4fun
(Just 1 Man Writing A Story For You)

Chapter 19- A Tough Test

For the first time in a long time, I could afford to sleep in with almost no worries. Waking up around 11:30 just felt right. Unfortunately I can't do that too much unless I want to fall behind in the gym challenge. Based on my current pace, I should qualify a week or so before the deadline which is pretty good considering a lot of trainers get their eighth badge on the last day. Nothing from my pre-gym battle routine changed except I took the spare time to walk around town this time around. It definitely has the small town feel with its little family owned shops and special food.

The gym was more modest compared to Cianwood's statues or Olivine's giant stage. There were still statues outside, but they were official league ones so I guess Pryce isn't much for putting on a show. Ice was coming out of the corner which leads me to believe it's beyond cold inside. Despite arriving half an hour early, I opted to go in just to see if he was ready. Inside was like a typical office at first glance with a receptionist to take my information. After doing so, she simply showed me the way to the arena beyond a door. Now this is where the ice was coming from. Freezing was an understatement for these temperatures.

It surprised me that Pryce was in a striped shirt, shorts, and moccasins of all things. He took a few seconds to look me over before speaking. "Welcome young man. My name is Pryce and I am the Mahagony Gym leader. My Pokémon and I have been through extensive training to focus on battling in the harshest conditions. As a challenger in my gym, you must go through the same experience I have gone through and will continue to go through." I was thoroughly confused by what he meant. He tried to find the right words to follow up. "Discard any jackets, hats, and mittens before facing me."

I wasn't confused anymore after his blunt statement. "So you want me to wear the same layers of clothing you are for an equal playing field?" He just stood there with a blank expression. "Very well, I accept your challenge."

He smiled. "You are the first trainer in a long time that has not complained off the bat. I congratulate you on your determination and timeliness. Now take your place so we can begin." A quick nod followed and I walked to my corner as soon as possible. Pryce's reputation as a battler was pretty well known, but the environment in which he held gym matches was something else. He expects to remain focused on the battle in the cold while challengers are split between staying warm and calling out commands. There is no doubt he deserves his title.

Field conditions were very favorable to Pryce. He had an icy battlefield with a circular pool of water in the middle on the field. A few snow-covered rocks were scattered near the edges of the field as well. Ice types usually have water as a secondary typing, so I can expect at least one water type. In addition to the already cold atmosphere, there seemed to be a slight breeze yet there was no visible ventilation system. That being noted, the pool still worries me the most. It's has to be at something like 32.0001 degrees Fahrenheit.

Our judge took her place in the middle and she too was dressed like both of us. "This will be an official gym battle for the Glacier Badge! Each trainer is allowed three Pokémon with only the challenger being able to substitute. The battle ends when all three Pokémon on either side are unable to battle. Begin!"
"Come on out Seel." The water type happily went from the solid battlefield to the pool in the middle. It's not the most intimidating thing in general but in the hands of a leader it will probably give me some problems.

"Ampharos, game time!" My electric sheep was raring to go after not seeing a gym battle since Morty. At first glance, the conditions didn't seem to bother her which was already a plus. Pryce was a little shocked to see her standing firm.

"Aurora Beam." A colorful beam came from the horn on Seel which failed to hit my moving Ampharos. "Go for the ground then do it again." It did as he commanded with ice shards coming from the broken battlefield followed up by another one. Ampharos tried to dodge again but the colors were reflecting and refracting through the shards. A smile came across his face when the move hit.

"I'll give you that one. Ampharos, use Discharge!" The pool that worried me was now an advantage instead. However, Seel jumped out of the water and was going to ram into Ampharos with its Headbutt attack. All of this was done without a command by Pryce; too bad he didn't see further down the road. "Big mistake. Use Thunderpunch!" With Seel charging, it couldn't escape the massive blow Ampharos delivered. Seel ended up back in the water which gave me the perfect chance to use Discharge.

The judge looked at Seel for only a split second to make her decision. "Seel is unable to battle. The round goes to Ampharos!" Seel is unable to battle? I'd be surprised if it was still alive considering I probably knocked it out with just the punch. Was the Discharge overkill? Probably, but I'm not taking chances in a gym battle or since that judge incident in Olivine.

Pryce recalled his fallen Pokémon before staring at me yet again. "Young man, you seem eager to get this battle over quickly." I mean he's right; if you're going to throw water types out there then I'll zap 'em. "I will admit that you both are surprising me right now considering the below freezing air temperatures but it always starts out like this. Electric types may beat water types but your strategy is simplistic and I'll show you why. Dewgong, time to show this boy how to battle." On cue, it materialized in front of Pryce but didn't make a beeline for the pool.

"Pryce, you seem to think I'm just another trainer. Unfortunately for you I'm not. Now use Cotton Spore Ampharos!" White puff balls made their way and clung to Dewgong.

"Icy wind!" As if it wasn't cold enough, a blistering wind rushed through the gym hitting Ampharos.

"Thunderpunch!" My plan to slow down Dewgong was practically offset by that Icy Wind and it hopped in the water to dissolve the spores and even laugh at how slow my sheep was going.

"Aurora Beam." Ampharos had her back turned and never saw it coming; she was looking a bit sluggish once she turned around. "Use it again Dewgong!" I can't afford to take too many more hits but he'll just break the ground like last time. Wait a minute…

"Sprint towards it!" A move that made no sense to neither Pryce nor the official made perfect sense to me because I didn't finish my command; why spoil it right away? Dewgong got off another attack up high which worked in my favor. "On your belly!" Just like that, it dodged the attack and was sliding up to the edge of the water. "Thunderpunch." The speed from the slide added to the power of the punch and got the result I wanted.

Across the way, Pryce was shaking his head. "Foolish boy. Dewgong, drag it into the pool!" Shit! That's what I was afraid of the most. Truth be told I thought I delivered a knockout blow so I
wouldn't have to worry about this exact scenario happening. Now Ampherose was struggling to get
back on the icy field. "Use Rest." Double shit, now it gets to heal off what I just did.

"Discharge!" Yet again Pryce was surprised at my tactics as his Dewgong was ruled knocked out
by the judge shortly after the move was done being executed. Once the judge was done with her
cadence I called back Ampherose, leaving just the three of us in silence.

By this point in the match, I was starting to feel the frostbite creep in. His voice came from across
the gym to snap me back to reality. "There is no doubt you have the guts to pull off a victory
considering the sequence of events you just did. However, was it worth it for your Ampherose to get
hypothermia? Technically you have three Pokémon remaining but a smart trainer would not dare
reach for that ball for the rest of the battle. If you were to call it out right now then it could easily
collapse."

I could have called her back than switched to Furret for a split second then call out Ampherose
again. But by then, Dewgong would most likely be awake and he would have a serious advantage.
There's a likelihood that Ampherose was not going to last much longer anyway. "There is no doubt
in my mind that Ampherose had enough strength left at the time. If she wanted out, then she would
have let me know."

Just standing there gave me no clues as to how he felt. Honestly, this man has a great poker face. "I
will acknowledge that you are no ordinary trainer but I still have my most loyal partner ready.
Although your mind is still sharp based on your explanation, you might want to think about
conceding if you don't finish this battle quickly."

As much as I hate to agree with him, my options are limited. I could send in Gyarados to obliterate
his final Pokémon but he needs rest. Growlithe would be bad since that pool in the middle is the
last thing he wants to see and I don't want him dragged or pushed in. My game plan is to use Furret
and Espeon since they both have some fur albeit not too thick and are agile, even on ice.
Conceding is something I have never done in my career and I have never considered it.

"We'll have to finish it quickly then. You're up Furret!" She stood with confidence as Pryce sent out
his Piloswine. "Charge in and use Slam!" She was far from the rocks so I opted to go for the
slower paced move on the open ice. It connected for some decent damage but Pryce knew it was
going to be over soon.

"Mist." The entire battlefield was soon shrouded in a thick mist. Furret used to her ears to track
Piloswine as we both heard it charging. "Now Fury Attack!" A barrage of stabs landed on Furret
causin her to recoil in pain. I can't keep it together for much longer with the cold to seemingly get
progressively worse.

No time to worry about traction or speed. "Use Return!" Piloswine wanted to get in one more hit
and it got it in… at the cost of a powerful Return attack. Mist's effect was starting to wear off so I
could finally see across the field. I also took some time to give Pryce his own words of advice.
"Was that one extra attack really worth a Return?"

Gloating was the dumbest thing I could have done. His face turned to a scowl. "Blizzard." Snow
came down by inches until the attack stopped. There was nowhere to dodge based on how the field
looked. Maybe Furret had used Dig to hide but I was horrified to see her frozen in ice yet not
knocked out.

"Use Flamethro-" no way. It can't be like this. I'm so distracted by this cold that I'm ordering a
Flamethrower just to get her thawed out. I'm literally losing my mind; the cold is making me go
insane. A proverbial red flag came into my mind and I immediately recalled her. Luckily neither of
the two saw the extent of Blizzard. Part of me believes that the judge would give the round to Pryce if she saw Furret like that while the other part of me just wanted her out of there because she was defenseless. According to the scoreboard I still have three Pokémon left but in reality I only have Espeon. Should I really concede defeat?

What a day to be me. I finally get another chance at a gym leader's Pokémon. Mitch always has a tough time deciding who to use during gym battles because I've heard nobody does a full 6 on 6 battle. Strength is something I'm still working on although I am much faster than I could ever be. Psybeam is developing more and more with each passing day. Sometimes I even do mental exercise in my ball to get the rhythm of my mind and attack to sync. It really is mumbo jumbo but this stuff matters to me.

Shade has been more reserved than usual since we took the same route back into town. His ball is usually unresponsive but I can't blame him because the forest nearby was his home for such a long time. The trip to the cemetery also puts some strain on his mind; I can feel it from my own ball as well. Battling seems to be a great distraction for him as he goes through this tough time. He may not be on the battle roster today but that won't stop him from watching. So far the battle has been up and down with Mitch being on the downward slope this time after two knockouts. He is getting anxious as he reaches for my ball. Don't worry master; I know I can do it.

Freezing temperatures and a slight breeze are the first two things I feel once I'm on the field. No problem with that at the moment. Piloswine is the only one left huh? Let's see how fast I can wrap this battle up. I examine my surroundings and notice that Mitch is starting to turn purple in his arms and he's shivering. They made him battle like this!? Further down the field my opponent is wearing only a shirt, and shorts. What the hell is wrong with this gym?!

Our official gave us the ready signal. "Espeon, use Fire Blast!" Now I took that as a sign to check his mind since he's much smarter than that. How much is the cold affecting him? Let's see… ah ha! He's so preoccupied with the cold that he wants to get warm and is ordering any fire attack that comes into his head. "Shit, sorry Espeon. Go for Swift" he mumbled in embarrassment. I readjusted my scan while landing the attack. His mind is teetering on the edge of four planes: conscious, unconscious, logical, and illogical. I know he doesn't have much time left before he collapses.

"Still won't concede? Very well then." It was his opponent. "Icy Wind!" The cold burst of wind slowed my reflexes down instantly. "Follow up with Fury Attack." Its tusks came in for close combat damage; all of which I couldn't dodge.

"Psybeam!" There he goes, back to the conscious and logical planes. I threw more power into this one hoping for a victory. It took the attack a little poorly. Confusion overtook it as it started ramming into the rocks on the outer edges of the field. I was hoping it would knock itself out with Mitch getting progressively worse by the second.

"Dammit Piloswine! Use Blizzard!" It snapped out of confusion and fired up a strong Blizzard. The cold was more intense than Icy wind by far. I was impressed that I survived until I could start to feel my hind legs freeze up. The ice encasement started to go up my body until I use Confusion to keep it from fully consuming me. A deadly attack like that in this environment could possibly kill me. Still, I have enough energy to keep attacking from distance. A Psybeam was being readied until I heard my master scream.

I could be going insane because I swear I can feel Espeon inside my head but whatever, the battle is more important. Another attack by me would hopefully win me the match. What better way to
end it with Fire Blast? Hold on, Espeon can't use that move. Maybe I am losing my mind. Swift seemed to work better so I went with that. By now I am completely focusing my will to stay awake and focused. I can see Espeon getting pounded but I just don't know what to do. The Blizzard wasn't as strong as before but she too started to freeze.

Something clicked in my head at that moment in time. "That's enough! No more!" I had screamed those words with practically all of my remaining strength. I can't stand to see my Pokémon end up in such horrible shape. My eyelids grew heavier as Pryce recalled his Pokémon in victory. He simply told me to leave the gym in a monotonous voice and so I did after I gathered my things. Running on reserve strength, I made my way to the Pokémon Center in the moderately warm evening. Most of my body was numb and purple from the gym.

A long line of trainers was in the Pokémon Center. Apparently the machines had broken so they were treating individual Pokémon or something of the sort. There was no way I could get them the care they needed without risking having to wait around. Even in the ball, body heat can still decrease if frozen. I made my way to the edge of town and took shelter in a hollow tree. With my last bit of reserve energy, I called out everyone.

My healthy partners looked at me in horror as I went to talk to Growlithe. "Listen buddy, thaw out Espeon and Furret please." He had a serious look of concern on his face as he walked over to me. "No. Get the girls warm first then worry about me. I may be cold, but they're much worse." That was all the energy I had left.

The warmth of Growlithe's flames minutes later brought me out of my unconsciousness long enough to feel pinned down. I didn't have to open my eyes to know that everyone that could fit in the tree was huddled on top of me. Growlithe noticed me become conscious in my sleep and licked my face very gently. I gave him a pat on the head as his reward. Even in my state, I could feel everyone snuggle closer together. I was such a lucky trainer to have Pokémon that care about me this much.
Chapter 20- Licking the Wounds

It was very upsetting seeing my master in his condition during the battle. Under normal conditions he would have been fine but with the cold corrupting his mind on top of the stress of the previous rounds, he couldn't take the psychological torture anymore. His scream to stop the battle was the most gut wrenching thing I've ever seen or heard. Sara's beating suddenly felt like nothing compared to that emotional moment in terms of me feeling awful. Mitch has proven time and again how much he cares about everyone because he wants to win as well as making sure to keep everyone as happy as possible. As much as he didn't want to quit, he still did it even though I was close to full strength while Piloswine was on the ropes. He quit not so that he could escape that hell and get warm, but so that we could battle another day.

Being in the ball didn't thaw out my legs but I didn't have to deal with the ice creeping up my body anymore or using energy to keep it at bay. Unfortunately for Furret she is stuck like that although the ball should keep her from dying of hypothermia. It might even be fair to say the ball prevents us from getting worse but won't heal us. However, Mitch was so out of it that he forgot a Pokémon cannot get worse inside their ball and he panicked.

Mitch should've collapsed on the ground once the warm evening air met his cold body. There was something keeping him going. Was it the drive to heal us? My best guess is yes, but there are some areas of the mind not even psychic types can fully understand. He was so delusional that he was waiting in line to get some kind of candy bar and the machine had broken whereas he thought it was the line for the Pokémon Center.

On the way out of town he experienced all four planes of his mind from my earlier assessment. It was illogical to leave but he was conscious. After he found a hollow tree, he called out all of us which were two logical decisions. I found that his words to Growlithe were both illogical and logical. He mentioned Furret and I were in worse shape than he was; that was not the case. Finally, he collapsed from exhaustion.

We all stood around him for a second and then looked at one another. Nobody knew what to say or do now that our master was unconscious until everyone realized how bad the situation really was. Shade sprinted to his side while Gyarados immediately turned into a bodyguard. If any wild Pokémon got close to him, it'd be beaten to a pulp. Ampharos was warmed up first since she was the easiest to take care of. It took roughly 10 minutes or so to get her body temperature up plus drying her fur. I turned into the de facto doctor due to my sensory abilities. Once I gave her the nod of approval, she rushed over as well. That just left the three of us.

I looked at the rattled Growlithe as he just stared at Furret encased in ice. Her expression was one of panic from how fast the Blizzard accumulated. Him staring wasn't going to get anything done anytime soon so I offered my guidance. "You should thaw her out last. She will take some time to properly get healed."

"Why can't I just thaw her out with one Flamethrower now?"

"Because raising her body temperature too fast would cause the body to go into shock. There's a chance you could burn her too." Both of those sentences horrified him. "Look, you can thaw me out
your way because I don't have to worry about shock and I'll take the chance with a burn. Believe me, you're going to have to spend more than 10 minutes with her." More relaxed, he used a toned-down Flamethrower which easily melted my hind legs. After five minutes of moving around to regain the feeling, I went to the hollow tree.

"Wait!" Growlithe screamed at me. He was still rattled after he looked at Furret again. "What do I do?" He's not showing it outwardly but I know he cares for her; that is conversation that needs to happen but can wait.

"Apply steady heat to the block of ice with your fire. Once she's thawed out, keep the heat flow steady but turn up the heat a little. You don't want to spike too quickly. After that, raise her body temperature and then she should be back to normal. Don't panic if she doesn't wake up after that because she will need to continue to rest." I made sure he understood the process before I ran over to Mitch. Ampharos had curled up next to him sleeping while Shade stood over him.

"From what I'm seeing, he's still breathing. I can't do anything except lie next to him and be a living blanket. Care to join me Ruby?" I trotted over to see Mitch lying flat on his back. Purple areas were spotty with most of his body going back to red or white. Shade saw how skeptical I was so he kissed my maw to calm me down once we sat by him. "It'll be alright. Hey, you did a great job today. If that was a normal battle you would've won... you know it."

I snuggled closer to him before putting my head on his neck. "Yeah. I wish I attacked Piloswine instead of waiting. There's no way it could have survived two or three more hits."

He kissed me on my jewel. "That's my girl. You've gotten stronger since we met in so many ways." Have I? Sure I learned Psybeam but what are the other ways he's talking about? "You look tired yourself so get some rest. Mitch helped us out in our time of need. Now it's time to return the favor." Shade pulled up his paw and wrapped it around my neck and drowsiness eventually took its toll on me.

Sunlight had already disappeared when I woke up minutes later. Darkness was in every direction except for the small orange glow outside the hollow tree. Leaving Shade was a tough decision considering Mitch would lose some radiating heat. Upon walking over I saw that Growlithe had followed my instructions like I expected.

"So how is she?"

Poor Growlithe was mentally drained from this tedious process of thawing her out. Finesse wasn't one of his strong suits considering he had no clue how to properly thaw Furret; pure power from a Flamethrower would have been catastrophic. He turned his head with the most solemn look on his face. "She's sleeping soundly now. Before... she was shivering constantly."

"I know it's been hard on you but you've done a great job. Don't worry about the shivering. Keep the heat steady though. You have to trust me on this: the shivering is from nightmares. Being encased in ice is one experience you don't simply forget about yet you want to."

Growlithe turned back to the sleeping Furret. "Even though she's shown interest in me I still don't do anything back. She has no clue how much I love her. I almost lost my chance to tell her today."

"My suggestion is to tell her when she wakes up. Shade thinks Mitch won't be awake for quite some time so no going back to our balls unless we tap the center of them. Doubt that any of us will do that though."

"Okay. I do owe it to her since she's been really dropping hints. Just one thing before we go to
sleep. Can you carry us over to the tree with your psychic power? I'm still afraid to move her. Once we're in I can give off more heat."

"Come on then, let's get back." Whenever something needs to be moved it's usually better that the object isn't moving itself. Moving two sleeping Pokémon of their size is pretty easy. Both of them had gotten closer once we got back to the tree; their conversation should be really interesting.

Morning came after one of the longest nights I've ever been awake for. Those damn Doduo with their noise so early in the morning didn't make me any happier. Gyarados was about to send them a personal invitation to stop until I pointed to our sleeping owner. Stars from my Swift seemed appropriate to shoot out of the tree to get them to shut up since they were quiet. Mitch still needs to rest despite his body temperature going back to normal along with his skin color. Everyone else seems to be back to normal in terms of emotion after knowing he will be fine.

Growlithe had woken up after me and stayed awake compared to Gyarados. His eyes looked heavy as well as relieved. I slowly moved away from Shade to talk to him once he motioned me over. "So I talked to her last night after she woke up from her cold sleep."

"And?"

"I told her everything that I needed to say. No more hiding it. No more playing the tough guy. No more doubt or uncertainty. You're psychic so I'd like to assume you could take a guess on how she felt. She didn't stay awake too long but it was long enough to get her to smile. Her shivering stopped too."

Perfect. Furret is probably relieved of the tension she had before. She looks so content in her sleep. "Well that's great! Now what?"

"Guess I'll be spending more time with her if we're both outside our balls. Please don't yell at me if I mess up since I'm new to this mate thing. You and Shade have it down already." He looked down for a few seconds before continuing. "I'm sorry to stop talking, but I'm exhausted from using most of my heat to keep everyone warm throughout the night." And like that he went back to holding her closer as she started to wake up. Out of respect it was better not to keep asking questions. Still have to wonder how Mitch will deal with this considering we acted abnormally when we first saw him as a couple.

Sunlight was soon overtaken by clouds as it reached afternoon. Mitch still was not awake yet so everyone took some time to train nearby. Shade was focused on adding finesse to his moves, Ampharos was working on her attack pattern with lightning, Gyarados was doing some agility work to help him dodge, and the new couple just sat by the tree talking about what just happened in the past day. My training was focused on how to use Confusion and Psybeam together; toss something up in the air then hit it in midair. Somehow this was supposed to work in my mind; the execution is another thing.

All was well for an hour or so until a voice came from behind us. "What's going on over here?"

There wasn't too much to remember following my forfeit against Pryce. All I could grasp at was making my way out to the forest after running through town before collapsing. Mahogany townspeople should be able to help me out with my memory. Never have I ever experienced that much pressure as a trainer. I've battled in a large stadium in front of thousands at Olivine. I've battled in a tight space at Cianwood. But man, this gym redefines what it means to be in a pressure situation. I was a fool to assume I could win with brute force. Once the cold got to me the battle was already lost; it was just a matter of how much time was left in the fight.
My skin was back to normal once I finally got up from my sleeping position in the tree. The only possible way I could get that warm without any blankets was with Growlithe; he's getting a reward for sure. Furret and him were just sitting by the entrance to the tree base which is a little odd since he's very reserved around her. A kiss eventually followed after some time had passed. Wait… Espeon probably did something considering it was like this back at Cianwood's Pokémon Center. Now that's two couples on the team I have to deal with. By this point I'd assume that Gyarados and Amphanros have something going on too. The line between well-being and winning just got more complex.

Quietly coming up from behind them was supposed to be a nice surprise, but they're looking tired from last night. It took a few seconds for the two of them to see that it was me and that I was alright. Both cried as they sprinted to me wanting a hug. There was nothing for me to say except "I'm sorry I scared you like that" and I couldn't mean it any more if I tried.

Growlithe was very cold to the touch, even with him being a fire type. Keeping an entire team warm is not an easy thing to do. As much as Furret didn't like it, I called Growlithe back to his ball so he could get some worry free rest. A rub on the chin made her purr before I called her back too. Being frozen has to have a huge effect on her as well. Walking a few steps led me into a decent sized clearing with everyone training.

"What's going on here?" They all stopped on a dime to look at me. A split second happened before the remaining four Pokémon rushed to me and showed me affection. "Thank you for caring for me and each other last night. Let's go back to town and get you all the proper medical attention." All of them let out a sigh of relief before going back to their balls.

The path I had taken out of town was covered signs pointing to different routes due to it being the main pathway. Mahogany Town was already visible from the top of the hill I was on so the sign didn't have it on there. Just walking back into town felt like a walk of shame although not too many people saw me stumble into the forest. My first place to visit was the Pokémon Center in the hopes that Nurse Joy could heal my team or even give me some information. Even walking into the safest place in town made me feel uncomfortable.

Some people were milling about in the lobby so I just kept my head down hoping to avoid eye contact with someone who might have seen me. Nurse Joy was busy typing on the computer as I waited for her to finish typing. She took a quick glance at me. "Hello! It's good to see you again. What can I do for you?"

Keep it simple Mitch. Just act normal. "Can you please heal them with the ball machine? They're all fine otherwise." Nurse Joy took everyone's ball over to the machine for a quick heal. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two girls pointing to me with huge grins on their faces. "Can I help you or nah?"

"Look who it is. It's the drunk from yesterday." Arceus dammit. I'll just roll with it.

"Well you're not too far off from drunk. I just got out of a cold match with Pryce and was pretty out of it."

Both of them laughed at me; one even had to bend over to control herself. "W-w-what!? Y-y-y-you really expect us to believe that? I'm even surprised you're not in jail right now considering how much of an ass you were hahaha!" Clearly explaining everything wasn't going to work. "Well we have a match against Pryce tomorrow and I doubt we'll end up like that."

Nurse Joy was about to say something to them but they laughed out of the center before she got the chance. All six balls were placed on the counter along with her questioning glance. "Do you
remember last night at all?" Just shook my head in denial. "How can I put this… they weren't wrong." Not going to lie, that hurts to hear.

"Alright, I get it. What did you see me do? Better yet, has anyone else come in mentioning me?"

A deep breath escaped her mouth as she motioned for me to pull up a chair. Damn, this should be good since I pulled up a chair for this. "You apparently came from the gym covered in purple spots running around the town aimlessly since Pryce issues challenges in his unique way. I was in the back room dealing with something else and then you came in looking to heal your Pokémon which was fine until you were in line for our famous candy. People said that you looked anxious once the machine had broken. After that you just stumbled out of town according to those two girls. I have to say I'm concerned nobody decided to help you." An uncomfortable pause filled the room as some bystanders heard bits of the story before staring at us while the door opened as more people came in. "So do you want me to schedule another match next week?"

"Tomorrow."

"Are you insane? After what you went through? Fact is that you're lucky to be healthy after spending a night in the forest with hypothermia even with a fire type to keep you warm." Nurse Joy is right but I refuse to wait that long for a rematch.

We were interrupted by loud clapping from behind. "Despite utter defeat you wish to challenge me again so quickly. Most trainers wait weeks to challenge me again or never come back at all. Definitely not an ordinary trainer for sure and for your tenacity, I accept your challenge."

I gave him the most determined look I could muster. "See you tomorrow morning."
Chapter 21- Ice In His Veins

Pryce left the center after he gave his team to Nurse Joy so that he could get a good night of sleep. It would be fair to say that Nurse Joy was concerned about me being gone for an extended period of time but she took it a step further and called me over before I went back to my room. "Are you really sure you can go back to the gym so soon?" she asked with a concerned look on her face. "Do you resent him that much?"

"Not necessarily resent, but I have never been embarrassed like that. Both in battle and wandering around town like a drunk looking for a place to sit and eat. Never in my life have I had to forfeit a match I thought I could win. You have no idea what it feels like to lose because you couldn't handle the environment while your Pokémon were doing just fine." I felt like rambling on but I opted to slam my fist on the table to express my frustration followed by putting my head down. Everyone turned in my direction to see what the fuss was about.

Nurse Joy gave them some kind of look and they all went back to what they were doing. Then she went back to me. "The road to the Elite Four is full of failures. It is better that you learn that here than at the Indigo Plateau. Some trainers find that out too late." I lifted my head back up to acknowledge her words; she continued onward. "Pryce is arguably the only leader that pushes his challengers to the breaking point. League officials understand his tactics and they set guidelines for his gym in order to have a safe battle."

That irritated me even more. "Safe?! What is possibly safe about that gym? The water on the field is just over the freezing point while the gym itself hovers around zero degrees Fahrenheit. Please… humor me on this one," I said with a sarcastic grin on my face.

She started to serve a trainer after noticing one at the counter behind me; the multitasking nurse responded. "His gym was illegal for the first month of operation due to his sub-zero temperatures in addition to a big fan to simulate an all-out blizzard. After numerous complaints from both winners and losers alike it was decided that he had to tone down the intensity. The league loved his concept but it's not good publicity to have any of their challengers dying in the gym. Pryce currently has his gym around freezing with a smaller breeze plus some warm air filtering in. After battles he has trainers leave the gym as soon as possible so they can get warmed up in the lobby."

I just stood there dumbfounded. "So when he told me to get out of the gym…"

"Yes. You should have waited for him. He comes off as having a stone heart but he does care about his challengers. I mean, his monotonous voice is a little like a father scolding his child. He actually panicked when he couldn't find you. Running round town, asking the police for information, even asking random people on the street if you were around… you're all set!" The trainer felt a little guilty that they interrupted our conversation but I showed I wasn't upset. "Where was I? Hmm… anyway, the main point is that Pryce knows what to do. He's seen a lot in his time on earth."

Now I feel like the bad guy in this situation. Still, that information about waiting in the lobby would have been a little more than helpful but whatever. It was still early evening but I was just too exhausted because of last night's shenanigans. I thanked Nurse Joy for the conversation and
scheduled my match for 10:30am then plopped myself onto the soft bed. I started to think of a new plan of attack for tomorrow. It wasn't normally my style but it gave me a legitimate chance to win. Just before sleep overtook me I thought about those two girls making fun of me since their battle is before mine in the morning. It soon dawned on me that those two are royally screwed.

Compared to my previous night of sleeping in a hollowed-out tree trunk with moderate hypothermia, sleeping in a bed was a godsend before my rematch. Nobody in town seemed to notice I was the cause of the disturbance last night (thank Arceus for that) on my way to the gym lobby. I had wanted an earlier time to face Pryce so I could get moving, but just waited patiently for the two girls to come out of the gym. As the time reached closer to 10:30 the doors had still not opened. Was there really a drawn-out battle going on in there?

Only after I started to pace around did Pryce enter the lobby via a side office. "Oh hello Mitch. Are you ready for the battle?"

"Yeah. Let me guess… the two girls couldn't handle the gym and left after 10 minutes and that's why you're hanging out here."

"You're wrong… it was after five minutes," he said with a smirk on his face.

I smiled back. "I guess I gave them too much credit." Any warm clothing was removed just like last time as per the rules. This time was going to be different with the new strategy I thought of last night. A new strategy that I don't fully believe in should probably not be used, yet I feel I have no other choice. Both of us took our spots in the gym after the referee gave us the same rules as last time. Ampharos and Seel were sent out again for a repeat of last time.

"Interesting strategy sending out your Ampharos first young man. Are you sure that you are prepared?"

"Without a doubt in my mind. Ampharos, use almost all of your electricity. Discharge!" Seel had already taken its place in the pool so the electrical attack was multiplied resulting in a one hit knockout. Pryce didn't look too worried despite the circumstances while casually tossing Dewgong's ball onto the icy surface; Piloswine would have been better to send out at this moment but oh well.

My brain flipped a switch after I saw Dewgong fully materialize onto the field and I put my strategy into action. "Ampharos return! You're up Espeon!" I absolutely hate switching out when I have a type advantage. Under these conditions I have to keep rotating my Pokémon so that they don't get too cold or get tossed into the near freezing water. No more pushing my luck for now; the first moment of trouble is the moment someone's out of there.

It had been only a day since the whole incident with Mitch running around town until he came up on the forest. Nobody really got a chance to outwardly thank him since he wanted us back in our balls. That being said, I know by now that everyone is willing to put in more effort into their battles to repay his kindness. It still begs the question: what would he be like if he acted like Sara? Despite her negatives, she still won countless battles and maybe even got to the Elite Four after I was kicked out into the wild. I know for a fact that he has the ability to turn into a monster; every human and Pokémon has that capability. Sara cracked under pressure but Mitch is doing a much better job that she ever was.

He did think of a new strategy before going to bed last night that involved a lot of switching. Whether he knows it or not he's always thinking about the worst possible outcome when we fight. I need to get stronger not just for fights, but to be able to talk to him telepathically. Maybe I can tell
him that it's okay to push us harder every once in a while and not every battle is going to end up with us severely hurt. Most natural psychic types can talk to their owner from the moment they are caught. Me? I was a normal type before and I only evolved in the heat of the battle against Clair. Had I known Sara better I would've stayed an Eevee so I'm pretty underdeveloped as a psychic type in general. Learning communication skills is going to take some serious time.

Dewgong was going to be a little trickier to take down with its ability to dive for cover. Both of us were on the icy floor twitching until the flags went up. "Espeon go for Swift then wait." What did he mean by that?

"Dive into the water then come up for Aurora Beam." Now Dewgong didn't dodge all of the stars but it still hid from the brunt of the move. Seconds felt like hours as it just sat underwater lying in wait. Mitch eventually reached for my ball; that's when it came up.

"Got you! Psybeam, let's go!" It came back up to fire the Aurora Beam but it wasn't fast enough for the rainbow-colored beam.

"Jump back in and use Rest."

"Oh no you don't! Use confusion then hit it with Psybeam!" I had to get used to all the rippling water, but I still dragged it out of hiding then fired at will. The Dewgong plopped to the ground once the mist settled. Tally up another one for us.

I turned to Mitch to see if he would call me back. He had a grin on his face. "I didn't want to disrupt your training session when you were trying it out. It's time for you to rest." Oh, he's good. A happy yelp was my way of acknowledging my hard work for now. The red beam took me back to my warm ball while the two of them stood there talking.

"Hmm… there seems to be more than switching in your strategy." The opponent said running a hand across his chin. "Only one other trainer has had the guts to try something new after the first battle. She went on to Blackthorn City but I do not know how she fared over there."

My master took the chance to respond. "Fair enough. Just so you know the battle's not over. I appreciate the praise but I won't let it get to me."

"Hahaha I guess I can't phase you like other trainers. Piloswine you're up!" The hybrid ground/ice type came out more riled up compared to last time. Knowing Mitch, he'll probably throw out Furret since she is the last one to go into battle.

So far so good with the fight with the cold creeping in much slower than last time. Even Pryce is being genuine in his compliments although I can understand that he wants to throw me off my game. Piloswine coming out ready to charge ahead is kind of intimidating but Furret can hold her own against it and the cold.

Pryce wasted no time setting up. "Mist." Shrouding the battlefield was something that I didn't like since the mist was thick and it wouldn't dissipate anytime soon. Furret was caught off-guard by the low visibility then the Fury Attack that followed after a few seconds of inactivity.

"Furret, go to the corner of the field!" A high-risk counter since she moved to the right corner. She could only be hit from the front or the left; getting hit from behind or the right meant Piloswine was out of bounds. As far as rules go you can dodge out of bounds but you cannot attack from out of bounds. On the flip side, Furret only has one true escape route by jumping over Piloswine; Pryce is smart enough to send it equidistant from both sides in front of her.
Again there was a moment of silence before his command from the other side of the field. "Icy Wind."

Exactly as I predicted. "Dig followed by Slam!" Her paws ripped through the icy ground to hide then she came up immediately and delivered a downward Slam square on its head. No doubt it felt that. "Follow up with Return!"

"Blizzard!" Wind howled on the field in addition to the massive snowfall. It wasn't looking good for her after she missed the Return attack and the Mist attack had its effect wear off with the addition of more cold into the atmosphere.

Normally I would gut it out but I refuse to make the mistake of overdoing it. "Furret come back." Red light from the ball took her back to safety. "Ampharos I need some support here!" I opted to throw her in the middle of the field instead of the corner for more range. My electric sheep looked confused as to why she had to come out against a ground type. "Cotton Spore." A proverbial light bulb went off in her head as she sent the speed lowering cotton balls towards the opposition.

Pryce became unsettled as he saw what was unfolding. "Mist!" It was too late for Mist to negate the effects of Cotton Spore so he altered his attack. "Change to Icy Wind." A direct hit landed on Ampharos which meant a substitution for me.

"Furret, time to finish it off! Use Return." As soon as Furret was done materializing she rammed straight into Piloswine for massive damage.

"You got too close boy. Counter with Fury Attack!" Good idea by Pryce until you factor in Cotton Spore lowering the speed of those tusks. Furret easily dodged the counterattack then used Slam to push it near the pool in the middle of the field.

"Knockout blow Furret! Use Return!"

"Grab it with your tusks!" Both Pokémon got their way but Piloswine was hit into the pool before Furret was tossed aside like a rag doll. It thrashed about in the pool for about three seconds before a red beam hit it and it disappeared.

The referee raised my flag. "Pryce has forfeited the round. That was his last Pokémon. Therefore, the winner is the challenger Mitch from Violet City."

"Go to the lobby this time and we shall talk there," Pryce said with a tired look on his face. I quickly recalled Furret followed by sprinting to the lobby where it was toasty. Pryce followed suit shortly after retrieving the Glacier Badge along with the prize money. "This badge proves you are capable of moving onto Blackthorn City for the final badge."

"Thank you very much. Why did you recall Piloswine though? It could've easily gotten out of the pool with all of its strength plus fight me down to the wire. I was honestly surprised you didn't try to freeze the pool on the first move like last time."

He took a minute to respond. "Not every battle is the same. You are the only sensible trainer that I can remember walking through those doors in a long time. Nobody had given up when they were so close to victory. In fact, nobody had given up at all in my gym. However, I can assure you that every trainer had a serious moment of reflection in victory or defeat. I too had a moment in that battle where my future relationship with my Pokémon was more important than trying to win. You taught me something I almost forgot about: knowing when to concede."

No denying that he had a sharp mind at his age. "That's the beauty of battling I guess."
"My gym also is supposed to prepare you for Ice Path. A dangerous path with temperatures much colder than my gym lies to the east of town; it's the only way to get to Blackthorn without spending some money. Making through the battle in minimal clothing is a sign you can make it through there with few problems. Now go get stocked up on supplies before you head out."

With that conversation in my head I headed to the center to heal everyone in addition to buying some general supplies. A bit of nervousness sank into my mind after I processed his warning about Ice Path. Nurse Joy congratulated me on my win after she was done tending to my Pokémon. All was calm until the two girls strolled in looking to do the same thing. "Oh looky here. How'd you handle your battle today drunkie?"

A sigh escaped my breath as I took out the badge and slammed in down in front of them. "Pretty fucking good. Plus I at least lasted longer than five minutes in the gym." They went from laughing to fuming in an instant. "Looks like the drunkie has one badge to go before he can go to the Indigo Plateau. Can't say that much about the two spoiled assholes in front of me." By this point the entire Pokémon Center was laughing at my brutally honest response. One of them went to open their mouth and just walked out the front door while the other went to chase after her.

I made my way over to a corner to double check the amount of provisions. Numbers seemed to be okay so why was I nervous? All six of my Pokémon are in fighting shape and I have adequate funds if I'm in a pinch. Maybe this is just the feeling of being so close to the top? Regardless of what it is, I have to be ready. I didn't get seven badges by pure luck alone and there is no way on Arceus' green earth that I will go down easy.

The road ahead is full of obstacles. Ampharos, Gyarados, Growlithe, Furret, Umbreon, and Espeon will help me make the path as clear as possible. As they do that, I will make sure to not let them down. We can only hope.
Chapter 22-Frostbitten

The last few days have been all about meditation and relaxation for me. Mitch hasn't called me into battle at all but I know that he wants to give everyone their fair shot at battling. I'm not going to sugar coat it: I wanted to battle against another gym leader. That loss against Steelix was embarrassing when compared to how much hard work I've put in over the course of my life. Still, it was pretty disheartening to see Mitch unconscious in that tree the day we all saw that defeat. I felt even worse for Ruby considering she was going to win without a doubt until Mitch went into panic mode. Sometimes when I look at Mitch I see Tom's face or I hear his voice at random. Believe me when I say that I miss Tom, but being with Mitch eases the pain more than anything in the world.

Something about an Ice Path was mentioned in conversation after the battle so I just sat in my ball continuing to clear my mind when I was called out. I took the liberty to stretch and make sure I was well petted for being cooped up for so long.

"Hey boy!" Mitch said as if he were talking to a kit. "I need you today. You up for a challenge?" My ears perk ed up after hearing the one word that intrigues me. "We're going through the Ice Path and I need you to battle any wild Pokémon that come our way. I know how much you like to battle and you can get some exercise." I happily nodded my head; not a bad way to get rid of the cabin fever. We walked to the east end of town raring to go until an old man approached us from behind.

"So you decided to take the short yet cold way to Blackthorn after all," the man said while a Swinub followed behind him.

Mitch seemed to know this man very well. "That's the case. I have Umbreon here to guide me through here."

"Well I thought I would offer you some advice before you go through it. Swinub and Golbat usually are the two Pokémon that you'll most likely encounter. They usually travel in groups. Jynx do not try to engage in battle nor are seen that often but stories have been told where trainers would encounter them, only to have dire results. Blackthorn citizens have seen trainers encased in ice left on the edge of the path while some trainers come out of there hysterical. Some trainers have never even come out of there. Heed my warning on this. It's times like this where I'm glad I'm a dark type. Jynx's ice attacks could still bother me since we would be on their turf.

"I'll watch out for them. Also, I have a Growlithe with me."

"Your Umbreon should be fine. The cold isn't that bad for a Pokémon with some fur on it, although keep an eye on it. Having five moves will also be beneficial if you get into trouble."

A quizzical tone came out of my master's mouth. "How do you know that it's the same Umbreon from before?"
"Because Swinub here is hiding in fear and shivering. Pokémon can sense when something is wrong in other Pokémon although they hide in when in battle because they do not want to show fear or some don't care to make a big deal out of it. Most trainers don't have the patience to train an Eevee to evolve by happiness either. Although… a girl did come by about a month ago mentioning something about getting a Vaporeon after she defeated me. Regardless, you have to be careful when you use it in any trainer battle. I don't think I need to explain why."

I just fell to the ground at the sheer thought of being taken away for a second time; Mitch helped me back up before responding. "Alright it's true. But he chose to come with me so now what? Do I just abandon him? If you were there that night we met then maybe you would…"

"Calm down. All I said was to use him carefully in battle. By the way, I saw a large scar on your Espeon's stomach when we were fighting. May I ask where it came from? Your other four Pokémon would appear to be normal."

That was the last straw. He may be a gym leader but he wasn't there the night Ruby almost was poisoned to death after being tortured for hours on end. He wasn't there when Mitch carried us back to his tent in the pouring rain. He certainly as hell wasn't there when I returned to visit Tom for the first time and saw how everyone rallied around me. I took an offensive stance until Mitch stepped in front of me with a stern look on his face.

"I honestly cannot tell you what happened before I met her. All I know is that I took them in and we're going to fight like hell to get to the Indigo Plateau". He looked at his badge case. "To get in the Silver Conference." The old man relaxed his face.

"Sorry about that personal question. Umbreon seems to really care about Espeon based on its reaction. Ever since that day I talked to Lance, I realized how much was going on right under my nose. Just promise me that you'll continue to make good decisions along the way."

Both of them shared a bow before we continued east towards Ice Path. It was a pretty modest day outside with the clouds occasionally covering the sun. Our path was empty on the way to the entrance; not even a single Pokémon cry was heard. After the first step in I realized why Mitch was wearing such heavy cloths; it had to be below zero in here. Only eight steps through the cave and we already met a group of three Swinub. Obviously seeing newcomers intimidated them but it wasn't in our best interest to take three Powder Snow attacks.

"Quick Attack!" I hit all three of them in a flash which sent them scurrying. "Good job Umbreon. I know you have stronger moves, but the faster we get out of here the better. I'm trying not to damage anything too bad in here or train. Golbats are probably going to be a little harder to beat though." A scratch under the chin was my reward. I wish he'd do that more often.

Hours seemed to pass by as we continued to travel deeper into Ice Path when in reality it was only minutes. So far there hasn't been anything other than Swinub packs roaming around the snowy surface. That changed once we arrived to a whole floor covered in solid ice with only a few stones to grab for balance. If it weren't for the freezing temperatures and wild Pokémon, it would be a great carnival attraction.

Mitch took a long look in front of him. "Alright Umbreon I hope you can walk on ice." I'd like to think I can maneuver on ice but not so much after I laid a paw down carefully. I progressed slowly before looking back at him to see what was taking him so long; he was thinking out loud. "Wonder if Jasmine had a spare pair of ice skates? Still, this jacket is a godsend." He finally noticed me out on the icy floor so he decided to stop talking. As soon as he stepped on the ice he ate shit… hard. There was no more appropriate reaction than laughing as hard as I possibly could.
"Alright alright, I blew it. Now let's just cross this damn field of ice. Almost shattered my elbow," he said while slowly getting back to his feet. It didn't get much better on the way to one of the balancing stones with both of us flailing every three to four steps in the hopes of staying upright. Roughly one-third of the way across, some Golbats swooped down looking for a meal. "Dark Pulse!" That was more like it. All of them took a hit but some decided to come back for round two. "Keep it up Umbreon. Dark Pulse!" A flurry of Golbats rained down readying Leech Life only to be blown back into the dense cave wall.

We made it about 75% of the way over, only to be distracted by a Jynx moving her hips as if she was dancing. For some reason, Mitch suddenly started to dance as if he were in a trance. Pawing at him didn't make him snap out of it. Whatever was working on Mitch definitely wasn't working on me so I opted to play along. Soon he started to follow it across the rest of the ice. Now on solid ground, we entered another part of the cave with a light filtering out of a wall on the other side. However, we were led off to the right.

I thought about attacking it until I saw her fist covered in ice and her head turn around for a quick glance at me. She still looked like she had her doubts if I was actually hypnotized. Had I not pretended to dance, she probably would've killed him on the spot. It wasn't much longer before we finally were in a makeshift den. Four more Jynx came out to look at us and Mitch finally stopped dancing; he remained in some kind of trance. General observations showed that the huge den was filled with a whole horde of items on one end while the other end had two bodies encased in ice. Poor souls looked terrified in their ice prisons.

They were talking about stealing his things before freezing him since he was easily enticed by the dancing. To make sure that we were not able to fight back, they went back to their dancing. Mitch went back to dancing while I followed suit. All five of them came right up on us to take our gear. I let loose a Toxic attack from my fur as discreetly as possible so all five of them would gradually get weaker. Our items were casually tossed onto the base of the pile and then they came back to finish the job with ice covered fists.

Dumbasses. Wild Pokémon are always idiots thinking whatever they do will work 100 percent of the time. The reason I ruled so long was because I could adapt faster than others around me. By the time they figured me out, I already had something different planned. I'm a dark type; psychic tricks don't work on me. Compared to the Arboks in the forest that night, these five were as slow as rocks. Time for a little freestyle battling.

My preferred move choice was Dark Pulse since there were five targets. The moment they took a step towards us was the moment I fired at will. The den became complete chaos with items flying everywhere and Ice Punch being used all at the same time. I dodged most of them except one that hit me in the side. Cold air rushed to my lungs, making breathing painful. Another round of Dark Pulse was fired to weaken them more and with Toxic accumulating damage over time, this wasn't going to last much longer.

The whole group came at me again, only to stop and gasp for air when Toxic finally was starting to severely affect their movements. Most Pokémon who use Toxic probably see this and think they won the battle. Fair to say that they would turn around and look to be praised when in reality they are about to get nailed. Not me. I know how much Pinsir injured me after I outright covered him in the purple liquid. Just like I thought, they got up again after adjusting their bodies. Doubleslap was the new attack since Ice Punch took too much energy to use. It was much weaker which meant I could just sit there and take 25 slaps on my body without feeling too much pain.

Yet again they dropped to the ground with labored breathing. Now was the time for truly no holds barred battling. I rushed in and used Bite to knock out one Jynx then I proceeded to shake it until I
heard a quiet yet distinct snapping sound. Others looked on in horror as I repeated the process on every single Jynx until they all lay motionless.

The sheer amount of times I've been in fights that involved me only knocking an opponent out has been too much, especially in the forest. Ruby knows I'm already a cold-blooded killer on two separate occasions but what about Mitch? What about the rest of the team? Would they be upset with me? I don't want to kill but when lives that I care about are on the line, all bets are off.

Killing the Jynx or crying out didn't seem to get him out of his trance. Nibbling at his leg wasn't working either. Attacking him might work? Yea Quick Attack might do it. Onnne. Twooooo. Three! I hit him square in the stomach then licked his face.

"What the hell happened Umbreon? One minute we're sliding across the floor then we're here the next. Better yet, where's my jacket? I'm about to freeze to death. I'm getting sick of this cold." Black and blue marks covered his exposed arms. It was almost as bad as when we were in that tree. He looked at the five dead Jynx that lured him in here then went wide-eyed when he looked at the two trainers frozen alive. "Oh shit.. so this is what Pryce meant," he said in a low voice. "Growlithe, I need a favor." Growlithe came out looking around at the winter wonderland. "Thaw those two out and stay by my side. We're getting out of here."

Silence followed as Mitch checked their pulses hoping they would be alive; he shook his head slowly before closing their eyes. He gathered his items and took one trainer on each shoulder. "Umbreon, make some markers on the way out. I feel like that I have some explaining to do when we get into town."

We walked in silence with the occasional Golbat trying to attack. Luckily for us, the Swinubs ran at first sight seeing a fire type in front of them. The exit was not too far away from the den but due to the hole in the wall blending in with the surroundings, there was no reasonable way to see the den entrance unless you were right up next to it.

Warmth felt so good as we made it into town with the long shadows being cast on the ground. Now it had been hours since we entered into that freezing hellhole. Many of the townspeople were apparently inside because we strolled through town with no questions asked as to why my master was carrying two dead bodies on his shoulder. The Pokémon Center was also very empty with the exception of the nurse on duty.

"Welcome to the Po... oh my Arceus!" Aaaaaand now someone knows.

"It's a really long story, but can you see what you can do for these two? I just came out of Ice Path."

She clearly was traumatized. "I-I'll s-s-see w-w-what I c-c-can d-d-do." My guess is that she's going to need more nurses. She took a deep breath to compose herself. "You can have a room here tonight since we're empty. Tomorrow is the start of the Dragon Festival so it will be more crowded."

"Thank you very much. My Pokémon don't need to be healed right away. Have a good night."

Darkness finally covered the sky shortly after Mitch's shower. I felt the moon's rays illuminate my rings to help heal off some of the damage from that lopsided battle. He called me back with the intention of going to sleep right away. The ball was much cozier after being outside all day long. I could see Mitch in a deep sleep and the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to go to sleep. At least we made it into another town with a gym leader. Now for some peace and quiet.

*knock knock knock*
Chapter 23- A Proposition

Blackthorn City was a sight to behold after taking the whole afternoon navigating Ice Path. The majority of the trip was one giant blur because of that group of Jynx. All I know is that Umbreon defeated… well, killed… them all and that the two trainers we carried back weren't so lucky. One of them was a girl about my age who had two Pokémon on her after she was thawed out while the other was a man who was about five years older than me but still in his 20s; he had one Pokémon on him. I dare not touch their Poké Balls after checking their pulse only to find no signs of life. How would I explain that their masters were dead? Would my Pokémon be able to calm them down or would we have to battle?

Walking around with their bodies on my shoulder was uncomfortable to say the least. It's not even that I strolled through town with them; it's that I did so with nobody around. My one saving grace was that Nurse Joy told me that everyone was inside their houses getting ready for some Dragon Festival. I'll probably check it out after I shower and rest.

*knock knock knock* What the actual fu… fine.

"Hold on. I have to wake up first." It wasn't too late outside but it had been awhile since I went to sleep so early and could afford to sleep as long as I wanted. I prayed to Arceus as I turned the knob.

"We're with the Johto Police Department. You have some explaining to do." Guess I didn't pray hard enough. I opened the door to the sight of two officers about six inches taller than me staring into the room expecting to find damning evidence. "The nurse on duty is still working on the two bodies you brought in. You have five minutes to get dressed and come to the lobby otherwise we'll make you come out."

"Will do." I grabbed my heavy jacket in addition to my Pokémon since I have a feeling I'm going back to Ice Path. The lobby had become much more crowded since I brought in the two bodies. Outside was even more crowded with some locals along with caution tape. If anything, this was a sign that I'm not destined to be in Blackthorn right now.

"Alright, we just want you to take us back to where you saw those two trainers. Don't think about running away. Once we get into the cave then call out that Umbreon of yours since it was with you. Don't even think about trying anything funny either." Two Arcanine were sent out as our bodyguards. I took them back the way I came into the opening of the cave. Umbreon was called out to help me get back to the spot. Unfortunately, he couldn't pick up on the scent of even one Jynx but I was smart to have him leave marks leading to the hidden area.

Each Jynx still lay motionless as Umbreon left them. Both officers had their Pokémon sniff around for anything suspicious in the large pile of items until nothing set them off. Umbreon had been on high alert for the entire trip probably because there were potential threats around him. Another person came into the secluded cavern wearing a blue shirt and a black cape which had him giving off a low growl that started to crescendo.
"What reason do you have for calling me out here before I went to sleep? I get that our two ceremonial bearers were found but unless that item is found, we're going to have some problems. I really hate this place enough as it is. Also, could you call back that Umbreon?" she moaned.

"Come on Clair, the item has to be here. They had it on them!" one of the officers said as if that was going to make the situation any better.

She took about one minute to rummage through the massive item pile to pull out a pendant. "Looks like your Arcanines couldn't find the ceremonial pendant but I did it in such a short time. Why bother taking it slow? Ransack the pile! We all know what it looks like." Both officers looked dejected. "Just go back to the city. I'll deal with this trainer myself." They briskly walked out of the cave while we waited until they were out of sight. Dammit I just want some sleep.

"So can you tell me what that was about? I just got through here a few hours ago and I really didn't want to come back," I said with a tired look on my face.

"It's ironic, isn't it? Blackthorn has been a city filled with dragon Pokémon trainers since the beginning of time yet we live right next to a cave full of Pokémon that can potentially defeat them without human intervention. Blackthorn records show that dragons could not be defeated in nature except by ice types or other dragons." I just gave her a confused look. "Anyway, I want to thank you for finding those two despite their circumstances. They were our two bravest people in the city to venture through here to get that pendant."

"Then why didn't you go get it?" Not the best way to make friends and I'm tired as hell.

Clair actually took it nicely for some odd reason. "The Silver Conference is coming up soon and everyone is trying to get a badge. In years past I made the trip myself but those two said that they would make the trip so I wouldn't get in trouble for skipping out on gym battles." She then turned to me. "I was feeling generous just now but don't you dare talk to me like that again."

We finally made it back into town as the last house light turned off. She escorted me back to the Pokémon Center with the tape now removed as well as the other police officers. Nurse Joy was back at the desk with no signs that there was ever a body there. Clair shooed me back to bed which I appreciated along with the rest of my team, even though I didn't have to use anyone in a battle.

Morning came too soon as the sunlight shone brightly through the one window in the room. Nothing changed in terms of my morning routine until I heard another knock on the door. I walked over to open it only to see a package on the ground with a note. A black robe with colorful depictions of dragon Pokémon all looking at some jewel looked to be very important. I kept it close to me as I exited the center to go look around the city. I didn't make it far before a note dropped from the robe.

Dear Mitch, there needs to be more of a discussion following what happened yesterday. Come to the gym so we can have a talk. Wear this robe just before you enter the gym and none of my gym workers will give you any problems. Do not parade it around town. You have until noon today to get here, otherwise there will be consequences. –Clair.

Boy, the pressure of being a gym leader seems like too much for her since she's getting pissed off all the time. Although to be fair, I did most of this to myself. All I want is a gym battle since this would be my last one before the tournament.

Townspeople lined the streets selling a lot of dragon merchandise from stands as well as some good food. They all seemed to be wearing some robe with a dragon on it in honor of the festival. On the other hand, tourists were much easier to identify simply because they had regular cloths.
The gym was hidden in the far north of the city with a body of water behind it. Nobody stood outside so I put on the robe Clair gave me before I went on. Statues of dragons lined the walkway into the gym, but some I had never heard of before. One was a pure white one with a tail that seemed to be on fire while there was a black one whose tail looked like it was made of pure lightning on the opposite side. Both of them loomed large in comparison to a Dragonite statue. The sliding door opened as I approached and an attendant made his way out. He was about to scold me until he took a closer look at my robe then ushered me in.

"Right this way. Clair is in the back tending to the Dratini. Please be considerate when approaching them."

I get that Dratini are rare or vulnerable but I'm starting to sense an elitist attitude around here; I hate elitists or anyone who looks down on others regardless of their status in society. Battling is the great equalizer and I let that do the talking for me. Other trainers in the gym watched me very carefully on my way through the gym and into an opening behind the battlefield. My guess was that the robe was the only thing preventing them from completely teeing off on me since they had their hands by their Poké Balls.

A dark path illuminated by only candlelight led me to a large cave with grass and another building on an island. Clair was still kneeling by the lake tending to the little Dratini with a Gyarados lurking in the distance. Once it saw me, it made sure Clair knew I was here. Dragon Rage was charging until she gave the signal to stand down. She still looked stern since the last time we met.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. There are a few details that I want to know but didn't ask about last night. Let's start with why you were going through there. You could have spent some money to get here and avoid that place. Maybe get a local guide by the Lake of Rage?"

"Money has caused me problems since the day I was born regardless of if I have it or not. All my Pokémon have very nice items on standby, but I got them at a discounted price or free after my trip to Olivine. Had they been full price, then I wouldn't have bought them. Buying Luxury Balls was even a pain in the ass when I only had four badges because the mart workers didn't think I was rich enough. No average trainer would pay 1,000P for an imported ball and some would be hesitant to buy Ultra Balls. I can live off snacks instead of meals so that's where the money comes from." I'd rather not explain my home situation.

Clair indicated my answer was acceptable. "Now do you remember what happened in Ice Path?"

"All I remember was that Umbreon and I almost made it out when we were suddenly fact to face with a Jynx. Pryce warned me about them but something about their movements just made my mind go blank. Since Umbreon is a dark type he probably wasn't affected and just went to town. I wonder if he had to kill them though. Beating them might have been enough."

She was deep in thought. "As much as it pains me to say this, I'm glad you did. Pryce and I have talked about the Jynx and how they kidnap trainers but nobody could find their hiding spot. You were the main suspect in the death of those two until you led us there in such a short time. All of the items that were stashed away will be given to their original owners in due time."

"Glad we could clear that up." I wasn't really sure if I should leave, but this robe intrigues me. "Why did you give me this robe? What does it mean?"

A proverbial light bulb turned on in Clair's head. "Oh, that. That is the robe of the ceremonial pendant bearer. The jewelry used to be worn by a dragon master in ancient times with the idea that
it can control any dragon Pokémon in the world. Centuries passed until the first Poké Balls were invented and the pendant was not needed anymore. However, it still has the power to control wild dragons if they were to walk up to the holder. We see it as an important piece of Blackthorn history which is why Team Rocket took it awhile back. It ended up in Mahogany Town and was on its way back here." Then she ran her hands through her hair in frustration. "I failed those two who risked their lives to get it back. Nobody here has the Pokémon to safely make it through Ice Path twice or the time to take the long way around but they insisted on bringing it back. The least I could do for them was to give them the third highest honor in the city only behind myself and the master of ceremonies."

I could only sit there, take in the information she gave me, and digest it as best I could. "But why would you give an important position to an outsider that's unaware of your traditions? Surely someone in the city would like to have that, right?"

"The way I see it, I owe you for your help… even if you did it on accident. I could give you a gym battle too. Just know that I won't go easy on you. Now you can go back into town but be back here by 5:30 since the ceremony starts at 6:00 sharp; I'll give you the details then."

Just like that, I made my way back into the gym with my head down trying to ignore the glares directed at me. Now I have to take part in this serious ritual that I may or may not mess up. It was still afternoon when I made my way back into the heart of the city so I looked around the various stands. Nothing really looked interesting to buy which disappointed me; Olivine's market was much better plus it had friendlier people. Finally, it was time to make my way back to the gym. One gym trainer stood on the outside with a look of displeasure on his face.

"I've been a part of this gym since I was eight. No way am I going to let some scrub from the outside mock our tradition. Show me you deserve this. Dratini!" What an idiot. I'd hate to imagine if I refused a request by the gym leader of the city but the elitist attitude needs to be beaten out of him.

"Listen to me. You really shouldn't battle me out of spite. I'm not some scrub; I have seven badges to my name." He still didn't show signs of backing down. "Alright, it's time to teach you a lesson. Growlithe, let's go!" I know that I won't be using Growlithe against Clair. If I lose this battle he can have the ceremonial robe but if I win, then I can prove that dragon types are only as good as their trainers.

"Slam!" Arceus, what a moron.

"Flamethrower." The result was fairly obvious: Dratini fainted after one hit. He ran up to his fallen partner with a shocked look on his face. "Pretty irresponsible for you not to take a warning from another trainer. Sure, it may have been a bluff but I had no reason to lie about my strength. Unfortunately you did."

That stirred him up pretty good. "Shut up! You're no better than that bitch who screamed in the gym for hours on end after Clair beat her. The staff left before she got really riled up. She eventually won after four tries but people like her don't deserve to get far in the Silver Conference. I think Clair could win it if she really wanted to! Just know that even though you won, I still can't respect you for what you're about to do tonight."

He retreated into the gym to heal his partner. Maybe if he actually asked Clair to this ceremony then she would consider him. Regardless, Clair was inside preparing for the ceremony when I made my way in.

"Good, you're here." She gave the pendant to me on a royal blue pillow. "All you have to do is
follow me and listen for the master of ceremonies to mention your role. Other than that, just relax.” From the gym we all marched through the city as the people lined the streets and bowed with respect. All of the townspeople followed us shortly after to the town square where a large Dragonite statue overlooked the whole city.

Our master of ceremonies was the first to speak after a long silence. "Citizens of Blackthorn City, we gather here today for the beginning of the Dragon Festival. We honor all of those we lost in this past year in addition to all of our beloved Pokémon with a moment of silence." Between the citizens and outsiders, no one spoke for about a minute. "Thank you. Around this time each year, we see more dragon types near Dragon's Den. It is a splendid time for all here in the city and so we honor our ancestors who connected with dragon type Pokémon by offering this pendant. Would the bearer please place the pillow at the foot of the statue?" I approached the huge statue then placed the pillow on the ground as carefully as possible. "And now we battle to represent the immortal fighting spirit in dragon Pokémon. All battlers may line up across from each other. We will call you two at a time before you start battling. Everyone else may be seated."

For the rest of the night the trainers battled in front of the whole city. I took advantage of the situation to get some basic information on dragon types. I learned that unless it's a fully evolved Pokémon, dragons are not really that strong. However, it would be foolish to assume Clair is weak just because she doesn't have a Dragonite. That Gyarados looked like it was more of a monster than my own.

Status condition moves were very common in not fully evolved dragons which meant I had to prepare for a drawn-out battle compared to pure power. The eventual winner was an elderly woman and her Dragonair named Linda. She had long dreamed of winning the competition so that she could be given permission to enter Dragon's Den on her own time. Clair told me that only a select few may enter the domain at will, let alone at all.

Once the festivities were all over, it was well past midnight. Clair asked for her robe back before I went to the Pokémon Center to rest up for the night. Despite mentioning being busy all the time, I was her only challenger tomorrow. I mentioned that I wanted to arrive around 11:30 so I could sleep in. My head hit the pillow knowing getting this last badge was going to be one hell of an experience.
Chapter 24-Ruby's Return to Blackthorn

The Pokémon Center wasn't exactly quiet when I went to sleep. People in the hallway kept extending a conversation about Linda and how she deserved to win the tournament. Clearly she was a good person in the city if the group could only say nice things about her. Seriously, when was the last time you didn't hear a jab at someone? I do remember her Dragonair being very agile which made me think about Clair's team. Gyarados is only one Pokémon that I know of. Oh well, guess I have to wait it out until I'm actually there. Morning sunlight came in through the window so I went through my morning routine of showering, eating, and mentally preparing.

It was a difficult decision to set my best lineup. It really is a bitch to deal with dragon types because they only have two weaknesses; I have neither a dragon nor an ice type. Rumors of Clair having a six on six battle as the strongest gym leader were too strong to be ignored but I know that Growlithe would be hard to use in this fight. I just kept my head down on my way to the gym until a soft voice came from my left side.

"Nervous young one?" It was Linda.

"A little. This is my last badge before I can go to the Indigo Plateau. Of course it would be against one of the strongest types."

She gave me a warm smile. "You'll be fine. Dragons may be hard to defeat but remember that every Pokémon can be defeated through willpower. I think you'll do fine just like the ceremony." Linda wandered off after she wished me luck in battle.

Her words were inspiring, yet they were pretty corny as well. I get the whole motivation spiel but willpower can only get you so far. Hold on… Umbreon and Espeon looked awful the night we met, just inches from death. They were in no condition to fight and they were out of breath but they escaped whatever hurt them. Their will to fight has been on display so many times now that I think about it. Maybe that old phrase holds some weight.

Blackthorn's gym was still the same as I had remembered through my time in passing. A large gate blocked my way to the Dragon's Den but other than that, the moat in the middle of the battlefield was still there. Clair appeared from behind the gate to get ready for battle along with our judge. Since I was the only trainer on the schedule today, she has had time to think about my Umbreon just as much as I have thought about her Gyarados.

"Well I see you actually showed up," she said in a playfully aggressive tone.

I flashed a grin. "I sure as shit hope I showed up. The Silver Conference is coming up soon and you're the last gym leader I need to beat."

"Fair enough. It will be a four on four battle with you being able to substitute. Choose your Pokémon now then take your place."

Dammit. I have to make a tougher decision by leaving one of my teammates out of this crucial fight. Umbreon and Ampharos will definitely battle since Umbreon is nearly on par with Gyarados in terms of overall strength with Gyarados being hyper offensive and Umbreon being hyper
defensive. Ampharos against her dragons may get me one round if I can paralyze Clair's Pokémon. Gyarados in the lineup as well but I still really don't want to use him unless I'm really in a pinch. Also, he may like going 110% all the time but that will catch up to him at some point in time. So now I'm down to Espeon or Furret for the last one. Furret would have a hard time with that moat whereas Espeon's ranged attacks could still hit hard; Espeon it is.

I handed over Growlithe and Furret to the judge as per the rules before I took my place in the trainer's box. Our judge went over the rules again and Clair sent out Dragonair as her first choice. Linda's Dragonair breezed through the tournament so I wonder how skilled this one is. Either way, it still proves for a tough opponent. Umbreon has been dying to battle stronger opponents so I'll go with him. After I called him out, my Pokedex was making a subtle beeping noise. It told me that it had learned yet another move: Moonlight. Shit. Now it's really going to take some serious effort to stick with four moves in battles.

"Go for Dark Pulse!"

"Into the moat Dragonair!" Umbreon had seemingly predicted that dodging attempt so it aimed for the water to get some small damage on it before it went completely under. That moat is going to be a huge problem unless... "Use Surf!"

The boosted water attack came crashing on my entire side of the field and with nowhere to dodge, Umbreon took a decent hit.

"Shake it off and use Dark Pulse again." Now Dragonair went onto the hard battlefield surface to dodge it again; got 'em. "Faint Attack!" Umbreon flashed a smile as he ran full speed ahead into the elegant dragon type. Definitely a critical hit considering how long it took Dragonair to get up again.

Clair was starting to get tense. "Thunder Wave!" Shit! That Surf still left a decent amount of water on the field to conduct the electricity.

"Jump up then Quick Attack!" My only defensive maneuver was to get behind the attack. Luckily for me, Umbreon has enough power to jump to the other side. "Dark Pulse!"

"Dragonbreath!" Both attacks met at midfield only to be turned to smoke. We sat in silence waiting for the smoke to clear but Clair must have seen a gap before I did. "Dragonbreath again." Umbreon had grunted in pain after hearing the move connect. "Follow up with Surf." A large wave came down on Umbreon again while also making the other side of the field wet. Now the smoke had disappeared completely; Umbreon still looked it fighting shape.

"Umbreon, use Bi..." No. I can't do that. That would screw up my entire strategy, but I have to hold on just a little bit longer.

"Nowhere to run now Mitch. Dragonair, Thunder Wave!"

"You're wrong Clair; there is a place to run. Faint Attack straight ahead with Quick Attack for extra power!" It was pretty gutsy charging into the air over the water, but I really can't afford to get Umbreon paralyzed.

A loud noise echoed throughout the gym followed up by a large splash. I think I won until that dragon slithered back onto the land potion of the battlefield with Umbreon holding on. "Dragonbreath. Get it off of you!" The move missed as Umbreon let go on his own.

"Dark Pulse!"
"Into the water!"

I made sure that it stayed submerged for a little bit; checkmate. "Use Toxic." Blotches of purple liquid were sent into the moat which turned the water into swamp water. In a matter of seconds, a fainted Dragonair floated to the surface.

"Dragonair is unable to battle. This round goes to Umbreon!" Score two victories for me. One for the actual win plus one for making that moat useless.

Clair shot me a very dirty look. "How dare you come into my gym and poison these sacred waters. No trainer has done something so dishonorable is my time as leader. Unfortunately, I have to let it go since this is an official gym battle. However, you will still pay for that. Gyarados, get out here!"

Well now, looks like I got inside her head. That alone should get me the win but it's 4-3 in favor of me with a lot of battling left. In my heart of hearts Umbreon could win, but it's much easier to throw out Ampharos. She looked at the poisoned water and went to poke it until the stench pulled her away. I swear she's a handful sometimes. Judge's orders were to start the battle once Ampharos went back to her side.

Clair wasted no time going for a knockout blow. "Hydro Pump!" A huge blast of water came out of its mouth heading straight for the moat. She has a sharp mind trying to dilute the water to the point where the toxins won't hurt anyone who goes in the moat. "Add more force Gyarados!" Now this wasn't about diluting it anymore; this was clearing the moat entirely and putting in her own water. Also, that toxic water was flying all over the battlefield, landing on both Pokémon. Once it was all said and done, both of them looked poisoned. Touché.

I don't have time or guts to see how this round will turn out if I don't end it now. "Use Discharge!" The result was fairly obvious with Gyarados falling to the ground after the one hit.

"Gyarados is unable to battle. The round goes to Ampharos!" If I didn't have Ampharos, I probably would have had to throw out my own. Even then I'm hoping for a draw at best. Right now I'm in a prime position up 4-2 with a chance to sweep the hardest gym leader in the region.

She just stared down at her Gyarados' ball. "Why do I do this to you? Every single time, someone just has to bring an electric type. Don't worry, we're far from done," she mumbled. Piercing eyes met mine along with a scowl. "Time to get serious. Dragonair, you're up!" Oh for Arceus' sake another one? This one may have some different moves compared to the other one. I mean, why would you have two of the exact same Pokémon? Regardless of what moves it has, I know that Espeon might be able to control it better with her psychic abilities.

"Ampharos return! Alright Espeon, showtime!"

Amazing isn't it? I somehow ended up at the very place where my life officially became a living hell. It really didn't register in my mind that I was really here since I just shrugged it off as a coincidence. Cold air from the Ice Path still got into my ball but I didn't think about what would happen after we got out of that place. When Mitch walked back to the Dragon's Den for the first time, I saw the battlefield and prayed that we wouldn't be standing near it. Luckily for me that didn't happen the first time. Over the course of the night I realized that we'd be going back for that last badge. Mental toughness is something I have for sure, I just wonder about the power to win. The only reason I lasted so long was because of adrenaline rushes in the last battle plus the thought of making Sara happy.

"Alright Espeon, showtime!" Why!? Why did he decide to use me? Am I really that strong? Do I
stand a chance? Most importantly, what happens if I lose?

Clair was still the same as she was when I last saw her except for the Dragonair in front of her this time. Before the judge started the battle, Clair stared at me then spoke. "A trainer a little younger than you came in here about a month or two ago. She had an Eevee that evolved mid-battle into an Espeon. That still wasn't good enough to defeat me though because she was naïve to think that deflecting attacks would get her the badge. However, I don't remember a scar on her Espeon. You have some explaining to do after this battle."

Mitch took offense to that last sentence. "Shut up and let's get this over with."

"I told you not to talk to me like that again. Slam attack Dragonair."

"Swift!" Dragonair came in for a hard swipe but I set it off course with sharp stars. Unfortunately I still took some damage on the back end of the swipe. "Confusion!" I opted to fire a beam of energy at it for some moderate damage.

"Dragonbreath!"

"Psybeam!" We were evenly matched as the smoke started to cover the battlefield. Mitch probably saw the same opening in the smoke and he took the chance to strike. "Psybeam!" Rainbow like beams were sent toward the blue dragon and neither of them saw it coming.

"Ice Beam!" An icy cold burst of energy hit me dead center; at least I didn't get frozen this time. Mitch wasn't as concerned compared to Pryce's battle. "Another Ice Beam."

"Counter with Quick Attack!" Faster than the Ice Beam, I easily dodged the attack while landing another hit through the smoke.

Clair was starting to look like she was in a zone. "Blow it away with Twister!" Best way to describe the attack: like someone put me merry-go-round that won't stop. Balancing after that was pretty challenging but I got it together in time to fire a Confusion attack at Dragonair. I didn't get up.

"Dragonair is unable to battle. The round goes to Espeon!" Perfect. I made it through another tough battle not feeling too tired. Psybeam isn't as exhausting to use compared to earlier which lets me have more options if I need them.

"You've beaten three of my Pokémon. Now it's time for you to face my strongest one in the moat. Kingdra, I choose you!" No. Please Arceus no. Mitch isn't looking like he'll switch me out either. If there was ever a time to prove myself, this was it. This very Pokémon was the one that flipped my world upside down. Revenge isn't really the right word to describe what I'm thinking now. Oh no, that's reserved for Sara if I ever see her again. How I feel right now is anxious.

Kingdra charged at me firing a Dragonbreath; I countered with Confusion. Mitch was a little stunned at how fast it was but regrouped. "Espeon use Psybeam!" The move connected for some decent damage.

"Smokescreen." Fuck. I know where this is going. "Surf."

"Confusion as a shield Espeon!" Shade had taught me so much while we lived in the forest and now was the time to take advantage. Shield height and width were as small as I could make them and still be protected from the wave. It bypassed me harmlessly and another wave was sent my way; I used Quick Attack to jump for the time being.

I saw Clair smirk once I was above the smoke. "Hyper Beam when it comes down." she said with a
stone-cold expression on her face after the smile faded.

"Confusion. Turn it around!" Mitch sounded so confident in his strategy but Hyper Beam was the last move that practically ended my life. The attack was fired once I was close enough to the ground. Once I felt my feet touch the ground, I immediately tried to contain the powerful blast. Somehow I was holding the massive amount of energy in place. Then I felt this extra strength to send the attack back to Kingdra. One massive explosion shook the gym and Kingdra was down for good. Redemption.

"Kindgra is unable to battle. Since all four of Clair's Pokémon are unable to battle, the match goes to the challenger Mitch from Violet City!" Unbelievable. I was so hyped up that I ran around the battlefield cheering until I made my way back to Mitch and passed out.

He gently stroked my head before I fell deeper into unconsciousness. His words were spoken so softly. "You did it Espeon. I'm so proud of you. We'll celebrate later. Get some rest." Just like that, I went back to my ball for the most peaceful sleep in my life.

Whatever got into Espeon, it worked big time. She made Clair's strongest Pokémon look like a joke by only taking down in a few hits. Espeon has gotten so much more confident in my time with her. Umbreon may have helped her early on, but it seems like she's been carrying herself better more often. Clair walked over with the badge in hand.

"You knocked out my entire team. Based on skill you earn this badge. However, I saw that scar on Espeon; don't think I didn't see Umbreon's scar either. The Pokémon League gives us the power to deny badges to trainers in extenuating circumstances. I would say that this qualifies. Linda is the oldest priestess of Dragon's Den. Talk to her then come back to me with her by your side. If she deems you are worthy then I will give you my badge."

Holding in my anger was very hard to do, so I let it slip out a little bit in my response. "Fine. I will talk with her and I will be back. Have a nice day." The Pokémon Center was a decent distance away so I decided to heal up first before going out to find Linda. A voice came from behind me.

"Hello young one."
Rising Up

Chapter 25- Rising Up

There was an odd satisfaction when Kingdra finally fainted. I mean sure, I just won my eighth and final badge to get into the Silver Conference but there was something about Espeon that entire battle. She looked like she was a little nervous when I called her out. Maybe my own nervousness was affecting her since a few psychic types can copy the emotions of their trainers. Regardless, it was a clutch move having Espeon beating two of Clair's dragons because Gyarados got some more rest. I honestly think he's getting restless from not battling for so long. I know I'm pretty restless after not getting the badge because of some scars. If I had truly known what happened that night then I would've just told the truth. Now I have to find Linda and get the only person Clair trusts around here to convince her to give me a badge.

"Hello young one." Damn, that scared me. At least I found her.

"Clair said I had to talk to you. She thinks I'm not worthy of Blackthorn City's badge because…"

"Hush. Follow me." Without saying a word, Linda brought me back behind the gym to a small wooden boat. Another gym assistant was already there to row us across to a cave. The short ride over was eerie since the only sound was that of rippling water from the oar. Once we arrived at a dock, Linda finally spoke to me. "You have been in the Dragon's Den before. However, this time you must visit the Dragon Shrine. I will be waiting there along with two other elders. You may choose to go back or you may choose to continue riding. The choice is yours. Farewell." She disappeared behind a large door while I had to continue the ride around.

The gym assistant looked down at me. "Do you dare continue? I must warn you, the elders do not take kindly to those they see unworthy to enter the shrine, even though Clair may have sent them."

What could she possibly mean by unworthy? Still, the prospect of punishment did not knock me off of my path. "Take me to the shrine. I accept her invitation." A solemn nod came from the rower as she continued to paddle to the dock that contained the Dragon Shrine.

Fear mixed with hope was written over her face. "Good luck." Now I'm getting more nervous but I can't turn back now.

Both doors opened on their own as I approached. The inside was paying homage to all dragons from many different regions as well as many different time periods. Linda appeared in front of me as the doors closed. "You have made the decision to come here instead of fleeing. Now stand in front of the council." She made her way up a set of stairs to a fire pit where the other two male elders lit the fire. "Let us begin." Begin? Begin what? This was getting more intimidating by the minute.

One elder spoke after they said a prayer to a divine looking statue. "My name is Adam. I have been a priest in the shrine for quite some time. I have seen many a trainer walk through here but a vast majority were not worthy of seeing this place. You will be tested before the three of us. This is your last chance to change your mind if you have doubts about being tested."

I stood as tall as I could. "I'm not going to walk out. Go right ahead."
Adam nodded. "Very well call out the two Pokémon in question." Umbreon and Espeon were sent out to just stand there; both of them looked a little beat up since I never went back to the Pokémon Center. "What are your Pokémon to you? Are they your pals? Underlings? Friends?"

Dumb question. "My Pokémon and I are friends and companions. We both help each other out."


"I raise my Pokémon to face tough battles. If any of my Pokémon are at a severe disadvantage or in danger, then I will concede defeat."

"Interesting. Which type of trainer would you battle? A strong one or a weak one?"

"Now this is a trick question. If any other trainer were to come up and ask for a battle, I would battle them regardless of their skill. There is experience to be gained by battling anyone."

"Finally, what is the most important thing that a trainer needs to raise Pokémon?"

Interesting that Adam didn't give me options to choose from this time around; this one's on me. "Compassion. Every Pokémon is unique and I wouldn't trade these two for any other Espeon or Umbreon in the world."

Linda looked to the other elder then to Adam. "Your responses are very interesting. I sense no negative feelings in both of your Pokémon when you were answering. Countless trainers have given countless answers to these four questions. Some have fared well while others did not. Elder Nico, please offer the final test."

Nico made his way to the bottom step. "We will battle to see if you are truly worthy of a badge or if your victory over Clair was a fluke. You are to use Espeon since it defeated two of Clair's Pokémon. Go Dragonite." The orange dragon materialized looking hell bent on defending the shrine's honor. Espeon looked horrified at the sudden turn of events. Somehow she still staggered to the middle of the shrine.

"No."

"Hmmm. What do you mean young man? Do you not want the badge?"

"I refuse to let her battle in her current condition." He looked at Espeon and studied her movements before he acted.

An icy command filled the shrine. "Fire Blast."

What part of "no" did he not understand!? I reached for my ball to call her back but Umbreon had stepped in front of her to take the hit; I couldn't grab both of them fast enough and Fire Blast connected. Umbreon was clearly injured but he was standing albeit panting very heavily; Espeon started to tremble.

Nico's face remained emotionless. "I thought I told you that you can only use Espeon in this battle." I lost my mind.

"And I thought I said that I Refused to let her battle!" Silence filled the shrine for five minutes as Nico let me regain most of my composure. "How dare you attack my friend like that. She is in no condition to fight let alone move out of the way."
He still didn't seem to listen to me. "Hyper Beam." Yellow energy started to gather at Dragonite's maw.

"Return!" This time I had both balls in hand to call them back. Nico quickly threw his right hand up by his head and Dragonite stopped on a dime.

"Call them back out again," Nico said in his emotionless voice. I just stared him down for a while until he recalled Dragonite. "Now you may call them out. There is no threat anymore." I did so with extreme caution and stood in front of them while he went back up to the fire pit.

Linda had nodded at Adam and Nico before addressing me. "In the face of adversity, you chose to flee. However, you remained true to your beliefs in a challenging time. Your friends were in danger and despite wanting to face a strong trainer to prove your worth; you realized that you have not raised your Pokémon enough to take on such a challenge. Showing compassion to your Pokémon is most admirable. You are indeed worthy of the Rising Badge. Call back those two and come back to the gym with me and stand before Clair."

She descended from the pit along with Adam and Nico while I made my way to the door. All three of them had a conversation which ended with a bow. The girl who took us over on the boat was very surprised to see me get back on after entering the shrine. Linda had been looking at me the entire time we were still in the Dragon's Den. She told me that Nico was aware that I was reaching for my ball but he never predicted that Umbreon would step in. We arrived back on land behind the gym shortly after and gave our thanks to the gym assistant. Linda must have seen my face considering how confused I was at what just happened.

"We test trainers that way to make sure that they are ready for the journey ahead. Only a handful of trainers have answered Adam's questions and then acted according to their beliefs. Most trainers give the obvious answer then turn on their word when it comes time to battle with Nico. Even if some younger trainers are not as pure as others, as long as they stick to their beliefs during the test then they will be awarded a badge."

"So what's the deal if they do lie or do something stupid?"

Her face formed a scowl. "Those who are unworthy face a variety of punishments. One girl in particular had been yelling at her Pokémon for hours after she suffered a defeat. She won on her fourth try but she failed our test miserably. All four of her answers were similar to yours but when it came for battle, she did not act according to her values. However, she did win which is a testament to her pure strength. Clair had hoped she had seen the error in her ways but had no choice but to give her the badge. You have nothing to worry about young man." The gym was still empty when both of us walked back in except for Clair standing in her trainer's box. We approached her ready to talk it out.

"I see you've returned Linda. Is Mitch worthy of Blackthorn City's badge?"

Linda took one more step forward. "He has passed both of our tests. He is indeed worthy."

Clair sighed while she reached into her pocket. "In accordance with league rules, I give you the Rising Badge." The black badge looked like a dragon head with piercing red eyes; very creepy to say the least. "With this badge, you can register for the Silver Conference with some time to spare. There is a ferry that arrives in New Bark Town periodically to take trainers to the Indigo Plateau. Normally you have to pay but your registration into the tournament waives it." Clair still looked anxious. "Linda… what was wrong with Espeon and Umbreon? Did you figure it out?"

"I'm sorry I don't follow, but what do you mean?"
"Linda can communicate with Pokémon on a level that is nearly unreachable; it's like she can figure them out just by looking into their eyes. Ancient dragon masters tried to master this skill but few could. The ability is not passed down either. Only through intense meditation can one communicate with any Pokémon and even that can take an entire lifetime." I wanted to call her out on it, but it would be better if I went with it.

A gentle nudge was given to me by the elderly priestess so I called out the two Pokémon I saved from the forest that night. Espeon was still trembling until Linda started gently petting her while Umbreon was still showing signs of being tense. I calmed him down with some petting of my own. Linda led us back to the Dragon's Den through the gym door and we all sat down on the grass. She took a deep breath and said that both stories served to ease Clair's concerns as well as me understanding them better.

"Which story would you like to hear first Clair?" She pointed to Espeon. "Very well. This Espeon seemed to be destined to die at a very young age. As an Eevee, she was the runt of the litter with only having brothers. Her Jolteon father and Espeon mother abandoned just her one day and she searched for an evolutionary stone to get stronger. A young girl named Sara caught her and it seemed she was happy with each battle they won. However, Sara was unsure if she wanted a Vaporeon because she had Ice Beam which would have made the battle a little easier to manage. Mid-battle, Eevee evolved into an Espeon for the desire to make her master happy but she lost when you knocked it out with a Hyper Beam."

"That's true. She was a spoiled brat but she eventually won."

"After your first match, she physically and verbally abused the newly evolved Espeon after you left to tend to the shrine for hours on end. Sara had released her into the wild without healing her in the hopes that she would die. She was saved by this Umbreon here and all was going well until they came face to face with one Pinsir and one Ariados. The Ariados took her back to a clearing to torture her with poison and having her unable to move until Umbreon rescued her. She faintly remembers Mitch giving her an antidote before going to sleep. The scar comes from a series of Poison Sting attacks. Ever since she has met Mitch and Umbreon, she is much happier but still fears that she will be let go again or will be too weak to continue the journey despite making it this far."

Both of us just stared at Linda in disbelief. Espeon went from standing up to lying down with her paws covering her eyes; whimpers shortly followed. What… the actual… fuck. I mean I knew that Espeon was hurt when we met, but I had no idea it was that bad. Only two things are on my mind after that story: payback for Espeon later and comforting her now. I slowly scooted over to her and tried to pull her in. She flinched initially but held my arms as I scooped her onto my lap where she started to cry again. I started to gently pet her as Linda smiled warmly at me then turned to Clair. "Thank you Linda. Thank you for telling me what I couldn't understand."

She turned back to me. "I was going to tell you eventually but you were almost late for this battle. Now it's time to hear Umbreon's story. Are both of you ready?"

"I guess I'll tell it?" Now Clair and Linda looked surprised. "He used to have a loving trainer but he was killed by Team Rocket. Also, Umbreon was taken to Mahogany Town to be experimented on for some collector. To be honest Clair, he knows six moves. He came running into my camp with a dislocated hip after saving Espeon. Oh yeah, I never actually caught them when we met. However, I still brought them to the Mahogany Pokémon Center to get healed up before moving to Ekruteak City. As soon as we entered through the gate he was off to the cemetery to see his old master's grave. From then on, he's been pretty focused on battling and hates losing."
Linda nodded as Clair looked dumbfounded. "Six moves!? That experiment must have been pretty serious." Umbreon walked over to me. "So why didn't use all of them?"

"Ummm you're kidding, right? You'd probably stop the battle and ask me how that would be possible. I wouldn't have any answers which would open up a can of worms." I turned to Linda. "Anything I missed?"

The priestess was in thought. "Well let's see... there are some minor details. Umbreon's hip injury was caused by the Pinsir. For whatever its worth too, Umbreon was an Eevee that was sold for money. It wants to prove that it is the strongest. It also loves you unconditionally but still wishes Tom were alive."

"So you want to prove your strength even more? You gave Furret a run for her money. That in itself is pretty hard to do." He just purred and nuzzled Espeon, who was still quietly sobbing after her story had been told. "Are my other four Pokémon 'normal' then?" She had a long pause going as if she was still trying to get a feeling for them.

"Yes. Compared to these two, your other Pokémon have lived normal lives."

Four remaining Poké Balls were tossed into the air. Furret, Gyarados, Ampharos, and Growlithe all saw Espeon and gathered around her but Furret was the one doing most of the talking while Umbreon was still showing his affection. "Listen up everyone. I want to tell you that we have all eight badges and we are going to the Indigo Plateau. Espeon is worried that she's not strong enough to keep going. Is that true?" Gyarados immediately shook his head. If my strongest pure power Pokémon thinks that Espeon can continue, then I know there is a higher level of team chemistry going on. "See Espeon? I will never let you go. I am not Sara. I promise if we face each other on the battlefield, I will win so help me Arceus."

Clair's expression softened up. "So you're really going huh? I don't really say this a lot, but good luck."

I looked down at Espeon. "My Pokémon have already risen to the occasion despite their pasts. Now it's my turn to rise up."

"Oh master..."
Chapter 26-On A Whole New Level

Getting praise from Clair was no easy thing according to Linda or any other of the gym assistants. All eight badges had been earned through blood, sweat, tears, heart, mind, and soul by everyone on our team. Espeon has lost the most blood going through this road, but not a single drop fell under my care. Umbreon had probably sweated the most, but he always had sweat out of fear since he always loved Espeon. Since under my care, a bead of sweat has not fallen because of fear or uncertainty. The greatest gift I have given them was a loving environment. Furret had shed the most tears, especially on that day early in my journey. Gyarados by far has the most heart on the battlefield. It's not to say that the other five don't, it's just that he has never lost in any important battle. He's been beaten down so many times yet he always got back up. Ampharos has the one of the best minds on the team since electricity can be used in so many different ways. She makes use of her power very wisely. Finally, Growlithe has the most soul due to him being my first Pokémon. Both of us have been through it all since he came into my Violet City house.

Both dragon trainers gave me some key information on the Indigo Plateau like its location, what to bring, how to deal with the press, and other smaller things. When I asked about what to expect, they told me I had to experience it myself. I stood up, recalled the two eons, and made my way back to the Pokémon Center to double check my things before I left for good. Back in the Dragon's Den I swore I heard a voice inside my head. Maybe it was just me getting tired or hungry. It had been some time since I had a full-blown meal so I decided to check for any restaurants in the area. Breakfast and lunch usually consists of cereal bars but sometimes I just don't have the supplies for dinner. Come to think of it, the Olivine Market was the last place I was surrounded by great food. That super coupon I got from winning was mainly for special items. Oh how I wish I could have gotten some extra food plus containers for the leftovers. To be fair it probably wouldn't have fit in my bag anyway. Now that I think about it, my bag has been practically empty for quite some time with the exception of some random items I may never use. Meh, I'm hungry. Here I guess?

The place looked like it was a little fancy for me considering I was still in my all-purpose coat and hiking pants while everyone else was in business casual attire. A few Dratini were eating with their masters. Even the hostess looked hesitant to seat me until she realized I was the pendant bearer for the ceremony not too long ago. I was seated at a small table outside with a large area around me.

"You can let out your Pokémon if want to sir," the hostess said hesitantly.

"Perfect. After getting the Rising Badge we would love to eat together. Just give me a sec." A look of shock slowly came across her face as she saw all six Pokémon come out onto the patio. "I'll just need a few minutes to order please." She walked back to her station still looking a little intimidated. Let's see what looks good here. Pepperoni Pizza? Absolutely. There seems to be no Pokémon food listed but I assume they probably have some.

A waitress came out with a notepad looking equally intimidated by my party. "W-what do you want to eat?"
"I'll have a large pepperoni pizza for myself and Pokémon food for everyone else here. Water too please."

"Okay, I'll put that in." She hustled to the back of the house; I looked down at the table in a state of reflection.

Leaving Violet City, or at least the outskirts, was a tough decision to make. Money had been a little tight growing up. School was alright except for the fact that I really didn't have good friends to hang out with. Owning a Growlithe was a nice perk in the classroom because not a lot of children had a Pokémon to call their own. Most of the people I went to school with became trainers as soon as they could whereas I worked to put money in my nest egg when the time came to leave.

Registering for the Silver Conference was honestly harder than getting my first two badges; any mistake on the paperwork would have meant a delay in getting my trainer's license. A fair amount of my graduating class actually found out that the trainer's life wasn't for them so they either settled back home or wandered down a new path. Most of them still love Pokémon enough to own at least one.

My waitress came back some ten minutes after I placed my order and tapped me on the shoulder to get me back into the real world. "Here's your pizza plus the Pokémon food. Just call me over if you need anything."

"Thank you very much." All six slices in that pizza were scarfed down pretty fast and five of my team members finished their food pretty quickly. Only Espeon wasn't concerned about eating her victory meal. She was too busy staring across the way before going to eat slowly. The sound of feet approaching our table forced me to turn around out of instinct.

A girl who looked nineteen having red hair and standing about 5'6" was in front of me. "I couldn't help but notice your Espeon was staring at me. Is there something wrong with me? Do I have something on my face?" Those were genuine sounding questions.

"I mean you look normal to me. Pokémon sometimes stare at strangers."

She got snarky. "What does that mean?" You're kidding, right? What a bitch.

"All I did was answer your question. I don't want any trouble and I'm pretty sure you don't either." Her hand slowly reached for her back pocket. "For the love of Arceus don't do it. We're in a pretty crowded place."

She eventually put her hand back by her side then shot me a glare. "I know you probably beat Clair for your last badge. See you at the Indigo Plateau." Just like that she was on her way. Espeon was really looking pale even after she was done eating. I checked the ferry guide once I paid the check. Despite Blackthorn having no ferry service they were nice enough to provide the information. New Bark Town was the closest place for a ferry to the Indigo Plateau just like Linda said.

Each Pokémon looked drowsy after stuffing their faces full of food so I went to call them back. Espeon violently shook her head which caused Umbreon to growl at a low volume. To my surprise, Espeon nudged Umbreon ahead so that he could go back. The look on his face was mixed between relief and fear while holding a tired smile. It was just the two of us walking through the city to the open southern gate with her trying to hide behind me the entire time. Offering her the chance to get back was declined every time until she sat down in an open field with nobody around.

"I really don't understand Espeon. What's with you right now? You've never acted like this before. Not even when we met." Whether or not she was trying, the puppy dog eyes came out in full force.
"Aww come on. Don't do that…"

"I thought I would never see her again."

"Did you just say something?" Espeon continued to stare into space. "Your mouth didn't…"

"You can hear me!? Oh Arceus I didn't think I could do it. Well I guess I finally gained the ability to talk to you through telepathy. I've been trying to do it since we went to Cianwood City."

"So you tried to talking to me back there too?" A small nod to me. I cracked a smile. "Well I'm glad you can now! I know your powers aren't as honed as they should be but that's okay. You probably have a lot to say." Just the wind blowing made the next few minutes a little tense. Luckily the sunset made it a little easier to restart the conversation. "So what did you mean by you would never see her again?"

She immediately tensed up before talking really slowly. "I-I-I r-r-really can't believe that I would see her face after she left me to die that night. I shouldn't be alive right now."

Poor Espeon was starting to cry just like Umbreon the first time he returned to the cemetery. Linda was right when she told me Espeon had a horrible past. Now the Demons have come back except for this one will torment her as long as she is alive and I didn't do a damn thing about it when she was right in front of my face. Arceus dammit!

Espeon continued to weep for as long as she could before finally crawling into my lap. The sniffling eventually was replaced by slow breathing after the sun had finally set. Gently petting her made her curl up in a tight ball. I made sure to whisper so she wouldn't get scared.

"You don't have to tell me everything since I think Linda did a good job. If you want to talk, I'll be here. Just know that when I see her again there will be hell to pay. Losing against her is not an option. But let's cross that bridge when we get to it. Now let's pitch the tent for tonight." Placing her gently on the soft grass allowed me to set up camp for the night. It was a pain in the ass without some light until the tent stakes dug themselves into the ground. Espeon had made her way inside after I finished setting up the sleeping bag. She hopped in before I took out her ball; her head shook.

Her paw poked at my shoulder. "Can you sleep next to me tonight?" I guess sleeping beside Pokémon to comfort them is acceptable. Still, it feels weird because I've never done it with Growlithe even though he was my first. "I just don't wanna go back in my ball right now. Some nights I have nightmares about that night where I should have died from poison or the time Sara threw me away. Mitch, sometimes I wonder if I should have just given up. Even travelling with you I sometimes feel like I'm not good enough."

Damn. Talk about not knowing your Pokémon. We were always told in school that body language of a Pokémon usually gave away its feelings. Problem is that Espeon has been doing too good of a job hiding how she really feels. Battling in certain situations makes her uncomfortable for sure, but this is something they don't prepare you for in school. Nobody told me how to deal with Pokémon that have been treated like shit their entire lives; that was never a lesson. Any Pokémon that evolves by happiness that are found in the wild are quite rare which was a red flag to me. Nevertheless, I didn't dig deeper since both of them affectionately begged me to take them. Hearing that hurt like hell.

"Don't you dare think of yourself in that way. Don't talk like that to anyone else either. Even if I didn't want you then I would give you to someone who would. There is no reason to give you up when we're all so close to the top. All the work you put in will continue to pay off. We've been
through this before yet the answer is the same every time: I will love you and everyone on this team. We made it too far to doubt ourselves. Sara? I'll make sure I win against her."

Espeon took a deep breath. "I can't believe it… you're just like Shade. How do you have limitless empathy for a weak Pokémon like me?"

"First, you're not weak. Second, a Pokémon's strength partly relies on the trainer's own strength. All I want out of everyone is to battle to the best of their abilities. Win or lose, I still love you all. Third… who's Shade?"

"Oh, Shade is Umbreon. My name is Ruby."

"So I can call you Ruby or Espeon?" She nodded to both names. "Does anyone else have a self-given name that I'm not aware of?"

"Not that I know of. Maybe you've picked up on the fact that there are some pairings though. Furret and Growlithe are the newest couple; it happened when you were passed out in the woods after the ice gym battle. Gyarados has no idea how much Ampharos loves him which makes the other couple interesting. Shade and I have been really close since the night we met."

That stay in Cianwood City was her doing. All of them have been a little less anxious since that stay. Living in the Olivine Lighthouse probably made their bonds grow more too. Gyarados took the floor any time there was a bed and Ampharos followed him. How did I not add that up? Arceus I'm such an idiot when it comes to this stuff. "Wow. Maybe I should pay attention to everyone more closely. Unfortunately everyone's going to continue to get hurt in battle. Not a lot of battles happen where one side doesn't get hurt. That doesn't mean I won't try to make sure everyone can stay healthy. Remember that Dragonite? There was no way that I would let you fight that Pokémon in your state."

Espeon curled up tighter. "I wish you found me first. You are the best master a Pokémon could ask for. As a favor, I can help you talk to everyone else through me. They have a lot to say too. Just don't let me go for now."

"Master just doesn't sound right to me. You can call me that if you want, but you can always call me Mitch." I gently kissed her forehead. "Get some sleep pretty girl."

"Hmmmm yup. Exactly what Shade would do."

Rain started to fall outside about an hour after we were done talking. It would have been horrible except the weatherproof rain cover kept the water out and the sleeping bag was toasty. She had been sleeping soundly while I was fading in and out for a while. After hearing all of that straight from her mouth err… mind, I just couldn't sleep peacefully. What if I just fought them at first sight? What if they came to me appearing healthy? Killing a wild Pokémon is something I have never done but Umbreon biting me would have given me a reason to kill him. How can I balance all of this in the heat of battle? Jeez, they should probably teach this in school too.

The morning sun was covered by clouds as I woke up first. Ruby had not woken up when I stepped outside to stretch. When I came back in, she was twitching in her sleep. Just one touch made her stop on a dime; purring followed. Once she was fully awake, she continued to purr while rubbing her had on my arm. "We have to get to New Bark Town so you have to go back. By the time we reach the Indigo Plateau we'll be more than ready to take on any challenge we face." Her paw tapped the center of the ball after a lick to the face. Once everything was put away I had no choice but to stare at her ball reflecting on the past few hours.
"Keep fighting."
Chapter 27- Rough Road to the Show

Morning had made its presence known as the sun beamed down from the clear sky into the tent. Wind whipped as I readied my things to go to New Bark Town to catch a boat to the Indigo Plateau. Ferry schedules are accurate most of the time but there is always a chance to be late due to some headwinds or a school of Seaking blocking the boat. Espeon err… Ruby had finally spoken to me after finally learning to control her power.

I thought it was just a fluke, but her soothing voice was much more confident when we were talking last night. I knew something was wrong with her mentally when I found her because psychic types can usually get inside your mind within a few hours; two days at most if they are really slow on the whole mind talking thing. Evolving for a person and having them send you out into a hostile environment half dead would not make me want to talk to anyone let alone trust anyone. There are demons still inside of her that may never leave, but I'll be damned if I let them consume her. Still, I just can't wait to talk to everyone. Who knows what else I've missed?

The mountain trail south of Blackthorn was ragged and very unbalanced compared to the smooth Ice Path or the common grasslands. I treaded carefully through the thin pass that was carved out for travelers. One look up had me seeing Skarmory in their nests snoozing away where one look down had me seeing a very deep ravine; what kept me from losing it completely was that I could at least see the bottom. School taught me that steel types are more sensitive to vibrations so I had to avoid creating a rock slide if I wanted any chance of going undetected. Another factor was the sun. Skarmory tend to hunt when dusk rolls around since it's easier to catch prey before they can really get a chance to hide.

Slowly I made my way down the mountain with both hands grabbing at whatever bulged out for balance. Jasmine's jacket was still holding up but I was starting to think it was getting too hot despite the wind blowing. A section of the trail was bigger a few hundred feet down so I took the chance to reassess my situation once I reached the unnatural rest stop. The jacket came off but I opted to keep my pants on as opposed to zipping off the part below the knee for shorts. From first glance it seemed the path was going to shrink again. However, I still had this feeling there would be loose rocks in addition to the path opening up as I continued to go down.

"Ampharos, I need some backup." She took some time to stretch after being crammed in the ball for so long. Making the decision to have her escort me was not an easy one. Unfortunately there seems like a high chance that Skarmory mothers are going to fight over me if I kicked a stone. "Here's the deal. We need to make it down the mountain but I can't do it alone. Can you help me?" Ampharos looked ready to go; good enough for me. Descending from that small open space was even more dangerous that before with the loose rocks all over the place. Eventually it got to a point where it was a minefield; every step had potential to knock rocks down into the ravine. My luck ran out as both of us were faced with a boulder blocking 90% of our path.

"Looks like we're going to have to climb over this thing unless we want to walk on the edge of the cliff." Her facial expression told me that climbing over the boulder was the better choice. I somehow made it over but as soon as she made it over the top, it started to shift. She ended up thrashing out of fear which made it move even more. "Hold on! You're almost there!" It was no use. She wasn't actually moving forward so I had to grab whatever loose fluff she had and yank her
off; the boulder pinballed down the ravine while we backed up against the side of the mountain.

"Skarrrrrr! Skar! Skar! Skar!" Looks like our cover is blown. Arceus dammit.

"Use Discharge!" The whole flock fled after getting zapped only to be replaced by a second wave. Just like the last one, this one was also was scared off. Skarmory are hostile Pokémon that rarely just go away after one super effective hit though. "Keep it up!" Our plan was to back up slowly down the mountain while hitting any one that made their way closer. We had made it only a few feet before one got past the electric field.

Peck attacks rained down from a very young steel bird which caused me to throw my left arm up to protect my face. Was it fatal? No. Did it hurt like hell? Absolutely. Tossing it aside was easy since it had to be only weeks old, but my arm was practically red Swiss cheese. Things weren't looking good for either of us because Ampharos was expending too much energy just to protect herself; I had to take a risk.

"Ampharos let's get out of here!"

She stopped her attack to start running. I had made sure she was in front of me so that I could easily call her back if anything else were to happen. Slim trail turned to somewhat wider grassland after finally making so far down. The ravine had become a fifteen-foot drop compared to what felt like a mile long and I saw that there was a well-established trail leading somewhere. We were still relatively high up but each step was closer to the bottom. It dawned on me that I could risk sliding down to the ravine and walking the alternate path so I went for it.

Baseball sliding on the side of a mountain was probably not the best way to handle it. My left arm somehow got even more covered in blood followed by parts of my left leg that weren't covered by my pants. When both of us made it to the bottom, we tried to hide ourselves the best we could. After a few minutes, they all just left. My best bet was that Skarmory hate lower elevations or that they were too far from their home. I went to call back Ampharos but she refused to go back after looking over my bloody arm. We set off on the ravine's path for a while until a wide-open field was before our eyes. Although it was so open, the bottom of the mountain was still far away. Our pace needed to improve if we wanted to get down by dusk. Off in the distance I saw some very large boulders that were… moving? Wait...

"Grav! Grav!" Today just isn't my lucky day.

A pack of four wild Graveler made its way in my direction. They all looked hesitant but the dry blood was the only thing they needed to know about me; I was a dead man walking and an easy target. Rollout took me by surprise as I took the hit and was sent flat on my back by their leader. It spun back around for a second hit except that Ampharos stood in front of me to take the hit this time and a third one.

I was furious she kept taking those hits. "Get back in the ball dammit! I'll be fine!" No dice. There was something in her eye that kept her going. By the fifth one, she could only get to her knees as she was pummeled again. This time she didn't get back up; the area was about to be reconstructed. "Gyarados!" He was looking well ready after the long hiatus that I gave him.

Once he looked back at me his attitude changed drastically. I could barely stand, left forearm covered in red holes, fading out of consciousness, and he saw Amapharos out cold. Whatever fight he had in him was amplified tenfold at the very least. It wasn't just a battle for him anymore, especially after some more Graveler rolled up to the battle area. All of them attacked at once with Rollout but Gyarados countered with the most powerful water move: Hydro Pump.
Every Graveler was blown back and was sent scurrying back to where they came from. Unfortunately for me, Gyarados kept thrashing about after they were long gone. My Luxury Ball beam couldn't get him to come back; he was too out of control for it to grab him. For the first time as a trainer I felt completely helpless. Nobody else in my party could make him stop. Umbreon has the best shot, but even he would get tossed aside like nothing as time went on.

"Pa.." There goes my mind again from the exhaustion. "Palu..." I did a double take to see where the noise was coming from a second time. Ampharos had stumbled to her feet and was stumbling straight for Gyarados. She collapsed on the back of his tail and he immediately stopped. I too stumbled over to see the effects of her effort. Gyarados had gone back to being aware of his surroundings with no recollection of how much he carved up the area we were in. His guilt turned to concern once he saw how bad we both were. The first thing he did was coil around Ampharos so that nobody could even see her.

By this point I was completely exhausted and still losing blood although not as much since the minor scrapes were clotted. A very faint "I'm sorry" was all I could say to my strongest fighter. He was in no mood to take his eyes off of her let alone letting her go. "Please Gyarados I need to heal her. Once I'm done then I'll leave you two alone." Uncoiling looked painful for him as I dumped out some potions to heal her. Bandages were placed on all of her wounds after I was done.

Each time she winced or yelped in pain, I was given a harsh glare by Gyarados. He made sure to guard her tighter this time around. The next Pokémon that wandered through the area was met with a ferocious roar. No living thing that had half a brain would come near us for the rest of the day after his roar echoed throughout the mountain range. Camp was set up as the sun was setting after I took care of my own wounds. Darkness finally came after one of the worst days I've had as a trainer.

Both of their balls were left just under the outer layer of the tent. "You can come back whenever you want. I have to rest." Sleeping bag warmth was something to look forward to as the night air got colder by the minute. There was a serious conversation going on outside that tent since I kept hearing her cries plus his mumbling. How easy it would be to send out Espeon to translate. I've already done enough damage for now. It's best to let them talk about whatever they're talking about.

Neither of them went back to their ball. However, it was nice to hear Ampharos purring before I finally fell asleep; she's in good hands for tonight.

Or maybe the rest of her life.

Morning came when Ampharos made her way into the tent to wake me up. Poking things was always her way of communicating. So innocent yet very effective at getting things done for some reason. Packing up camp under the cloudy sky felt uncomfortable. Most trainers just want to win battles and rise to the top as fast as possible without caring about anything. After having gotten my fourth badge I was just like everyone else. Then an Umbreon with a dislocated hip came rolling in my camp with a near dead Espeon on his back. Realistic trainers would have taken Umbreon while leaving Espeon out in the cold or healing her up so that they wouldn't feel guilty about sending her back to the wild. One night paved the way for a whole new path to follow.

Gyarados was at his calmest he had ever been at after I threw on my backpack. It was time to really tell those two where I stood. "Are you upset at what happened yesterday?" Ampharos shook her head while Gyarados kept a straight face. "What happened yesterday was an embarrassment to me as a trainer. I failed to protect you Ampharos when it mattered most. All the other gym leaders kept pleading that I make the right decision but that was not the case. Yesterday I made the selfish
decision to protect myself without even considering that all of this might have happened. So I ask you this: do you trust me as your partner?"

They both looked at each other for a solid thirty seconds then nodded at me; I took a deep breath. "I'm very lucky to have you with me. Come on let-"

"Paluuuu!" Ampharos had hugged me while starting to cry. Gyarados bowed his head.

"I just want you to know that everyone's going to get hurt but I'll do everything I can so that nobody on this team has to go through something like this again. If anyone ends up severely hurt because of someone else, then I will get revenge somehow. Do you want to walk with me?" She shook her head in denial. "Let's move ahead. We're almost to New Bark Town."

By the time we got to the gate connecting route 45-46 gate, it was about 10:30am. Workers behind the counter gave me a physical copy of the ferry schedule so that I wouldn't have to memorize it in the future. The next departure wasn't until 12:15pm so I had some time to kill. For a strong trainer like myself it was refreshing to see weaker Pokémon roaming around the edges of New Bark Town. The actual town was fairly small even with the section reserved for Silver Conference registration.

Killing time was easy due to the laboratory in the northwest portion of town. Professor Elm was pretty open as a person and anyone could come in his lab unless he was in the middle of something big. Luckily for me that wasn't the case. Assistants were bustling about with their research as I moved about the lab. Eggs of many different Pokémon filled the lab which intrigued me the most because Pokémon breeding was a hard concept to grasp. Elm was just about to be finished with his observation when he spotted me.

"You're Mitch aren't you?"

"Yeah. How'd you know my name?"

He looked like he was in a hurry. "Tell any other trainers that I'm not available for a few hours. We need to go to the back of the lab right now. I'll explain when we get there." Elm led the way to his security coded door for which he entered the password. It looked like an average area of the lab but it was protected for a reason I guess.

"So what are we doing professor Elm?"

"A league official told me that you had an interesting Pokémon with you. May I see it?" Umbreon was called out. "So it's an Umbreon. Listen Mitch, would you mind if I did some tests on it? Get some readings?"

"Why?"

"The person who contacted me told me that your Umbreon has five moves. While I know that Team Rocket is responsible for it, I just want to see its condition."

"If you told me who told you that information then I'll consider it."

He sighed. "It was a girl by name of Ashley. She had heard from a gym leader that you were carrying an experiment Pokémon." Pryce told her?

"Well that is true. I guess I can see what's up. Are you okay with it buddy?" Umbreon stepped forward.

"Great. Let me just run some tests. You can stay in the room." Over the course of an hour there
were numerous pads connected to my dark type fighter along with various monitors. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary when Umbreon had to do something physically oriented.

"So is there something I need to know?"

"Based on these tests it's a miracle that nothing else is wrong with him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Take a seat please." A chair was pulled up for me. "Any Pokémon that is experimented on usually goes through a rigorous process to normalize them so that they suffer no dangerous side effects. Team Rocket obviously didn't care about that so Umbreon is at risk for a number of things." I took a moment to process everything. "Now it has five moves but it also is severely at risk for what we call 'random attacker' status when it is in battle. It means that he could use another move instead of the one you called out on accident regardless of owning all eight badges."

"But he has six moves. Moonlight was used in the Blackthorn Pokémon Center."

Elm's eyes grew wide. "Then that's why the data didn't add up. The probability of Umbreon using a random attack is at 50% with five moves. Six moves means that his odds of using a random attack at least once in battle jumps to 80%."

I rubbed Umbreon's head. "So how come it hasn't happened yet?"

"Well it could be that he is in a stable environment. You are obviously a good trainer to have gotten this far as well as have other Pokémon that work well with him or accept him for who he is. Compassion goes a long way in addition to a mate, which you seem to have on your team based on his tests. I just want you to know that a random attack could happen during any given battle or he could battle normally. I don't know what would happen if anyone else knew about the six moves though. Only a few of us know about it but we would never tell anyone. That is on you as a trainer. Just know that you can come back here."

I stood up. "Thank you professor Elm. I'd like to talk more but I have a ferry to catch." Everyone went back to their balls before I approached the ticket window across town.

"How many?"

"Just one for the Silver Conference."

"ID and badge case please." Both items were presented to the attendant. "Here is your ticket to the ferry on dock number seven. Good luck young man." The ferry was bigger than I expected but it would still bring me to my destination.

I can't wait to introduce myself to Kanto.
Chapter 28—Really Big Team, Really Big Dreams.

Ferry after ferry lined the east side of New Bark Town as I hopped on the one that would take me over to the Kanto region. The captain was standing on the top step to greet other trainers as they boarded since it was customary to do so. She cringed as she saw my arm still covered in dry bloody bandages but still welcomed me aboard with a smile once she got over her initial shock. In total, there were about 20 other trainers on the ferry with me which was a nice change of pace. Being surrounded by other tough trainers is something I've been longing for since I won my sixth badge; travelling alone takes a toll on the mind over the course of a long journey.

Below deck there were a few common rooms for the trainers to lounge around as the ferry made its final preparations. As an insurance policy, I found Nurse Joy to heal my Pokémon via the healing machine. A majority of the trainers were travelling with someone else or have had a companion for some extended period of time on their journey. Not me. At no point in my journey did rely on one particular person to help me for so long. I had made friends along the way only to lose them because they were rooted to their homes or jobs. There's nothing a call wouldn't fix but I wouldn't want to bother them with small talk. From my peripheral vision I saw two trainers my age walk up to my side.

"Hey stranger! How's it going?" The girl looked about 25 years old, stood about 5 feet 6 inches with blonde hair, blue eyes, and had a shirt with a fire pattern.

"Pretty good I guess. I'm here for a reason, aren't I?"

"Hmmm, you have a point. Name's Carly. My boyfriend has been by my side and he's qualified too. Fire types are my favorite but that's not mean my entire team is fire based. Typhlosion is the staple of the team. Why don't you see him? Come on out!" She was pretty hyped up. The de-facto fire starter for the region looked like it had gone through so much on this journey. Fur was far from clean in addition to the various bruises around its claws.

"You're awfully friendly to a complete stranger like myself. What's the catch?"

"No catch. I'm just introducing myself to everyone and maybe they want to hang out. Most trainers travel alone and now that we're all gathering in one place, we can cut loose a little bit. I've had friends along the way but we parted ways because that's how the trainer life is. You don't have to hang out if you don't want to."

"You're right about travelling alone. It's just weird to me that someone wants to try to make new friends at this point in time. Anyway, what's the deal with your Typhlosion?"

"He's always been my pride and joy from the moment I got him from professor Elm. Nobody other than a gym leader or two has beaten him. I can't wait to see what the top trainers have to offer after I earned 11 badges after..."

"Hold up hold up hold up. Eleven badges!? Where'd the other three come from?"

Carly's traveling companion interjected. "We're from the Kanto region. I'm Davis by the way. Carly was born in Celadon City while I was born in Saffron City. Both of us met when we were
trying to take the Kanto gym challenge. Unfortunately, we realized we couldn't get the badges in time for their tournament. Might as well cross Mount Silver to see if we had what it takes."

Davis stood at least my height but looked as tall as 6-2 compared to my 6-0 yet he had a very slender for his stature. His brown hair was well kept for a trainer getting all of those badges; his eyes looked very confident too. Compared to those two, I looked like a mess. The ferry left the docks with most of the trainers waving their goodbyes to their families. I guess I waved out the window since it seemed like the right thing to do despite having nobody to do it to.

I tried to get away from everyone else and decompress after the trip to New Bark Town but both of them found me again. I wasn't as upset as I thought I would be when they stopped by. We talked about our toughest fights and desperate strategies as the ship made its way across the sea. Carly asked if I had any fire types on me so I brought out Growlithe to show her.

She seemed to get along well with him even though Growlithe is pretty reserved around strangers. Many of the trainers stayed above deck to enjoy the weather while our conversation continued. Both of them seemed very friendly to me even though I mentioned I could beat them in a battle which was a surprise in this very competitive atmosphere. After we seemingly ran out of things to talk about, there was still one thing I had to ask.

"Question for both of you: have you seen a red headed girl named Sara or another trainer by the name of Cory at any point in your journey?"

Davis looked into space before snapping his fingers. "Once actually. This 'Sara' was in Blackthorn city when we were passing through. Carly had just won against her first gym leader and after the battle we saw her hanging out by a cave in the back of town. She sounded jealous if not hostile when I told her Carly won. She just stomped off into the distance when I told her that I also won. Haven't heard of this Cory person though. Why?"

"Just wondering." I'm not about to mention what she did to Espeon in front of two strangers I just met on a ferry. "Also, how did you beat Clair as your first gym leader? Did she take it easy on you?" A grin came across both of their faces.

"She asked us where we were from because our IDs showed us as Kanto residents. After we told her that we had no badges she gave us the option to come back later or battle her right there," Carly cheerfully noted. These guys have to be ridiculously strong to just waltz into arguably the hardest gym and win against her the first time around; please let them beat Sara and Cory if I fail.

The rest of the ride was pretty relaxing after the couple excused themselves to enjoy the view. I took a power nap then proceeded to the deck for the first time all trip. It had been a solid hour since the ship left port which meant we were at about the halfway point if not two-thirds of the way to Kanto. Growlithe was appreciating the view until he looked down through the railing. A whimper told me that he really wasn't feeling the boat ride anymore so he went back to the ball. Other trainers had one Pokémon out by their side so I thought I should give someone some fresh air.

Furret was in dire need of attention. "Come on out girl!" She took advantage of the situation by stretching and rolling around on the deck before resting her head in between the rails on the ferry. "Comfy are we?"

"Furr!" She had zero problems when it came to water despite the fact that Pryce's gym water didn't look all that inviting. We both stared ahead of us for the remainder of the voyage in deep thought. We have come so far together since that night outside of Cherrygrove City. Arceus only knows what would have happened that night if that old man didn't step in. I was just a weak trainer with only a Growlithe and a Magikarp while she was a Sentret. Now she looks so confident and playful
trying to grab the Silk Scarf around her neck. Just enjoying the moment is never a bad idea.

A woman's voice came over the loudspeaker. "Attention trainers, this is your captain speaking! We will be arriving in Kanto in five minutes. Please gather your things and head to the deck. Thank you for choosing the official Silver Conference ferry as your means of transportation. Good luck to everyone!" Just like that, a wave of trainers came to the bow of the boat to see the Kanto docks getting closer.

Even older trainers in their thirties oohhing at the sight of Kanto told me that this was a once in a lifetime chance. We were the last to leave the ferry as everyone else bolted to the second registration area. Vehicles lined the other side of the tent so that trainers could pick how they wanted to get to the Indigo Plateau. Unfortunately, they cost too much to rent for my taste. Still, league officials had offered to guide trainers to the trainer's village if they wanted via bus ride. They only made three trips per day based off the ferry schedule and it was about to be the second one.

Decompressing was more important to me because I did not get as much down time as I had thought. Furret even looked like she wanted a nap after the trip. Her scouting led us to a bench somewhat away from the crowd where we could close our eyes for a few minutes. Rustling of bags woke both of us up after the much-needed nap. Another trainer just shot us a confused look as he gathered his things and left. The last bus was schedule to leave in about ten minutes. Something clicked in my head.

"Espeon, come on out." Ruby materialized in front of me looking eager to do something. "Did you need something master?"

I still wasn't used to that title. "Errr yes. Remember, you don't have to call me that if you don't want to. Does anyone want to take the bus ride into the trainer's village or would everyone prefer we hike up a path?"

She focused to try to get some feedback. "Everyone wants to hike. They thought the ride over took too long." Well it's not like they're going to hike next to me.

"So I'll walk and call anyone if I need some help. Chances are we won't make it to the Pokémon Center until the morning. Return."

The trail that led into the hills was pretty quiet save for the few Pokémon nests to the side. Jacket warmth was starting to be missed as afternoon turned to evening so I dug it out of my bag. Honestly, Jasmine came in clutch when she gave me this jacket. My old windbreaker couldn't have handled Ice Path let alone a mild rainstorm. A cave embedded in the side of Tohjo Falls made for the perfect place to stay the night and build a fire after I made sure no one else was there. Now was the time.

"Everyone, come on out." Six of the most loyal Pokémon in the world were standing at my feet. "It has come to my attention that Espeon can actually talk to me through telepathy. So… who wants to talk?" Blank stares from everyone until Ampharos walked over first. "Perfect! You guys can do whatever you want while you wait." The three of us made our way just out of their hearing range in relation to the other four. "Let's talk Ampharos."

Mumbling was all she could manage to do after finally getting the courage to think of something to say. Espeon told me that the words coming into my head are not hers beforehand.

"I'm really sorry about the other day for starters." Dammit… I thought we were over that. "You
are such a kind and compassionate person. Being caught caused me to get really sad for the longest time. Still, you never gave up on me and had the patience to work with me despite me poking everything new I see. Battles weren't as fun until you showed me all the fun I could have in wins or losses. For some reason I can't explain, being wild just didn't seem as much fun when I was around you. I also want to tell you that I love Gyarados very much. Ever since he saved me from drowning, he's always been by my side. We've talked about getting hurt but please… I'd be lost if he…" Ampharos started to tear up.

"Wild Pokémon are very rarely happy to be caught. I can't imagine what was going through your mind when I first caught you" I whispered while rubbing her back. "There was never any intention to let you go just because you were sad. Only a selfish trainer would've let you go back to the wild all sad like that without even trying to make you feel at home. Please believe me when I say that I still remember that day where you were tossed into the water; I couldn't do a damn thing about it and that was the first time I truly wanted to kill another human being. Gyarados battles hard Ampharos. We went over this before, but I will do my best to protect him from things he can't handle."

"Alright… I'll go back now. Thank you master."

"Wait!" she turned around. "You don't have to call me that if you don't want to." A smile came across her face as Furret sprinted over and she looked like she wanted to get a lot out in the open. Even Espeon gave a sign for her to slow down.

"Hello master it's nice to finally talk to you. I was wondering if you could…"

Espeon somehow got that much to me.

"Pause for a second Furret; take deep breaths then slow down."

A few seconds went by with her finally getting calm enough to talk at a normal speed. "I can't believe we made it here after all we've been through. I'm not surprised though because you are a very smart trainer to get this far. Wild Pokémon hate to be caught but with a right type of master, they will fight for you. Pokémon in the wild are envious of us since you treat us like family. Unfortunately there are times where I have nightmares of that night a long time ago. I'm sorry I've caused so much trouble since then."

"Stop that." Furret looked down. "That's a lie. You haven't caused any trouble since that night and what happened wasn't your fault at all. Remember, you don't have to call me master if you don't want to since you're a part of my family. Don't worry about Growlithe either; I'll do my best to keep him safe for your sake. Go get him for me unless you have something else to say." She licked my face and went to get Growlithe. He made his way over next after she gave him a kiss.

For the first time in a while I truly felt nervous. "Hey partner… it's been a long time coming. Arceus only knows what you probably have to say to me. Have at it." Pure silence for minutes. I couldn't tell if he was nervous or was trying to think of something to say; he finally let out a huge sigh.

"Mitch… The only human in the world that gave me a home and loved me when nobody else would. You don't know this, but I used to be owned by someone else before we met. I was treated like dirt the entire time he owned me. I'll never know why he kept me for so long. It was a relief when he finally let me go. When I went back outside Violet City, nobody wanted to accept me because of the fact I was previously owned; I wasn't 'wild enough' for them so they didn't support me and took anything I gathered for myself. The night I walked into your house was the night I was about to see Arceus. I really wasn't sure if I wanted to go through the experience of being owned again or just give up that night. After you convinced your parents to keep me after I was fed, it was
a sign of hope. That glimmer of hope has been replaced with a loving trainer. Following you has been the greatest thing that has happened to me in my lifetime. Remember, I will always fight for you because nobody else is worth fighting for. You spent so much money just to keep us happy and well fed while you were stuck with old gear; those Luxury Balls mean a lot to us. Also, thank you for taking care of Furret the entire time you've had her. I'm still very weak in comparison to you."

There is no way to describe how I felt after hearing that. It couldn't be expressed in any words of the written or spoken variety. It was all a mix of anger, sadness, frustration, and the desire to go back in time to prevent it all. I just sat there staring into the ground. "Linda lied to me. She told me that everyone else had a relatively normal life before I found them."

"She only lied because I begged her not to tell the truth. I wanted to tell you, not have her do it for me. She looked so sad when I pleaded with her but she understood why. Does that make you think anything less of me?"

I immediately picked him up and held him as tight as I could. Now it was my turn to cry. "N-n-n-no. N-n-no it does not. S-s-stop lying about being weak too. Just stop lying!" Attempting to regain my composure, I gave myself time to calm down before continuing. "I'm scared Growlithe. I'm scared that we'll lose and that everyone won't trust me anymore. I'm scared that I'll turn into a heartless bastard by only caring about winning and not caring about you guys. Every trainer goes down that road, but I haven't done it yet. Something tells me it'll happen here in Kanto."

Espeon was really doing a good job of keeping herself composed as she continued to send me his calm, soft words. "Now you stop lying. We're all in this as a team. We all have big dreams to win this just like you do. All of us will continue to fight for you as long as we are alive. Umbreon and Gyarados don't want to talk tonight, but maybe down the road. Anyway, that trust is something that we will never lose for you. Not now, not next week, not ever."

"So everyone else wants to push themselves that much?" A nod. "Then I'll make sure your effort doesn't go to waste. Before we go bed, I need to know: do you remember your previous owner?"

"Yes. His name was Cory."
Chapter 29- Where the Past Meets the Present

Sleeping after those conversations with my Pokémon was impossible. Every single one of them was not as happy I thought they were. It just goes to show how much I have to learn when it comes to feeling everyone out. Umbreon and Gyarados still have to go too; can't wait for those. As soon as I was remotely close to falling asleep I put out the fire and just closed my eyes.

Some kind of bubble surrounded me as I looked down on Ampharos' memory first. The opponent had just been defeated and he took it out on Ampharos Mareep, by picking her up and throwing her into the water when she collapsed after the battle. I was a step too slow but Gyarados was a faster swimmer that I was. Growlithe's world looked okay until I saw a somewhat younger Cory berating my first Pokémon. Kicks hit him square on his underbelly until he passed out and was eventually thrown outside the house, then flashes of his pack were fed to me. All of the other Growlithe ignored him or robbed him of his food. The nightmare ended when I saw myself feeding him. Furret's past started to form until I was interrupted by a nudge and a soothing voice.

"Wake up Mitch. Please wake up." Ruby stood on top of me looking worried. "You were sweating and thrashing in your sleep. Is everything alright?" Sunrise was maybe half an hour away but I could still see everyone sleeping peacefully.

"I saw visions of everyone's past. Well, the ones who talked to me anyway. Everything looked to vivid to be an ordinary dream." Both of us stayed silent while looking at each other. A thought crossed my mind. "You might have projected everything to me."

She looked at the ground trying to understand. "Maybe. I know that I somehow ended up seeing Growlithe getting abused. I still don't know the extent of my powers though."

Espeon may not know the extent of her powers, but I have an idea. Psychic Pokémon have the potential to read minds and even insert themselves into a flashback as if they were right next to the subject. Her abilities aren't fully developed so she might have wanted to see what happened and had nowhere else to project them or maybe she thought I needed to see it for myself. Regardless, I know she can't simply turn it "on" or "off" quite yet.

"The sun's still not up. I'm going back to bed for a little longer." I slept much better without the nightmares and felt a rhythmic tap on my leg; probably wagging her tail in her sleep. Boy… how lucky am I to have something so unique? I can guarantee that not a lot of other trainers have psychic types, let alone ones that communicate with you. Frankly, most of them play pranks on you. How stupid Sara was to just toss aside Espeon.

Rays of light snuck through the cracks of my miniature campground signaling that it was time to wake up for real this time. The last of my own provisions were eaten while Pokémon food was still going around. Growlithe was right; I really do care for them more than myself. I managed to pack up a lot faster than normal before getting everyone back in their balls and heading out. The trail ahead was pretty beaten down due to the thousands of trainers that have probably travelled down this path in years past.

Wild Pokémon didn't really make an effort to impede my progress to the main gate of Victory Road.
or the checkpoint. Sure, Pokémon usually hate to be found, but the slightest noise like kicking a pebble sent all of them scurrying to bushes or up a tree. Maybe they aren’t used to so many people at once? Whatever, I have my team and that’s not going to change at all.

The guards at the checkpoint looked bored out of their minds until the male guard saw me. He immediately called me over to the desk. He looked me over very quickly. "Very unusual of a trainer to arrive here alone. I’m pretty sure we checked in about 15 or so yesterday since that’s when the ferry came in. Are you going ahead to Victory Road?" I nodded.

The female guard placed her hand out. "Only trainers who have proven themselves worthy may pass. Do you have eight official gym badges?" I took out my trainer case and place it in her hand. She carefully inspected each one. "Zephyr. Hive. Plain. Fog. Storm. Mineral. Glacier. Rising. Upon winning all eight badges, you have earned the right to pass through to Victory Road and register as a participant in the Silver Conference Tournament. Best of luck."

One giant statue stood on each side of the cave gate. A giant stone Poké Ball was the design on top with text inscribed on a gold plaque below: The road to glory is only just beginning. Many trainers have passed through here before you with high hopes. Only those with the courage to keep pressing onward and have a strong bond with their Pokémon will succeed in reaching the Indigo Plateau. If you arrive, do not falter. If you fail, do not give up. Now go forth.

I took one step into the cave and I was met with a group of trainers who were on their way out. All of them looked physically beaten down and mentally exhausted. Their long faces told me I was in for a long trip through the cave. One managed to look at me with his tired eyes. Just two words came out of his mouth: "too much". His friends begged him to leave the cave so he mindlessly followed them until they were all out of my sight. Too much what? Trainers? Pokémon? Alright, let’s see what the fuss is about. Another section of the cave was opened up to me after I made sure I had all of my Pokémon at the ready; his words made me have my hand beside my belt out of instinct.

Loud echoes reverberated through the cave as I made my way deeper into Victory Road. A blue blur whizzed in my peripheral vision and I felt a little dizzy; Golbat’s nest for sure. It circled back around with teeth glowing. It was a complete 180 to see Pokémon attacking me compared to when I first arrived in Kanto. Apparently it came circling around with another one for a combination attack.

"Ampharos come on out!" Nobody was around in the large section of the cave so I was free to fire at will. "Use Discharge!" The result didn’t surprise me in the slightest. What did surprise me was that a dozen more descended from the ceiling, fangs glowing. "Watch out for Leech Life!" She started to miss some Golbats due to the mix of echoes and sheer number of the annoying bats. "Damn it! Return Ampharos!" I wasn’t upset at her at all, just frustrated at the bullshit idea of them ganging up on us. Now I understand what that trainer said. Time for some Johto style ass kicking. "Espeon use Psybeam!" Banking on her ability to move quickly and land rapid fire Psybeams paid off as the gang of Golbats flew away in frustration.

Espeon looked off into the distance. "You did a good job. Ampharos was outmatched and you made sure she wouldn’t get hurt despite the type advantage. This is just one reason why we respect you as a trainer. Moving forward with me might be a good idea because I can feel out the cave." I thought about all of the things that could happen but Ruby seemed to read my mind. "Please master… you always talk about keeping us safe. Now it’s my turn to keep you safe," she pleaded.

"Alright I’ll go with it. The moment you’re in trouble is the moment you’re going back. Understand?" She nodded and led the way. Acting like a father figure wasn’t in my nature for the
longest time. I usually went by reason when it came to making decisions; rarely did I make emotional, split-second decisions. Having to deal with the couples on the team turned me into more of an emotional person I guess. Pokémon like mine can fend for themselves, but why take the risk?

The remainder of Victory Road was probably easier than what any other trainer had gone through. I was guided by Espeon without having to backtrack or second guess her decisions. We avoided sections full of wild Pokémon nests as well as some trainers itching to battle. Battling isn't the worst thing, but maybe not in a cave where other trainers are on edge. Rumors about this place were that some trainers never made it out alive because they got lost or that they were attacked when their Pokémon were out of energy and couldn't defend against attacks. That plaque sounded motivational, but it's just a dark disclaimer for the hell you might go through.

Some trainers had been dozing off against the trees when we arrived to the front door of the Pokémon Center. Even more had passed out on couches or the floor of the main lobby; maybe the league should advertise how exhausting Victory Road really is? Regardless, I didn't have to heal anyone due to Espeon's guidance. I saw that Carly and Davis were on a couch in each other's arms. The afternoon warmth kept them and all of the other trainers fast asleep. I could've woken them with up to say hello, but come on… that'd be a dick move. I still made my way to Nurse Joy after tiptoeing to the desk.

"Hey, I was wondering what to do now that I'm here," I whispered to her.

She too whispered. "Oh so you're here to register too. Give me your ID and I'll officially register you for the preliminaries." The deed was done pretty fast. "There's an open tour for participants that includes the Hall of Champions near the stadium…" I stopped listening after that. Only those who have won the whole thing are allowed to be enshrined in there. A section of the Hall of Fame is open to the public, but a member gets full access to areas that no average trainer would see. Such a place is off limits; I guess it's an inspirational tactic?

"Thank you very much. I'll be off," I whispered as I quietly made my way out of the center. Tours for the Hall of Champions were self-guided with the exception of security guards posted in front of the stadium as well as the actual room. Stepping into the place made me feel like I was in a time machine because I was the only trainer there looking in pure silence. Since the Indigo Plateau hosted the Kanto and Johto championships, there was no shortage or star power.

Red adorned a large section with all of his accolades and memorabilia. His team was legendary in its own right with powerful Pokémon beside him. So many have tried to surpass him only to fail in reaching the last battle at the Indigo Plateau or do some stupid stunt that backfires. One of my goals on this journey was not to become him. He is Red. I am Mitch. There is no reason why I need to become the new Red. Gold on the other hand was someone who was a little harder to immortalize. I guess being from Johto may have hurt his reputation due to Johto being weaker as a region, but he still had tremendous strength. The last shrine that piqued my interest was for Silver.

Most of the older champions had a well-balanced team while Silver had a glass cannon team; hyper offensive, but could potentially be knocked out in two moves if anyone had a type advantage. Even though Silver stole all eight badges, he still was allowed to compete. After returning them, I guess he was granted a reprieve because he went on to demolish every foe in the Silver Conference.

"Need any more motivation?" The voice made me jump.

"Jeez Carly, you scared him. The man was in deep thought and you do that to him? Come on." Carly had shrugged off the playful tone of her boyfriend, Davis, as she approached me.
"Relax Davis, I didn't know. Sorry about that. I just wanted to say thanks again for talking to us on the ride over. It means a lot to us since we don't know anyone and everyone we did talk to couldn't hang around. Now it's my turn to return the favor. There's a gala tonight for all he trainers who made it early. You can get the details if you battle me."

I put on a smile "You're on. Outside in five though, I want to soak this in just a bit longer." Both of them left without a fuss leaving me to just look at what could be. When you think about it, so many trainers are in the world yet only a handful has ever made it in here. This is the epitome of greatness… and everyone would have to duke it out in the preliminaries to see if they are worthy enough to get here.

Outside was turning to dusk considering I stayed in that place for quite some time. The battle would have to start now if any of us could actually see our Pokémon so both of us took our places. 

"Alright Carly, let's go!" She calmly threw out a Rapidash while I went to Furret. She hadn't battled in a while and she looked like she was due for a tune-up.

"Rapidash use Ember!"

"Dig!" Furret easily dodged the weak fire type move and waited until she sensed Rapidash wasn't moving around so much. The hit did a nice chunk of damage after lying in wait. "Keep it up! Use Return!" Another powerful hit landed on the fire horse but it still looked in top form. "Another one!"

"Take Down!" Its speed made the impact sound intense along with the horn delivering a critical hit. "Fi…"

"No more! Furret come back!" I immediately pulled her ball to bring her back to safety.

Carly stood there confused yet looked like she knew something. "Let me guess, she's a little nervous." I nodded. "I can sympathize with you. My Rapidash is nervous too. I wouldn't want to hurt her too bad either, especially since this is a battle for fun. Anyway, the gala is in a few hours and it's a black tie event at the Pokémon Center convention area. Don't worry, they have suits laid out so just pick one. Hope to see you there." Davis gently grabbed her hand as they both walked into the sunset. Maybe I should have paid attention to Nurse Joy since that gala sounds like a cool idea. Although… I'm not really used to a fancy or upper class type shindig. At least the league is trying to get us relaxed.

Freshening up was relatively easy since I only needed a shower. Making my way to the convention area was pretty hectic since there were about 50 more trainers trying to do the same thing. An area was shown to us so that we could store our equipment if we didn't already have a room yet; the trainer's village would be opening tomorrow for housing throughout the tournament. Coatrooms full of suits and dresses were paired with changing rooms so that every trainer could look their best out on the floor. It felt weird being all dressed up, but I took the chance to grab a bite to eat. I had finally found Carly and Davis when I heard a familiar voice.

"…so I let it go. No way was I going to win with a useless psychic type. Who knows if she's still out there..." now I was pissed off. Her looks matched her voice: it was Sara. She continued to talk to three other trainers but I felt the need to crash the conversation.

"Oh she's not out there. I have her… you harpy." That got her attention. I couldn't call her what I really wanted to call her unless I wanted everyone against me in a heartbeat. "You were the reason why Espeon was uncomfortable in Blackthorn and you're also the reason why she nearly died that night you let her go." My voice was rising. "What kind of trainer just lets a Pokémon practically die like that?! She has a scar that will never go away for Arceus' sake! I cannot wait to wipe the floor
with you."

Her group was taken aback by my words but she remained steadfast. "Why not fight right now if I bothered you so much? I'll put you in your place in front of everyone here. You're going to wish you never won those badges. Piloswine, time to teach him a lesson!"

I felt obligated to send in Espeon to show her how bad she messed up. "Espeon, let's go." I released her to fight the one person who made her life a living hell, the one demon that would be with her forever. Ruby looked like she was cowering until I gave her a nod of confidence. "Psybeam!"

"Fury Attack!" Piloswine's tusks landed a few hits before Espeon finally got off the attack; she was obviously nervous.

"Calm down Espeon and use Swift." Pointed stars made their way to the ice/ground type and leveled it for some decent damage. "Follow it up with Confusion!" She made a ball of psychic energy and hurled it at Piloswine.

"Dodge and go for Fury Attack again!" Espeon easily dodged the onslaught of attacks but Sara showed me she could get even worse. "Go for the stomach," she ordered in a cold-blooded tone. Only two jabs were let loose and they found their mark too perfectly. The wound started to open again with a little blood leaking onto the floor; Ruby was well beyond knocked out. All I could do was drop to my knees in shock. Getting dizzier by the second, it was Davis who jumped in to stop our battle.

"Make one more move or we're going to have one hell of a fight on our hands." Sara wasn't too interested in him since our scuffle was all but over plus the crowd was really focused on us at this point.

"Whatever. Just know that he started it and I regret nothing."

I regained my composure and gently picked up my fainted Espeon like a newborn. She was breathing steadily despite the stomach wound reopening. "It's okay baby" I cooed while petting her. "Let's get you healed up." Dozens of people made their way back their previous areas to continue where they left off while security moved in. On the way to the exit I looked back at Sara to see her still fuming.

"If you can't beat one of my weakest Pokémon, what makes you think you can beat any of us here!?" Sara screamed across the way.

Again with the silence as everyone waited for my reply with Espeon in my arms. "If we meet in the tournament, it will be a historic record setting battle. I'll 6-0 you in front of the entire world. It will be the first sweep in Silver Conference history. Just make sure you keep winning until we battle."
Idiot! What the hell was I thinking? So many things went wrong all because I was selfish. One minute I see the second worst human being on the planet, the next minute I just lose my cool and start talking shit. I did it in a packed room and that led to a battle where people could have been hurt. Almost turned into a free-for-all for Arceus' sake. There was a chance that we could meet in the tournament but that would have been too long. How can you have the audacity to just casually mention you let a Pokémon go? I mean, make up a fake sob story or something. Also, don't say it when I'm within an earshot; to be fair, she couldn't have known I was there but still.

Maybe there was one saving grace about her. Nope. She dug her own grave when she explicitly mentioned going for the scar. And to top it off, I lost. Looking embarrassed was far from my main concern. Running to the Pokémon Center main lobby was all that mattered. Ruby needed stitches again.

The rental tuxedo had a fair amount of blood on it so it was really no surprise to Nurse Joy that something was clearly wrong. Her fingers started punching keys into her computer as fast as they could while a Chansey came out with a stretcher. Nurse Joy didn't have to say anything to me as she ran behind the double doors. Luckily the trip up a flight of stairs was short enough for Espeon otherwise I would have to call her back; there's no guarantee that the ball would stop the bleeding because they're meant to only limit ailments like burns or to prevent hypothermia.

Four feet walked across the lobby floor after I sat down on a bench with my head in my hands thinking about arguably the worst mistake of my life. Carly kneeled down in front of me. "I'm so sorry," she said quietly. "I don't know what to say… so I can at least do this." She sat next to me and hugged me while Davis sat on the other side of me looking curious.

"Can you tell me what happened so I can understand why I almost started a riot?" A little crass, but he needed an explanation.

"Remember when I mentioned if you saw those two specific people on your journey?" Davis nodded. "Sara was the reason why Espeon is always been a bit more emotional ever since I caught her. She came running to me with my Umbreon almost dead from a mix of poison and cuts. Just recently I found out that Sara used to have an Eevee that evolved mid-battle into my Espeon. Too much pressure was put on her to win a gym battle and her new powers weren't strong enough. Sara abused her and sent her off into the wild without healing her expecting that she would die."

Davis softened the expression on his face. "You have my deepest apologies. I just wanted to make sure that I could help you if someone wanted to follow up on tonight. Unfortunately someone will probably do just that since there was some damage done."

Now I have to worry about retribution from that bitch too. "Thanks, but I don't want to drag you into this too; it's my fight. Plus, I want to make sure things are done my way." He shot me a scowl. "Within reason of course. I still plan to 6-0 her." All three of us just sat there in silence with Carly continuing to embrace me. Davis just looked in deep thought until the operating room sign dimmed signaling the operation was done. Nurse Joy came out looking exhausted. I gently pushed Carly off of me so I could go up to her.
"How's she doing?"

"Fine. The previous operation was surprisingly well done considering it could have been better. At least two days of rest will be enough. The things you trainers do are starting to get a little more reckless every year." I almost lost my mind in front of everyone. She just took some serious shots without knowing jack shit about how this happened in the first place. Davis looked like he was about to speak up but I sat him down.

"I'll make sure she gets all the rest she needs. Thank you." Nurse Joy gave me one more look over as she returned to the back room to move Espeon to a hospital bed. I turned to the Kanto trainers. "And thank you two as well. Why would you stand up for a stranger? Wouldn't it be in your best interest to let me pay for my mistake as we get closer to the start of the tournament?"

Davis looked up from the ground. "Call it a gut feeling. There would be no reason for you to risk getting kicked out of the tournament for something small. It's obvious you care for your Pokémon and would do anything to make sure they are well taken care of. Kind of a shame really… there aren't too many of us here at the big stage. Here's our numbers if you need help. It's the least we can do for making us feel more comfortable on the ferry and on this rough journey. We'll give you some space. See you around." A piece of paper was handed to me as they made their way out.

So this is what it means to have someone backing you up?

Mitch wearing a tuxedo was one of the most… interesting things I've ever seen. He looked so refined and confident. You'd think he would have found someone by now, but he's so focused on keeping us happy. He had seen Sara in that room and I could sense him losing control of his emotions from my ball. Begging him wasn't an option because he was past the point of reason. I'm blessed he cares so much about me, but now wasn't the time to fight. I'm nervous when I was sent out to fight Piloswine because deep down I know she saved me from my first brush with death as an Eevee; part of my life is owed to her. Mitch's nod gave me the confidence to toss those deep-rooted feelings aside and stand up for myself since he was the one who had permanently saved my life. Sara was dead to me as a trainer, but I can't just forget what she had done to me. I only see her as a demon that can't be exercised.

Fury Attack wasn't the strongest move that could have been dished out but it was pretty annoying. My best guess is that she didn't want to start attacking other people with a move that had more field coverage like Blizzard. Fear never crossed my mind until a tusk jabbed at my stomach; the second one ripped open the scar from that night in the forest. Within seconds I was out cold after only hearing another thud, someone else wanting to jump in, plus something about 6-0. I've never heard of that phrase before.

I woke up in a very comfy hospital bed with the blankets pulled up over everything except my head. Wrinkles in the sheets led me to look at Mitch with his head sideways on the bed sleeping while I felt a gentle nudge on the back of my neck. There was no doubt in my mind who it was.

"Good afternoon my queen. I hope you slept well."

He hasn't called me that in a while. "How long have you been awake?"

Shade didn't even hesitate. "Since I was called out. It's been about 13 or 14 hours since you've been in here. Mitch tried his best to stay awake even after the nurse said you would fully recover."

"So you've watched over me this entire time?" A nod, then I fully turned around to kiss him. "Please go to sleep. You don't have to worry about me anymore." He still looked a little tense.
"You didn't talk to Mitch two nights ago when we arrived here. I think you should because he just
wants what's best for all of us. Tell him how you really feel about anything; he won't get mad at
all." Not quite ready to ease up just yet. "I'll be right there when you do it. Now sleep, your queen
demands it. It's okay for a king to relax," I said in a playful tone as I kissed him again. He gently
wrapped his paws around my upper body as both of us drifted off to sleep. Just like the first time
we met, he made sure I wouldn't get cold.

All three of us remained asleep for an hour just trying to recover from last night. As usual, Shade
was the first one awake and even growled softly at passing trainers until Mitch woke up too.
Having him for a mate was tied with Mitch raising me in terms of the greatest thing ever. I mean I
was happy with Shade back by Mount Mortar, but Mitch can protect me in ways Shade cannot
although he's always doing his best. He sighed heavily as he gently poked me. Judging by his body
language, this conversation was going to take a toll on all of us.

"I'm ready Ruby. Are you sure that you have enough energy to do this?"

"I'll be fine. Let me start." I poked Mitch to get his attention. "Shade wants to talk now. Are you
ready?" Mitch motioned for Shade to start the conversation.

Getting called on so late at night was fairly unusual since Mitch was asleep. However, this case
was something that was well worth my time. A stitched up Espeon, my mate, was lying in a
hospital bed with dulled pain; guess she's relaxed now because of the mix of drugs to keep her
under. The least I can do it watch over her until she wakes up. Something tells me I should let her
sleep on her own for as long as she needs. Even if the drugs wear off then she can still get some
natural deep sleep.

Nurses came in and out periodically which gave me mixed feelings. I want her to get better but can
I really trust these people? Mitch fell asleep after Ruby was shown to be alright so I truly was on
my own; now that brings me back to my free roaming days after escaping that hellhole laboratory.
Hard to believe that those idiots gave me powerful moves expecting me not to do anything with
them. Being "tied down" to both of them is what has kept me in check all this time. The more I
thought about it, the more I began to dive into my past. Giving her a nudge was by accident
because I had shifted to look at a Chansey dropping off some food for when we all woke up.
Chansey can't really do anything except heal, but I can't afford any mistakes when she can't protect
herself.

Regardless of how messy her body was, Ruby still looked beautiful. She still is my queen and
always will be even though I'm not in the forest. A kiss was all I needed to know that she was
alright. She had mentioned that I should talk to Mitch since I missed out on the previous
opportunity. Ruby had convinced me to fall asleep despite my will to make sure nothing would
happen to her. I made damn sure that she would feel safe even when I was asleep as well. This
conversation needed to happen so I poked at Ruby to get it started after she told me that the talk
wouldn't make her more exhausted; Mitch told me to start.

"Mitch… I can't believe we made it here. How long has it been since I came to your camp carrying
Ruby on sheer willpower alone? The entire run to our den was the worst thing I've experienced in
my life. Without you, both of us would be dead. I'm not sure if you knew that the forest you
camped in was filled with some of the most brutal Pokémon you could encounter. It was safe to say
that you had strong Pokémon by your side. You took us in when we were on death's doorstep plus
you didn't even capture us right away. I'm still sorry I bit you though. Our den had all the berries
we needed… or so I thought. That's why both of us just dropped when we led you there and saw
that there was nothing left…" I couldn't think of what else to say. Luckily he responded pretty fast.
"It's okay Umbr- err Shade. Back then I knew how much both of you were hurting and I knew how much you cared for Espeon. Biting me really didn't hurt all that much, although now you could easily fracture my hand. Capturing you wasn't in my mind until both of you found me in the morning so you could rub against me. Also, I didn't have any Luxury Balls on me. Any Pokémon with me deserves the best in life."

I knew that this next part was going to be painful. "Although I appreciate everything you've done, I still want to be with Tom. He's the one who showed me what it means to win battles and he was the reason I evolved from an Eevee. Frankly it sucks that I can never fully trust you because of what I went through. Some days I wish he was alive so we could travel and win the whole league together. Quilava had been my rival since he easily won every battle except for our fight against Morty. I don't think I can ever fully commit myself to you. There... I said it okay?"

Silence. Just silence while he digested the fact that I could never fully appreciate all of his hard work, those last four badges, that tournament in Olivine, the compassion he showed to so many people in the time I've been with him. All of it felt like a façade to me.

"Well... I can't change the past. Tom must have been a great trainer to you. From the first time I took you to the cemetery I knew that you could possibly feel this way; now I can finally hear it for myself. Understand that I never want to be anyone else or even pretend to be anyone else. Question now that I think about it: did you stay with me just because of Ruby? I kept a straight face. "I said I wouldn't get anyone hurt if I could avoid it..."

I felt myself losing control of my emotions. "Bullshit! You're the reason why she's in this hospital bed right now! You had to try to get revenge as soon as possible just so you could make yourself feel better. Not one second was devoted to thinking about what would happen down there. Things like this are why I can't trust you or any other humans for that matter. Team Rocket took almost everything away from me. Now using a fifth or sixth move can land me back in some laboratory or even six feet under. Do you understand what I have to live with for the rest of my life? I have to protect Ruby and make sure I can control myself. So many Pokémon back by Mount Mortar have been killed by me just so I could be here today. You may think that Linda person or that Nurse Joy back in Mahogany Town told you all about my life but they don't have a clue about what I've done!"

I panted heavily after the long-winded rant to catch my breath. "What matters to me is Ruby. Arceus be damned if she has to go through this because of your stupidity. That's all I've got for now." I kissed my mate and bolted out of the room; I needed to clear my mind.

Outside the Pokémon Center it started to turn into late afternoon which meant the moon was getting closer by the second. Using Moonlight at night made me feel really energized so I opted to wait until then. Going to the woods was the only reasonable thing to do since I felt like I belonged there since Tom died. Did I really make the right decision that day to follow Mitch on this path? Ruby is happy while I'm struggling. Damn, now I wish I didn't dart out of the room so fast so that she could know what was going on. She gets a lot of credit for not crying during my rant although I think I saw a tear streak down her eye on my way out. Look at me now... a hypocrite; I care about making her happy then I pull that. What really got to me was that I left too fast to see if Mitch had any reaction.

Whatever happened back there didn't matter anymore. My mind was on the two figures approaching me in the forest.
Chapter 31- Hail the King & Queen

Nobody stood in my way while I trekked through the dense forest. The Pokémon Center was long gone at this point and was replaced by an enormous mountain in the distance. It's not like I had to worry, but there was a certain point where I felt a shift in power of the wild Pokémon. Any younger Pokémon were well hidden while the older siblings or parents placed themselves at the forefront of the nest. Every single one of them shot me a glare as I walked by. Something about a trainer's Pokémon roaming around is pretty concerning; feels funny that I'm the one doing it now after all that time by Mount Mortar. Dusk approached along with two figures. One looked like a horse while the other looked like a ball.

One of them decided to shout instead of waiting to get closer. "Are you the king we've heard about?"

"Who wants to know?"

Ponyta was the first Pokémon to rush forward with a concerned look on its face. "We heard about you from the other side of the mountain. You were a ruler in one of the biggest parts of Johto, right? I've heard about you from everyone around here. Please… you have to help us."

"What's going on out here that you need my help? Isn't there someone else that can take care of your problem? I'm not in the mood to deal with anything right now."

The fire horse carefully planned a response. "I never introduced myself. I'm Emily, daughter of the rightful ruler of this area. Mount Silver is a fairly big area so long ago it was decided that the area would be broken up. Over the past few years it's been a living hell because my Rapidash father has been missing. My partner Trent and I still think he's alive." Emily stopped and miserably looked at the ground; her Tangela partner held steady.

"As much as I feel for you, I don't think I can help. If this has been going around for years, then you've probably looked through every crevice in the mountain by your tone. Besides, I gave up that title for good. All it did was cause me to worry." Emily didn't like my response so she raised her voice to me.

"If that's the case then where's your master!? Did they just leave you out here to die then? Both of us sense that you're still connected to a ball. Deep down you know you're a wild Pokémon. You were meant to be a king."

She's right. Mitch didn't rush out of the room to go get me and I was with Tom for what, two days before I got captured by Team Rocket? I've never really been tamed by Mitch in how I act or how I battle. There have been so many times I've sent another Pokémon six feet under in the wild. Mitch still allowed me to battle with my style or even encouraged me to do massive damage; I wonder how that Donphan is doing by the way. Whatever, I'm on my own now.

"Tell you what… you bring me to a safer place and I'll listen to more. Don't think for a second I'll just help you without knowing what I'm getting into." A small glimmer of hope was on Emily's face as Trent led the way to the Mount Silver's base.
The area was arguably the toughest place between the two regions combined and it showed. Hiding spots like logs showed signs of numerous struggles while smaller caves looked not as safe compared to the one I lived in. Another shift of power could be felt as we reached the entrance of the cave.

"Be careful. Once we get to where we're going, then you can finally relax. The road only gets tougher here so stealth is important," Trent whispered to me. "Maybe you could battle your way out of trouble but we're running if there's a battle. The ruler's daughter staying alive is more important than either of us. Do you understand? You can turn back now without the guilt of quitting on your shoulders."

How many times have I heard about something like this happening? Some important person is worth more blah blah blah… shut up already. "Lead the way."

Trent did so at a mixed pace where he would breeze through sections of the mountain's ground floor while tiptoeing through the other areas. It never occurred to me why we had to tiptoe until I saw Ursaring in groups of four and almost blew our cover. Once we were really off the beaten path, we went into a somewhat secret den area.

Emily lit a small fire. "Here's the safest place I could think of. Food?" A bushel of berries was nudged over to me.

"Pass. Now what's going on here? Is it something more than a wild goose chase?"

"Worse I'm afraid. Ever since my father disappeared, this area has become a terrible place. Him and his heirs, my bothers, were on business but never returned. It has been three years since the search party stopped and there were no signs of them either dead or alive. In that time of chaos we were ambushed by a group of pink Sneasel with a regular colored one as their leader; most of those still in power were slaughtered mercilessly. Now every Pokémon lives in fear for their lives if they cannot support his forces. Sometimes he kills while other times his assassins do it in front of a group for fun. Under his rule, he's somehow convinced the strongest Pokémon in the area to fight for him. There is truly no hope."

My interest has been piqued. "Don't take this the wrong way, but why aren't you dead yet? It would seem reasonable that he'd want you out of the way."

Tears started to fall from her eyes. "Marriage." Her voice started to get weaker. "Having children with him would never happen. If he tries to mate with me, I'll burn him. If I refuse or if his group hears about what I would do, then I would be executed in front of everyone."

"How do you know this is going to happen?" Can't you run?"

"I overheard him in his chamber one night. As for running, it would be impossible. He has his guards around the main points of entry and some of them keep a closer eye on me than others. He lets me roam around on my own for now but I feel the day is coming where he will ask for me to join him."

It was a miracle that we survived a dangerous path just to meet you. No sane Pokémon would take the path you were on into our area. I'm not sane… I'm desperate."

"Did you tell anyone that he's toying with you?"

"No." She covered her eyes. "It's better that they don't know. They already have enough to deal with. Even if they knew about it, they would be too scared to do anything. On the chance we all
stood together, we would still get killed in a heartbeat." Emily looked up with a nervous smile. "My father would be proud of me knowing I'd do whatever it takes to keep everyone else safe... even if it means giving up my life."

Her story hit me hard. The fact that she first referred to me as a king right away and not just an average Pokémon is enough to convince me she was desperate for someone strong. Circumstances like hers are actually rare. At least the overthrowing group would have the so-called "decency" to kill all of the old regime and make the change as fast as possible. Psychologically torturing a big group for an extended period of time is something I can't stand. Ruby will be under constant stress for the rest of her life because of Sara and even that was only after few days with her. Me? I almost let the psychological pain consume me. Just sitting in the laboratory day after day with zero chance of living a happy life took over my mind until they let their guard down.

"Emily I need you to look at me. You too Trent." Both of them had a hopeful look in their eyes. "After all the things I've seen as a king, I was happy to throw it all away. Unfortunately, being a ruler has some consequences. My mate has been through hell and back because of my title alone. Having no skin in the game makes ruling easy. Your father has done an impressive job to protect you this long, not to mention raising you as a kind daughter. I'll fight for you because you have what it takes to lead. Also, I want to test my strength. Forget the Silver Conference; my mate deserves someone strong who can protect others in their darkest hour."

She bowed to me. "Thank you my king."

"Enough. Remember that I gave up that title to fate. A wise ruler would have thought about a successor. Truth be told I'm not that great of a king since I only wanted power to survive. Ruby changed me for the better though. She taught me that fighting for certain people is worth it in the end. Call me Shade by the way. I want to clear any traces of me being a king."

"You can't," Trent said shaking his head. "There is an aura about a leader that just doesn't seem to go away. Call me crazy, but I can still sense it for Emily's father and you. Although you used to rule, no average Pokémon around here knows you. We can use that to our advantage. Now let's rest up. The sun is setting and both of us are exhausted. I know you're a dark type, but we need to be in top shape to even stand a chance in battle let alone hike up a few levels of the mountain."

Our fire was extinguished and we all found a place to sleep comfortably. Sorry Mitch, I can't have you coming for me now. You have no clue what it's like to fight like this. You'd only be hindering me.

In the depths of our hiding spot there was one sign that morning had come. A small ray of sun made itself known by shining brightly through a crack that fell perfectly in line with my face; of course it would be me with the rude awakening. Stretching would be important to keep me loose as the trek up the mountain would probably take a few hours. My breakfast was a grand total of three berries because I wanted to see how much Trent and Emily would need. Both of them woke up shortly after I finished eating. As I thought, they ate a large portion of their stash slowly. From the looks of it, they seem well prepared for a big mission like this one. Almost as if they were going over the details telepathically. Hmmm…

"Got a question for you guys." They stopped eating. "Be honest with me. Were you going to battle him today regardless of if I showed up or not?"

A sigh escaped Emily. "Maybe not today, but I sensed that I had to do it before he told the area that I would join him. It is getting closer to mating season around here." She pointed to the small pile of leftover berries. "We're both full so eat your share."
"I thought you'd want to save these for later."

She had fire in her eyes and in her voice. "Oh, who am I kidding!? We've decided that we're not coming back to this place. Either we win today or that's it. Eat up… you're going to need every scrap. If not, then you can leave the cave and fight the Ursaring on the way out. I'm not scared of dying anymore." So they were basically walking into a slaughter before I showed up. Desperation is an amazing emotion.

We made our way up the mountain with very little resistance. My best guess is that anyone willing to go see Sneasel shouldn't have to deal with security because he'll probably kill you after you're done talking to him. Everything changed when we approached a thin strip of land surrounded by water on both sides. Goldeen were casually swimming about posing no threat. Quagsire on the other hand, really didn't appreciate us trying to advance so it just blocked our path. Only one stood in our way but that was something we all really didn't want to deal with.

Trent took charge. "Get out of the way. We have somewhere to be." Quagsire stood there looking oblivious as ever. "Last warning. Move or I'll move you." Quagsire's face turned angry at that threat. Its tail tried to come around but Trent stopped it with his vines. "Your loss." Vines continued to come out before hitting the Quagsire for massive damage. Another one jumped on the land to fight for its buddy only to see Vine Whip slap it back into the water unconscious; he turned back to us. "Keep moving."

Emily was starting to get anxious so her pace picked up while Trent and I stayed behind her. He actually reminded me of my old self back there. "Hey Trent, I have to give you props for taking care of that so efficiently."

"Nothing should be too hard on the way up now." He took a pause. "You want to know something Shade? I agreed to help her because her father gave me a chance when I was down on my luck. I refuse to let any water or ground type get in our way, especially when we're so close. Just one more level to go up and we'll be on his doorstep."

More Pokémon seemed to stand in our way the closer we got to his throne room or whatever the hell you want to call it. It's an old mind game passed down from centuries ago: have heightened security at the beginning of your domain as well as at the end before the ruler. Leave the majority of the trip with no forces to lure enemies into a false sense of security. Sneasel really didn't know his enemy since he threw so many Quagsires at us. Trent effortlessly whipped them away or regained strength with Mega Drain. Emily took care of anything from the air like Golbats while I went to work on the stronger Pokémon like Donphan or Ursaring. We made so much noise so it's safe to say there was no element of surprise. Five pink Sneasels stood in front of the ringleader once we forced our way into a fairly large cave.

He arrogantly sat atop a rock. "My oh my look who it is! If I had known you were coming then I would have at least met you at the bottom. So did you decide to join me my dear? We could have the wedding later today."

Emily was shaken but took some time to make sure her voice was steady. "Over my dead body. Now what have you done with my family?" A sarcastic smirk came over its face as if he knew she would say no.

"Since you don't want to be mine, the least I can do is tell you the truth instead of lying to you for years. All of your bothers? Dead. Fearow food. My boys here made sure that each one was dead four times over. Your father? If you can beat them then I might tell you."

She was actually shaking so much that she collapsed to the ground; Trent stood in front of her.
"Alright… we'll slaughter the five of you first. Don't get too comfortable up there." Vines went for all five pink Sneasel and they all dodged; I knew it would be hard to get a hit in.

Claws were more favorable to all of them because any ice attack could hit a partner. Their speed couldn't be compared to anything I've ever seen. Both of us decided to attack ahead of the pack so that there was a chance that they would run into one of our attacks. Dark Pulse was a good choice since it had range and could send some rocks at them like a pseudo Rock Throw. One of them eventually anticipated wrong and took a heavy hit from a falling rock.

Bind was used and Trent easily secured him. He followed it up with Stun Spore to practically cripple the assassin. Mega Drain was used to ensure the knockout but Trent kept going; he was literally sucking the life out of the first Sneasel. When it was over, its comrades saw a shriveled-up corpse tossed in front of them.

"Who's next?" Trent said with some venom in his voice. And I thought I was brutal.

Their attack pattern continued to be close combat with their claws until I used Faint Attack to instantly knock one out cold. For good measure, I threw a layer of Toxic on the unconscious Sneasel to make sure it would die. The trio that was left standing abandoned their strategy of attacking in a pack and just went all out with no intention to dodge. I went for Faint Attack but I got Quick Attack instead. The hell was that about? Luckily for me I sent it against a rock at an odd angle; the audible neck snap made up for that fluke. I just looked at my scarred paw as if that was the problem.

"Pay attention!" Another pink Sneasel was heading straight for me flashing its claws. A blazing stream of fire pinned it to the side of the cave for a solid eight seconds before slumping to the ground with third degree burns covering the body.

"I think I'm good." Emily looked like she was still unsettled after hearing all of her brothers were killed. Regardless, she netted a critical kill for us. Desperation caused the last pink Sneasel to charge ahead at Emily only to be grabbed by Trent. He used the same method to finish off the last roadblock to the leader.

"Where are you?" Trent yelled. In the commotion, the leader had seemingly disappeared.

"Shut up and look with your eyes you idiot." He came out from behind another rock in the distance walking methodically. "You wanted to know where your father was my dear? Here he is!" A Rapidash was tossed in front of the three of us but still remained closer to him.

"Father!" Rapidash's fire was oddly colored and dimming by the minute. He was still breathing, though one hind leg was obviously broken and he was covered in gashes plus dry blood. "What… what have to done to h-him?"

Sneasel flashed a grin. "Just made sure he couldn't escape or put up a fight. How am I supposed to rule this huge area with him unchecked? I was merciful enough to let him live and take care of him… occasionally. But now I think it's time to put an official end to his reign." He ran at full speed from one end of the cave to the other horizontally. A lasp gasp for air echoed throughout the cave and then the fire on his mane no longer flowed; it looked like it turned to coal. It was a clean slice across his entire body. Emily was officially broken; there will be no more battling from her.

"Wow… that was fun! Can't believe I waited so long to kill him. You guys are next. I'll start with my would-be bride. We could've done so much more but you know everything now. Tell your father I said hello." I knew he was going straight for her. I knew I wouldn't be fast enough to get to him. I didn't know that Trent was even faster when grabbing him from a distance and using Stun
"You have caused so much pain to every Pokémon in this area, especially Emily. Now it's your turn to suffer! I'll suck the life out of you long after you're dead."

Mega Drain was looking fine until Trent was severely cut from a Slash attack. "Stun Spore isn't that accurate you know." He feigned being paralyzed this entire time. What's that yellow cloud around Trent now? Vines around him were loosened as he dusted himself off. "I'll leave the suffering to you." Fury Swipes was the move that delivered massive damage from five critical hits.

"I'll be seeing the rightful ruler with Arceus. I'll leave you with these two... and paralysis." Another desperate move: he covered himself in the paralyzing spores so that Sneasel's own attacks would get him exposed. "Shade! I've lived a good life with no regrets. Thank you for helping us in our time of need. Finish the job so that I can die knowing that Emily is safe and she will take her rightful place as ruler. Hail Queen Emily!" The hits took their toll and Trent finally drew his last breath.

Sneasel was still trying to figure out what had just happened to him.

Emily was beyond distraught and in no condition to battle.

The weight of an entire Pokémon community rested on my shoulders. You know what they say about pressure: it can break things down or make diamonds. Pure adrenaline coursed through my veins which caused my rings to shine a glorious yellow.

Time to make a diamond.
Chapter 32- Complications

Trent lay dead just a few feet in front of me after covering himself in his own Stun Spore to paralyze the last remaining threat in this whole saga. Sneasel looked shocked at the turn of events and cursed himself for getting into this situation. His speed was the only true advantage he had over me, but that was practically neutralized. I don't know what's been going on in this area over the past few years, but Emily witnessing her father's death and Trent's death in the span of just a few minutes has taken the will to fight out of her; maybe she's even lost the will to live. Sneasel took notice after he was done with his self-evaluation.

"Your idiot friend sacrificed himself for nothing. I can still move faster than both of you even in my current condition which means that I'll kill both of you. The real question is which one of you will get cut open first?" He moved his claw as if he was doing eney meeny miny moe and he slowed down when he reached the end; it pointed to Emily. "Aww man… I wanted to have a little more fun with you before I send you to see your father. Since I still somewhat love you and I'm a man of my word, I'll make your death as painless as possible." A Slash attack was ready to strike her as he moved across the area. Dark Pulse sent him into a rock.

"I'm also a man of my word. She will rule this area better than you have so far." I turned back to see if she snapped out her shock; still lying over in the corner shaking her head. "Trent didn't sacrifice himself for nothing. Last time I tried to fire a Dark Pulse at your slowest member, I missed by a mile. Still think you're faster than me? You won't even get close to her. Also, I'll be taking her place in battle. It's not really fair to attack someone who has no will to battle." Both of us were on the edge of our toes waiting for someone to move. Something told me to start counting once one of us moved.

"New plan: I'll get rid of you first. When you're gone, I'll kill off the bloodline. Maybe I'll have a little fun with her before that. No, wait! I'll beat you just enough so you're still conscious but unable to move, make you watch, kill her, and then kill you." My rings illuminated the entire cave and nearly blinded him.

"You touch a single flame on her and I'll find a way to bring you back from the dead just to kill you again."

"You'd have to kill me before I beat you down."

Sneasel made the first move with a piercing Screech attack. The high-pitched frequency reverberated throughout the cave while forcing me to cover my ears to the best of my abilities. A Metal Claw hit me square in the side for some decent damage. He continued to hack away until I used Bite to grab one arm. It was a mixed bag because I grabbed the forearm instead of the actual claw. Digging into his softer flesh was very satisfying, even at the cost of him getting in a few extra swipes at my face. I tossed him aside then licked my lips. The adrenaline rush gave my rings a more blinding glow on top of them already being bright for just a split second. He covered his eyes then I fired up a Toxic.

Poison didn't come out of my mouth though. Dark Pulse did. How? That doesn't make any sense. I literally thought about using Toxic, the poison welled up, but it just… was replaced. There was no
warning about the attack being different just before I launched it. That weird professor in New Bark Town said that this could happen but I wish he told me what it would feel like; still landed a nice hit on Sneasel though.

Heavy breathing came from the other side of the cave followed by the sounds of struggling. "Paralysis is a bitch isn't it?"

"Not as bad as using a pretty ineffective move. I take it you're not as dumb as her pathetic excuse for a bodyguard so what's the problem?" Not really sure if I want to give away my past or even hint at the fact I have six moves so I just kept a straight face. "Are you insulting me by showing mercy? That'll only get you killed out here!" An aggressive Slash was about to hit me when paralysis kicked in.

"Just giving you a taste of your own medicine. Why finish this so soon?" Arguably the biggest bluff I've ever had to do in my life. Unfortunately I have no choice but to act on it. "While you're trying to regain some movement, let me tell you that Emily would have never done anything with you. She would have rather died than mate with you. Ha! That speaks volumes considering almost every ruler usually has a lot of Pokémon practically lining up to mate with them. If you're really as keen as you think you are, then you either would've forcibly taken Emily or moved on to find another mate. No other ruler I've seen has been so half-assed when it comes to finding a partner. Rulers have to make decisive choices and live with them which is something that comes with the territory."

"Oh spare me the crap."

"You're not worthy to rule here on that principle alone. From the sound of it too, you're really not sure what to do since all of the Pokémon in your domain have been living in constant fear and uncertainty for the past few years. As for killing her entire family to get to the top, that is to be expected. However, you seemed to feel that Emily would be okay with that and banked on her feeling defeated or easily accepting that her father was never to be found after the search party stopped. The mind can be a terrible thing when we just ignore it."

He got back on his feet with a scowl on his face. "And who made you the expert on all of this? Just because you've been there before doesn't mean that your situation applies here. This is Mount Silver, the area home to the strongest Pokémon in the world. There's no way I'll give it up so easily." A grin appeared. "And thanks to you, I have a blueprint to make sure I get what I want in the future."

I took a deep breath. "You won't have a future."

I readied Bite, but Quick Attack was the move that came out. My body was too unbalanced to land an effective hit plus I was still hurting from the close-range Metal Claw attacks. Another thing from that is that he was closer to Emily whereas I was on the opposite side. Sneasel went for another Slash on my exposed side and scored a massive hit. This constant roulette wheel of attacks was getting in the way of this fight. For the first time since Olivine City I feel like I'm going to lose this one fight… the one fight that I can't afford to lose.

"I saved my strongest move for last," he said while looking over his handy work. A purple aura covered both of his claws as he charged forward to land another hit. I refused to attack in his direction for fear of hitting Emily with something that wasn't Bite. Now I know his mental capacity isn't all that high since he could've gone straight for Emily. What hit me felt oddly familiar and was very weak compared to his other attacks. A look of concern came across his face. "That still should've done more. Faint Attack usually gets the job done against everything, including dark types."
On the inside I was losing my shit. That was supposed to be strong!? I decided to show him what a real Faint Attack looks like. I got into position in front of Emily but the imaginary roulette didn't give me what I wanted. Moonlight was the move that was being used in place of the one I wanted which wasn't all bad since I felt much better after its effect ended. Frustration set in with Sneasel as he realized that a majority of damage from his attacks were essentially wasted. Then his expression changed and he started to mumble some numbers while counting on his claws.

"You know six moves... how interesting. Maybe not all humans are worthless." He looked at me with crossed arms. "I'll make you a deal. I won't kill you if you can take me to the human that gave you six moves. What do you say?"

Maybe he's a little smarter than I gave him credit for or that may have been the dumbest thing to ever come out of someone's mouth. "You cannot be serious. Getting those extra moves was pure hell. I highly doubt you would have the toughness to survive the long process. Shit, you're having a hard time with me. What makes you think you're worthy to have six moves? That last Faint Attack was pure garbage."

His head shook. "Power. I can have so much more power than every other Pokémon out there. At least I could be able to handle the side effects unlike you. Oh well, I can find them myself." Metal Claw was charged up but it stopped due to the paralysis. An idea popped up in my head as I thought about my next move: don't use the right attack. Mentally I prepared for Bite, but Faint Attack was chosen this time around. The impact wasn't as brutal as some of my previous ones which left me disappointed; still sent him into the dense back wall of the cave.

"Get up you bitch. I know that didn't kill you." A berry was in his hand as he lay on the ground. "Oh you've got to be fucking kidding me."

A smirk came across Sneasel's face. "Very observant. This berry cures paralysis so now I can move freely. You know... it pays to have a backup plan. The only problem is that I couldn't get to my little hiding spot fast enough. Bon appétit." The effect of paralysis was almost instantly gone after seeing his arms moving effortlessly. When rising to his feet, there was an obvious wince of pain; thank Arceus I landed a shot to one leg.

"Don't think that I'll ease up knowing that you're crippled. An enemy to me is either dead or ruled unable to battle by a judge. I don't see a judge or another trainer which means this isn't over until one of us is dead. Leg injuries can lead to something worse if not dealt with properly."

It was déjà vu all over again as he went from Screech to Metal Claw despite the injury in the leg. This time I opted to counter immediately with Bite rather than just cover my ears. Bite was what I wanted as I thought about using Toxic. Claws were my focus this time so that I could stop the attack. He used his other claw to push me aside and made a mad dash toward Emily. I can't attack though. What if I use Toxic and he jumps? I'd basically kill the one hope for this area; not the reputation I want. A blast of fire nailed Sneasel square in the chest.

Emily rose to her feet. "I'm done moping around. Sorry to leave you fighting by yourself Shade."

"Don't worry about it. I'm almost done with him anyway." I felt something well up inside of me; it was definitely Toxic. Could I actually control my attacks now? Purple blobs were sent in Sneasel's direction with each one hitting. Now it was only a matter of time. "I pray to Arceus that Emily's father beats you down into Hell."

"No! I won't go down so easily," the faux ruler screamed. "You were all about fairness in fighting so I'll make it fair." Screech echoed throughout the cave at a different frequency. "Ursaring will be here soon to make sure both of you will end up like your friend over there. Take this as a..."
another burst of fire sent him up against a side of the cave.

"I've had enough!" Emily teed off on the poisoned Pokémon mixing Stomp attacks, Take Downs, and Ember. When it was all said and done, nobody would be able to recognize Sneasel at the first glance or the fiftieth. "Father's waiting for you. I hope you beg for mercy and don't get any," she said venomously to the corpse. "Stay here while I get some of his berries." Take Down broke open a large hole in the wall and she rolled as many berries as she could over to me. I ate as many as I could fit in my mouth. Being exhausted was something I haven't felt since I saved Ruby on that fateful night.

"Thank you Emily. What made you want to fight at the end?"

She looked down. "Revenge, sadly. I heard you talking during the fight and I do feel bad that I dragged you into this whole mess. I'm embarrassed that I couldn't do it on my own."

I made her sit down next to me. "There's no shame in asking others for help which is why I feel bad about treating you so poorly when you begged me for help. Can you forgive me… Queen Emily?"

A smile came across her face. "Of course Shade. Now we just have to get out…"

"Urrrrssaaaarrrrring!" An army of about 20 Ursaring made their way into the cave and showed no signs of letting us leave so easily.

"Emily… get behind me."

"I can fight! There's no need…"

"Now!" I made sure that they formed a semi-circle around me. "This is going to get chaotic so wait until I give the all clear signal." All of them growled until four of them launched themselves at me with Thrash. For reasons unknown, I got Dark Pulse to fire when I was thinking about it. The group was easily knocked back but was replaced by another. Each one took turns trying to get close only to be blown back. Once they got to panting I fired a Toxic attack in the form of a wave so that all of them would get hit. The cycle continued until all of them dropped dead. My signal was given so that Emily could move about.

"W-w-what h-h-have I d-done? All of them were loyal to my father but now look at them…"

"You did nothing wrong. Unfortunately it had to come to this." Silence filled the cave until I thought I heard a moan. "I don't trust that they're all dead. Please… you have to let me make sure. Even one of them getting back up could mean some serious trouble on the way back down the mountain. I'll give you time to look away and cover your ears."

"I understand." It was heartbreaking to see her turn around knowing that we didn't have a choice. One by one I walked up before biting through their necks. By the sixteenth one I was running out of energy to bite down so I had to physically snap their necks. "Alright, every threat is taken care of. Without the toughest Pokémon around, we should have little trouble getting to the bottom." She still looked forlorn. "I'm truly sorry. The least I can do is to carry three bodies down for everyone to see. They have a right to know what really happened."

"Okay… can I carry my father?"

"Of course." I gathered the deformed Sneasel and Trent up on my back while Emily managed to get her father on her back.
The path down was oddly relaxing since there was no resistance like I expected. Any lower tier soldiers fled at the sight of their dead leader. Time seemed to be a nonfactor as sunlight couldn't find a way through the denser part of the mountain. Emily had to stop every so often to rest from carrying the one thing that mattered to her. On top of the physical weight of 210 pounds, she was carrying an emotional burden far heavier. The sheer fact that she didn't try to throw herself in front of an attack to stop the pain during my battle is a testament to her will. We could see the exit when Emily just couldn't stand.

"Shade… I need help."

"What is it?"

"I can't do it. I just can't do it. I'm afraid to tell everyone what happened. They'll all say that I'm weak. I can't face them with my father on my back. My legs can't handle it, I'm an emotional mess… was Sneasel going to be a better ruler than me?" Tears flowed from her eyes as the harsh reality set in: she was truly alone in rebuilding the area once we exited the mountain.

"Let me help you by carrying your father the rest of the way so you have all the energy you need. I promise that nothing will happen to him." She tried to stand with the weight on her back but fell down immediately. "Believe me when I say that your father would be beyond proud that you carried him all this way. You would not be dishonoring him if you let me carry him for the last few feet of the journey." Rapidash was left on the ground as Emily staggered to her feet. "Forget about what he said; the Pokemon that have seen you grow up trust you. I realized during our secret meeting that I wouldn't be half the ruler you are."

"That… means a lot to me…"

I adjusted my pace after accounting for the extra weight. "Come on, I'll be right by your side."

Sunlight shone brightly as we exited the hellhole that was Mount Silver and I could finally stop my rings from glowing. The first Pokemon we saw within the borders was a Larvitar who promptly got its parents. After explaining everything to them, Emily convinced them to have everyone gather in a more open area. So many Pokemon showed up despite the short notice all waiting to hear the big announcement.

"Pokémon of Mount Silver! I come to you today to tell you that the Sneasel that overthrew my father has been defeated by this Umbreon here beside me." I threw its body in front of me. "As for my father… he is dead along with all of my brothers. I am the only one left of the ruling family after three years of heartache. I am not sure if I am worthy to be your leader though. Will you accept me even though I have failed you for such a long time?"

Minutes went by without anyone saying a word until a Donphan spoke up. "All hail Queen Emily! The true and rightful ruler! Your father wouldn't want it any other way! Anyone still loyal to Sneasel may leave now without punishment!" Cheers erupted from the crowd.

She motioned for them to quiet down. "Before I can take my place, I must give a proper burial to my most loyal companion and my father. Tonight I ask that you give me privacy. Tomorrow we have a fresh start. I am honored that you chose me to serve all of you." More cheers followed as she motioned me to follow her into the forest.

Guards surrounding the "palace" were thrilled to see Emily return. A hollowed-out tree still looked like it belonged to her despite being on the run for so long. She asked me to dig the holes to bury the two that she once knew close to her home once dusk hit. Elegies were said before I buried them for good and placed a makeshift tombstone on top of each one.
Emily stared intently at me before breaking down again after the ceremony was over and we were walking back to her room. "Shade… I'm scared about the future. What's going to happen now? What's going to happen tonight? Is someone going to come for me?"

I spoke very softly. "I don't know. Tonight, let's focus on getting some sleep. You deserve it after all that you went through. I'll be outside guarding the room."

A quick kiss was planted on my maw. "Please don't leave me alone," she said weakly. Her bed was fairly large so she curled up beside me and laid her head underneath my chin while I comforted her; she fell asleep right away.

"Sleep well your highness."
Chapter 33-A Sense of Belonging

We both slept under the darkness that covered Mount Silver's base as the three year long struggle came to an end. It really is fascinating that almost all of that fear and pain can be undone in the span of 48 hours. Validation was needed because everyone was still very uncertain if we had actually killed the one Pokémon who had made this place nearly collapse from within. Nothing says "proof" like throwing a horribly disfigured body in front of an entire crowd to show that we survived our fight. Unfortunately Emily's work is far from done. She has to reconnect with this entire region after being prevented from speaking her mind and some things may never be undone. I have no clue how many other Pokémon around here carry burdens; some of those physical and mental scars can run deep. All that matters now is that Emily can look forward to a fresh start.

Clouds covered the sun when I woke up so I just stayed still while Emily was sleeping peacefully. Once the sun broke through for a split second, I let my rings glow just a little bit; Emily mumbled in her sleep before waking up. She looked so refreshed after fighting a losing battle for so long. Something also looked different about her and I had this weird feeling deep down. Something about wanting to be her mate.

She rubbed her head underneath my neck. "Good morning Shade. Sleep well?"

"Yeah. Just wish the sun stayed behind the clouds for a bit longer. Are you ready to claim what's yours?"

"… I don't know if I can do this. What if yesterday's enthusiasm was a lie? Is anyone going to take me seriously after I abandoned them?"

Doubt is something that cannot get in the way of her getting everything back to normal. "Something like that is very hard to fake. Don't worry if it takes a while for things to get back to the way they were. What I said about leadership back then is true though. You have to make decisions and live with them, but that doesn't mean you have to do it all by yourself. It wouldn't be a bad thing if I came with you for moral support. Remember it's your area now. Let's get going."

The forest Pokémon had felt just like Emily: refreshed and hopeful after hearing that Sneasel had finally been killed. Many of them actually did not need her help because they had still been living the same way during his reign. However, it just was with more fear. With reactions like those, I knew that Sneasel was a terrible leader. He had no idea what to do except for sit on his "throne" and rule from afar. This place may have been a ghost town if he actually visited the forest because his guards didn't do anything on their own. Honestly, it just bothers me how lazy he was yet he still ruled with an iron fist. A rebellion would've been interesting if it was the population versus Sneasel and his underlings.

Everywhere she walked, she was bowed down to and treated as if he father were in charge. Anyone that did have a problem had it solved by a neighbor or Emily would add it to a mental list. It was going pretty smoothly until we walked by a Teddiursa cub and her mother.

"Mamma… when's daddy coming home? He doesn't have to work anymore," she said in a worried tone.
The Ursaring mother looked down at her daughter with a glimmer of hope. "Soon. Very soon. When we see daddy then we go back to normal since that bad man is not here anymore." She spotted us and came right up to us. "Your highness! It's an honor to meet you. I know it's been awhile but you've grown up so much. My deepest condolences for the king. I can make you and your friend some food since you took the time to come all the way to the far east of Mount Silver."

Emily blushed. "Please please, call me Emily and thank you. My father will be missed for sure." She looked at me. "Come to think of it… we could use something to eat. Are you sure that you want to go through the trouble?"

A smile was on her face. "Not at all Emily. Give me about half an hour to make something up. You can keep walking around or stay close by, whatever works for you." We opted to walk around the nearby area talking to other Pokémon to see if there was anything we could do to get things back on track. Just like before, nobody really had any big problems since all of their problems were fear based. The smell of cooked berries was enough to draw us back for our meal.

The Teddiursa cub greeted us as we sat around the fire. "Mamma makes the best food around! Fire is hot but mamma makes sure nothing gets burned."

"But is that fire hotter than mine?" Emily asked playfully.

"Nuh uh. You're fire is waaaaay hotter." She'd be good with kids.

All four of us ate our food quietly. There was an odd tension in the room until the Ursaring saw her cub finish the meal. "Sweetie… the grownups need to talk now."

"Okay!" The innocence in that voice almost made me cringe. I don't think that I've seen a Pokémon that has no clue what is going on in the world. Arceus bless her.

A forlorn look came across the mother's face. "Would you happen to know where my husband is? He worked as a member of the royal guard under your father but somehow kept working under that Sneasel."

Emily's first test as a ruler was a tough one. Instead of the typical fight for power, it ended up being a problem with no easy solution. She got straight to the point. "Where was he stationed with Sneasel? Or do you not know?"

"He said he was assigned to inside the mountain. Since he was one of the strongest fighters, he was placed near the upper levels. We haven't seen him in months but…"

I had to jump in. "Is there a chance he was a personal guard? Like one that could be called if there was an emergency where Sneasel was outmatched?"

She nodded. "That was it. He constantly complained about how his ears were hurting. Whenever I tried to help him he told me it was classified training."

Emily and I looked at each other. Oh my Arceus… I killed him. Not only did I kill him with poison, I snapped his neck for good measure. Despite the damning thing I had done, she had to tell her. Telling someone that their loved one is not technically dead will only lead to long term despair. If she lies then I'm done. Gone. I'll say it before and I'll say it again: you have to make tough decisions.

Emily looked so nervous. "Umm ma'am… your husband is not coming back."

"I don't unders…"
"He's dead!" A long pause before she sighed. "During our battle, Sneasel called his personal guards and about 20 Ursaring came. They all looked like they had dead eyes when they arrived. Both of us fought them and we killed all of them… and snapped their necks for good measure. I'm sorry, I really am."

Pure silence filled the area as the cub made her return to her mother's side; she hadn't heard a word. "Are you done mamma? I wanna play!" I almost cried right in front of everyone. I know that it's one thing to tell an adult but fuck man, I've never had to tell a young Pokémon anything, let alone that their father is dead. Wait a second… young Pokémon… cubs… kits… Ruby! This whole adventure started because Mitch didn't come after me but now I realize how much I truly hate this lifestyle. I still have a mate that I want to have kits with back at the Pokémon Center and she doesn't even know that I want kits! Does she want kits? I need to get out of here so I can tell her.

"Shade come back! Excuse me for a second." Emily was faster than I expected because she caught up to me pretty quick. "What's gotten into you?"

"Dammit Emily I can't do this anymore! All this carnage I've caused and for what? I gave up this lifestyle so that I could be with my mate." I let out a deep breath. "Can we talk about this later please? I'm sorry I freaked out on you." I gave her a kiss on the top of her head.

Emily walked back to the mother trying to digest what I meant. "I know that I can't bring him back, but I'm willing to go back up to Mount Silver and bring his body back for a proper burial. I'm not going to lie to you: he's beyond injured and I'm not sure if you want to see him after what was done."

Ursaring thought it over. "An honorable thing to do. As much as I want to accept your offer, I just don't think I can handle it right now," she replied very solemnly.

"I can offer you the chance to join my family; your food is very delicious and both of you would be safer with me. It's the least I can do. You know where to go if you decide to follow through. Have a nice day." We made our way down the forest path talking to anyone who took some time to talk to us. There were some minor disputes over territory but Emily went off of her father's opinions to make judgments. Once we finally covered as much area as our legs would allow us, we headed back to her bed exhausted. Both of us got into similar positions as last night with the exception of Emily getting really close to me; Ruby would probably be more than upset if she saw how we were.

"We can talk now Shade," she cooed. "You scared me earlier today. What was going on in your head?"

"During our fight I started counting. I made a promise to Ruby that anyone who tried to hurt her would be gone in under a minute and those feelings came out for you. Ultimately I failed since the fight took much longer than a minute." She shifted so that her soft, warm neck was rubbing on top of my head. "Ruby is the only one I have left in my life that I truly care about. I ran out here because I thought that my trainer failed to care for her like the way I do. Her life as an Espeon has been horrible and all I want to do is give her the best in life. Now look what I've done: I've helped killed at least 25 more Pokémon here. This isn't me anymore. I just can't stay here anymore but I'm afraid I won't be welcomed back."

A hoof gently stroked my back. "Poor Shade… I had no idea that you were being eaten up by this guilt." She adjusted herself before going on. "I had a feeling that you had a mate so I didn't ask you to stay with me for that reason. However, I am truly grateful that you helped me get through today when you could have just left after the fight or even just ignored my cry for help. Your mate is very lucky to have you and so am I. My father told me to respect others but I want you to know that it
would've been great if you stayed here and been my mate."

"Part of me wants to stay though. I'm torn on my sense of my purpose in life. Am I better suited as a powerful ruler with few limits or a trainer's Pokémon surrounded by great friends?" I started to fight back tears until another burning question came into my mind. "Why did you lie to that Ursaring and say that we fought all of the personal guards? You didn't attack and it makes you look like a killer. I should've taken the brunt of her anger or sadness."

"Because a leader has to take responsibility for the actions of their friends. Besides, you were on thin ice with the rest of the wild Pokémon when we first met you. Nobody likes to see trained Pokémon around here anyway. Plus everyone praised you for solving our problem; I wanted you to feel comfortable here."

Validation is a wonderful thing. "Guess I was right about you; you are a true leader. I'm proud you told the overall truth to her even though it was painful to do." We stared into the outside world in silence for a little while as the clouds were blown away by the warm night breeze. "Emily, I think you would make a great mother. The way you dealt with the cub was very impressive." It hurt to say that knowing I couldn't be with her.

"Shade, I think you would make a great father if you and Ruby decided to have kits. You're very loving yet stern when you need to be. The biggest thing is that you shouldn't be ashamed of your past." She looked me straight in the eyes. "Next time you see Ruby you should embrace her as if it's your last day on this earth and tell her how much you love her. I took it for granted until my father told me he would be travelling on that day three years ago. Even though I can't be with you, I still told you how I felt and it felt wonderful." Both of us looked up at the stars while thinking about what we said to each other. The fact is that Ruby knows how much I love her but Emily's right about doing that every day of my life.

"Tomorrow I'm going back to the Pokémon Center and go back to not just my mate, but the rest of my friends. Belonging with Mitch is the path that's right for me to follow. He's gone so far out of his way to make sure I can live the best possible life. Feeling angry at him for so long wouldn't seem right at all."

A smile came across her face. "A leader has to make decisions and live with them. Are you sure that's what you want to do?"

I didn't hesitate that long. "Yes. Please unders…"

Her maw found mine again. "You've guided me through the hardest time in my life when I lost everyone close to me. Now it's my turn to guide you back to where you belong. As long as you're happy, I'm happy."

Now it was my turn to look her in the eye. "As long as you don't even think about throwing away your life then I'll be happy to have you as my guide on the way back."

Tears started to form in her eyes. "How did you know?"

"Call in intuition. Just know that I was happy to see you fight back; I love you too much to have let something like that h-happen." We both cried in unison after all of that came to light. I don't even want to think about losing anyone after how far Ruby and Emily have come. Eventually we ran out of tears before falling asleep cuddled up.

Morning came around with the sound of Doduo yelling at the sun. Neither of us wanted to move after waking up since it would be the last intimate moment we would have before departing back to
the Indigo Plateau. Emily was getting the shivers as I embraced her for the last time; I underestimated how hurt she would be as a result of me leaving her side. Before we got up to leave I told her that she has so many Pokémon to help her restore the area back to what it was. The trek back was uneventful overall with the exception of more Pokémon thanking us for all we did yesterday. We were not even halfway to the gate when a Growlithe appeared in the middle of the pathway.

"Shade? Shade! You're alive!"

Only one Growlithe knows my name. "I am. Is Mitch nearby?"

"Yeah, let me go get him."

He ran off behind a few bushes to get the trainer that protected me at my weakest moment in the forest, the trainer that let me love Ruby unconditionally, the trainer that shared my pain at the cemetery.

Emily held a nervous smile. "So this is goodbye?"

I sheepishly put a paw behind my head. "Guess so." I stiffened up. "If you're not busy, I'm competing at this huge tournament past the gate near where you found me. Wild Pokémon probably don't want to go because of all of the people but you're welcome to sneak a peek."

"I'd like that Shade." One final quick kiss was placed on top of my head. "Good luck."

Bushes rattled as Mitch emerged in front of me with Growlithe by his side. "Umbreon... oh Umbreon. I've been looking all over for you." His voice was so quiet and he sounded exhausted. "Will you come back to me or are you happy out here?" Again I started to tear up; typical Mitch to give me the option to leave him. I sprinted to him and rubbed my head all over him; oh how I missed that scent. He looked at Emily. "If you've been watching over him these past three days then I thank you. Take these." He dug out some food and placed it on the ground. "Come on buddy let's get you healed up so everyone can stop worrying, especially Espeon." He scooped me up in his arms and we were back on the path to the Pokémon Center.

He rubbed my head and carried me down the dirt road, favoring me in his arms instead of my Luxury Ball on his belt; done exactly like the first time Tom held me.

I cried the entire way back. I wouldn't have it any other way.
Preliminaries

Chapter 34-Preliminaries

Growlithe has always had the strongest nose on the on the team since I've been travelling. Umbreon really didn't leave much of a scent on anything except a faint one on his Luxury Ball. It was a very tough decision to leave Espeon behind but her reopened wound was too severe to have her just rest inside the ball. Ultimately she decided that her health was more important.

Nurse Joy was a little upset that we were leaving her in there when there were some more tests that needed to be done until I explained that Umbreon had run off on me. Even then she still shot me a glare. Honestly, she rips me a new one for getting Espeon hurt which was justified considering how bad I blew that whole scenario but who the hell would rip a trainer for looking for his lost Pokémon?

Carly and Davis came to check up on me only to see me getting ready to leave the Pokémon Center. When they asked where I was going, I told them I needed some fresh air to clear my mind. You could argue it was a half-truth with me omitting the fact Umbreon had run off. They've already done more than enough for me by risking their eligibility in the tournament by threatening to start a riot at the party and are even willing to go to bat for me when Sara complains. Besides, would Umbreon even listen to them if they found him? Ultimately I needed to go out to the base of Mount Silver since his scent brought us there.

Some of the Pokémon were very defensive of their nests yet they didn't want to battle. Any Pokémon that did was defeated after some considerable effort; no scrubs out here that's for sure. To solidify myself as a dominant yet caring presence after a dozen or so fights, I threw down some spare healing berries as I walked by so that all of them knew I wasn't trying to hurt them. I'm all for training, but not like this. By nightfall we were deep in the woods with no signs of finding him.

The next day proved to be just as exhausting but with fewer wild Pokémon encounters. I think we actually went around in circles getting lost so we cut our losses around late afternoon to rest for the remainder of the day. My body being tired won out over my will to find him which frankly pissed me off since I want to get him out of the wild. If everyone heard his story they'd make sure he'd never go back; one trip through Hell is enough. Looking at the stars with Growlithe was the only thing that calmed me down enough to give me a renewed energy for tomorrow. Lying under the stars when we first got here was something I'd like to do again before the whole tournament starts.

We woke up at the crack of dawn to reorient ourselves on my map after going in circles all of yesterday. By the looks of it, we weren't too far from Mount Silver. All I could do was take a deep breath out of frustration and get moving along the path. It came to my attention that Pokémon went from outright scared to a little nervous to acting like an average wild Pokémon as we made it closer to the base of the mountain.

Growlithe's facial expressions during conversations looked like a mix of shock and intrigue. Eventually he guided me away from the mountain but I noticed that all of the Pokémon that looked scared looked very relieved; almost like a long term heavy burden had been lifted. An Ursaring pointed to the path back to the Indigo Plateau while Growlithe sprinted ahead so I followed in pursuit. Exhausted, I just stared at Growlithe, Umbreon, and a wild Ponyta all together.
"Umbreon... oh Umbreon. I've been looking all over for you," I whispered. "Will you come back to me or are you happy out here?" He looked pretty beat up after some time in the wild but I felt that he was in no rush to come back to me; that was until he ran over and rubbed his head all over me. The wild Ponyta looked like it was going to cry after I was about to walk away with her best friend. "If you've been watching over him these past three days then I thank you. Take these." As a measure of good faith, I took out some food to place on the ground. "Come on buddy let's get you healed up so everyone can stop worrying, especially Espeon." Umbreon immediately went to sleep in my arms and even started to cry in his sleep. Our trip back was uneventful as the afternoon rolled onward. A painful three days was finally over when we made it back to the Pokémon Center. There were a few trainers relaxing in the lobby when I walked up to the counter.

"Hello, I'd like to heal him up please."

Nurse Joy gave me another dirty look similar to when I brought in Espeon. "If it were up to me outside of my job, I wouldn't treat him. You don't seem to learn from your mistakes, do you?" Pretty sure I bit my tongue so hard that I made it bleed. "I am required to heal him though. You... not so much. Hand him over." She quickly placed antibacterial cream and bandages on him then handed him back to me after taking him to the back room for a while. "Have him rest for a couple of hours and he'll be fine. It looks like he's been eating berries to help the healing process."

"Thank you very much. Before I forget, I'm sure I have a room in the trainer's village because of my reservation to compete."

She rolled her eyes. "Here's your key to the room. It's in a place called the Silver Hotel and it's located behind the stadium." As I was about to leave she grabbed the back of my jacket. "Next time you come to me it may just be the last thing you do at the Silver Conference," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that tournament officials are going to hear about these two incidents. You should enjoy what little time you might have left here. Now get out!" I walked to the back room to pick up a healthy Espeon before exiting the center. Glares from the other trainers served as extra motivation to get to my room as fast as possible plus force me to recall everyone.

The Silver Hotel lived up to its name for sure. A five-star hotel with 12 floors from the outside and giant glass statues of various Pokémon littered the inside lobby. I saw some unfamiliar faces all over the place; probably more new trainers that came over on ferries. The bellhop guided me to the check in counter after I politely declined his offer to take my bags. I just had to show my trainer ID to the desk attendant before I headed up to my room on the fifth floor.

My room was so big that I could send out Gyarados with a lot of headroom to spare. I can only imagine what all of the other trainers are doing in this place. Still, I don't feel comfortable here. When it comes to fancy things I always find a way to feel uncomfortable. Maybe it's based on the fact that I came from a modest city or any representation of luxury is usually associated with assholes. People could argue it's hypocritical that I have six Luxury Balls, but I'll be the first to tell them that I don't benefit from them. I'd much rather my Pokémon handle luxury than myself. Sure the pillows are fluffier, the bed softer, the television bigger, the food more delicious while costing nothing at meal times, but it all won't matter if I get knocked out in the first round. I took a shower after I laid out my clothes for the evening so that I could finally get rid of a mix of sweat and campfire smoke; going from the shower to the fluffy hotel bathrobe felt amazing.

Burning questions ran through my head ever since Umbreon ran out of the room so it was time to get some answers. "Espeon and Umbreon we need to have a talk." Once both of them shook off the cobwebs, they were beyond excited to see each other. I positioned myself with my back against all
of the pillows while I was lying down and they laid down on top of me with their heads near my chest. "Can you tell us what happened Umbreon? We were scared for you." Espeon took a moment to gather the strength to communicate Umbreon's thoughts into English.

A long sigh came from the black Eeveelution. "After I ran out of the room I wanted to get away from everything. No you, no Ruby, no teammates, nothing. I figured the best place to go was somewhere that would be off the beaten path so you couldn't chase after me. A daughter of another ruler came to me pleading to help her take down a strong enemy that took her father's rightful spot and I accepted."

"Why?" It was Espeon jumping in starting to tear up. "I thought you were done with all of that. Weren't you sick of dealing with all of the fighting and killing?"

Umbreon quickly responded. "So did I but some things can't be ignored. This Ponyta was almost like you Ruby; on the edge of throwing her life away with only a loyal Tangela to keep her going. A Sneasel overran the area and took her father hostage after killing all of her family. To make matters worse, she was practically forced to be his mate. I couldn't bear to see another Pokémon who did nothing wrong have their life turned into a living nightmare." He stopped as if to choose his next words carefully. "All I want to say is that I did some things I'm not proud of and helped right a lot of the wrongs that have been going on for the past three years there. Emily is in good hands now."

"Let me guess, you killed that Sneasel didn't you?" He buried his head into my robe and was sobbing.

"I'm cursed Mitch. All I want to do is live a happy life but deep down I'm filled with hatred for the world." He turned to Espeon. "I failed you too Ruby. What kind of mate runs off and goes back to his bad habits? Can I really change knowing that deep down I may want to kill someone before I get hurt again?"

I gently rubbed his head and talked softly. "You did what you thought was right. I know that you did the same thing for Espeon when you met her. Please don't think that I hate you for running away or killing other Pokémon. All that matters is that you're here in front of us right now."

"...thanks Mitch. Emily said that next time I saw you two I should tell you both how much I love you. So let me say it: I love you as a trainer." He hugged me to the best of his abilities before turning to Espeon. "Ruby... I love you more than you could ever know. I will never take you or Mitch for granted ever again. Will you forgive me?"

"Oh Shade..." a long kiss was shared between the two. "I'll stand beside you as long as you want me to. Life has been tough for both of us, but we can work anything out when we have time."

The passion got Umbreon red in the face and the jitters. "Um Ruby... I was wondering if you wanted to... ya know..."

"What is it Shade?"

He really didn't want to go through with whatever he wanted to say. "Maybe when the time is right. I still have something else though; I was using different moves all the time in my battles up there.""}

"Professor Elm said that your chances of doing that were very likely. All I can say is that I will find a way around it somehow. For now, let's all rest up. We're going to need it for the preliminaries soon." We all just lied in my big bed embracing one another after realizing that the air was cleared. A piece of paper was slid under the door and Espeon used her psychic powers to float it over to me.
To Mitch,

It has come to our attention that you have made some questionable if not poor decisions regarding your Pokémon in the past few days. You have earned all eight badges and the right to compete in the Silver Conference. However, with over 600 trainers from across the world at this year's tournament, there are preliminary matches that must be completed. Those who have received low marks from gym leaders or have participated in questionable conduct are subjected to multiple one-on-one battles to see if they are worthy to enter this tournament. You must battle four other trainers that meet these aforementioned conditions to make it to the opening ceremonies. Any loss or draw will result in you being eliminated from the tournament. Your first battle is on field 20 tomorrow morning at 9:00 A.M. sharp.

Best of luck,

The Pokémon League.

Oh look at that, more practice for me. First I need some room service so I can plan out tomorrow with a full stomach.

I had no trouble sleeping with the two eons on top of me since I was exhausted in every possible way. Bathrobe fluffiness also contributed to me sleeping like a rock. My alarm had been set for 7:30 in the hopes that I could eat some breakfast beforehand; it paid off when I woke up. A directory had been given to me in my room so I could find out where I was supposed to battle today. It came as no surprise that I was shoved on the field furthest away from everyone else. Who in their right mind would care enough to watch a battle between "poor" trainers so early? The indoor pool is probably calling their names.

The field itself was regulation size but there were no bleachers to sit on; not sure if there was even a spot for lawn chairs to set up. Other trainers in the preliminary pool gathered around to size us up. Guess everyone thought they would be battling under the bright lights so soon. I had everything to go at 8:50 while my 16-year-old opponent made his way to the trainer's box at 8:55. With both of us there, the match could get underway. Our referee looked like a recent graduate of the official's school based on his constant checking of the rulebook yet it didn't bother me; I know I wouldn't need his help to decide the battle.

"The first preliminary battle is between Mitch of Violet City and Kevin from Olivine City. The rules are one Pokémon each and a draw means both of you are eliminated. Release your Pokémon at the same time. Begin!" Both balls were thrown to the center of the field with the result having my Gyarados battle Kevin's Rhydon.

"Horn Drill!" Damn! This kid's going straight for the jugular.

"Oh no you don't. Hydro Pump!" Rhydon didn't even get close to Gyarados as the blast of water hit for super effective damage; it was over once the water stopped flowing.

"Rhydon is unable to battle which means that Gyarados is the winner. The victor is Mitch from Violet City!" Kevin gave me the one finger salute on his way out of the battle area as he was swearing profusely. Now I see why he was chosen to be here. "Excuse me Mitch," the referee said after I recalled Gyarados. "Do you want to get it over with now or wait for other trainers to fight? We're going to do this for all of the winners. Your call."

Thank Arceus I don't have to wait. "Keep 'em coming."
A clipboard was near a group of league officials containing all of the information. "Let me check to see who's up next for you." He sprinted over to see my next opponent. "You're battling Alexis from New Bark Town," he screamed across the way. The girl about my age, maybe a year older at 22, stood unfazed at what I just did to Kevin. "Same rules as before. Begin!" Round two was her Mantine versus my Espeon.

"Use Bubblebeam!"

"Try and shield yourself Espeon!" There were too many bubbles to stop at once and Espeon took some slight damage.

"Wing Attack!" It came at an angle so that she couldn't duck or jump to avoid the hit.

"Psybeam!" Rainbow colored beams landed directly on the Mantine's underbelly scoring a critical hit. "Follow up with Quick Attack!" I made sure to land a physical hit since Mantine are very good with handling special attacks.

"Shake it off and use Whirlpool!" The vortex of water circled Espeon preventing me from calling her back or getting off a decent attack. The more time I took to call an attack the more damage she was taking.

"Quick Espeon, use Confusion to create a hole!" Her psychic energy not only ripped part of the Whirlpool attack open, it also sent a fair amount of it back for damage. "Quick Attack before it can trap you again!"

"Fine by me. Wing Attack at full speed!" No matter how fast it was, I knew I was much faster.

"Get behind it and use Psybeam again!" Espeon got a little too close and took some damage but found a way to land a knockout blow.

"Mantine is unable to battle. The victor is Mitch from Violet City!" Alexis just walked off the field without saying a word. Maybe she was here because of how she handles a loss? Still got a win though.

The referee screamed out the next challenger. "Next up is Cassy from the Kanto Region!" Either they didn't have any more information on her or they didn't want to give away all of her information. Usually Kanto trainers are treated better for reasons I can't fully understand. This time it came in the form of not telling me where she was from; gym leaders over there have a huge influence on their townspeople's Pokémon. In a twist of events, she rolled out a Forretress to battle my Ampharos. I had to be more careful with my battles since Espeon almost was in deep trouble last time.

"For some reason I don't want you to succeed Mitch," she said in a sly tone. "You're quite a threat to the field. I got my last badge the day before we had to lock in our teams so I know I don't stand much of a chance past the preliminaries. My guess is that you'll paralyze Forretress then wear it down while it just sits there. So the least I can do is take you down with me and not make the battle a cakewalk. Use Explosion!" Horror was written all over my face as Ampharos took the impact; she was still standing after the dust settled albeit breathing heavily.

"You're an idiot for trying to force a draw on the first turn. Can't believe you made it this far Cassy," I said in a frustrated tone as she stormed off the field in disgust. Guess the league wants me out; nobody in their right mind would pull that stunt with so much on the line. Then again I could just be paranoid and she knows more than I do about her situation.
"Last battle for you Mitch and then you qualify for the bracket portion of the tournament. Your final opponent is Russell from Blackthorn City." Something didn't seem right about him. He just didn't seem like he was into dragon types and his cloths reflected that. I put my trust in Furret to take me to the ceremonies whereas he put his trust in his Golem.

Furret immediately looked terrified. She still hasn't recovered from last time.
"Come on Sentret let's keep moving. I can't beat Falkner with just you the way we are now." She pouted while her tongue was sticking out. "Look, I know that **you** know that you're pretty strong but the thing is that Falkner's stronger. He's my hometown gym leader so I know what it would take to beat him." Her head tilted to think about what I said but she ended up turning away. "Once we're out on route 31 then you'll be ready to battle. Get back in the ball," I recalled her in frustration and made my way to the east side of the city to go train.

Growlithe was fairly strong at this point since I've had him for a few months while Sentret was just caught yesterday on the outskirts of Cherrygrove City as I was training Growlithe. Falkner on the other hand was a skilled bird master. My only saving grace was that the league has to make him use weaker Pokémon against beginners. I've heard so many stories about how his Pidgeot would dominate and even give electric types a run for their money.

Route 30 was full of small bug types, Rattata, and the rare Hoothoot that wasn't sleeping. Sentret looked happy to be knocking everything out with ease but eventually she was bored by dusk. She didn't want to lose her battles, but it looked like her attacks were half-assed. We kept progressing through the forest before eventually reaching a lake by Dark Cave on route 31. I figured it was best to get Growlithe out as well so that we all could enjoy the decent weather. He obviously didn't like the water so I let Sentret go for a swim so she could relax and get away from me.

From the shore I saw her battle a Magikarp on her own and she was getting beat down. For a Magikarp to be *that* aggressive was rare in this neck of the woods so I threw a ball at it and caught it. Dripping wet, she swam back to me looking pissed off. I didn't want to make a snarky comment for fear of her completely disobeying me but I knew she was embarrassed to lose to a Magikarp, even if it was overly aggressive. I went to dry her off and she sprinted into Dark Cave in what can best be described as her own attempt to get stronger.

Dark cave was more for explorers rather than trainers due its complex layout so I had to get her out before she got herself into trouble; all I had to do was follow the trail of fainted Zubats to get to her. Moonlight was filtering down from above as she tackled a Zubat into a side of the cave. Unfortunately for her, it was a softer spot of a Golem that was sleeping. A mumble turned roar sent her running past me as the Golem rolled after her. My best bet was to run after both of them and call her back before running for my life.

I did my best to find the two since they both were moving much faster than I ever could, but the indented ground gave me all the information I needed to know. Eventually the trail led me south just outside the Cherrygrove city limits. The forest wasn't quite as dense which meant I could call for help my way. Golem on the other hand, saw me and looked like it didn't want me in the picture. It acted like Sentret wasn't there pinned up against a tree in fear and used Rollout on me instead. The first one was an easy dodge but I knew it wasn't going to get better.

"Growlithe I'm in trouble!" He materialized looking concerned. "I know you're at a huge disadvantage but your teammate is in trouble. Can you stall for some time?" He still looked nervous. "I'll put my body on the line too." A stern nod followed. "Alright! Use Ember!" The fire attack hardly did anything to the rolling rock type. "Now dodge!" We went in opposite directions
with Golem going after me. "Dammit! Growlithe use Ember again!"

Just like last time the move did practically nothing. I took a risk and tried to cut to the left but my forearm had to be put out to balance myself while on the run; it wasn't pulled back in time. My arm felt like it was just slammed into a wall and it would've been shattered if it was pinned against a tree or the ground. Golem stopped to assess the damage it caused; Sentret was paralyzed from fear, Growlithe or Magikarp were in no condition to do anything, and I was using all of my energy to stay up and hold my arm. It restarted the Rollout attack.

"Hydro Pump!" A powerful blast of water landed dead center and forced the Golem backwards before fainting; all three of us looked at our savior. "It was that Golem again… oh brother," he said with a light smile. "I may be old but I still pack a punch haha!"

I walked closer to get a better look at the man. "How did you find us?" I asked still shaken.

The old man smiled. "Easy my boy. Your Pokémon's flames of course. Nothing fire-like ever is around here. Let me guess… you're a new trainer aren't you?" I nodded while thanking Arceus that the flames were enough to draw some attention. "Well you can call me the Guide Gent. Long ago I travelled around as a trainer on the seas but now I've settled down and like helping new trainers. Come with me." Sentret came to me wailing loudly and grabbed onto my leg while continuing to sob; she didn't let go on the way into the city or for the rest of the night.

"Come on Furret let's keep moving! This isn't last time at all. You've gotten so much stronger and smarter since then." She shook her head to snap out of her trance. "That's it. Now use Dig!" The softer ground made it easy for her to burrow underground.

"You're a special kind of stupid aren't you? Magnitude!"

"Not really, Golem is only fast when it's rolling. Hit 'em hard Furret!" She came up from below to deliver a solid hit; the resulting magnitude was fairly weak. "Go in and use Return!"

"Get defensive Golem! Rock Throw!" Various sized rocks were rising from the ground at a fast rate in the hopes to slow down Furret; she skillfully dodged all of them to land another hit. "Come on you ball of rocks! Magnitude!" I feared that attack after getting in too close for Return. The field collapsed around Furret, trapping her in the ground.

"Dig under it Furret!"

A smirk came across the way. "No use my friend. Use Rollout!"

Unfortunately for me, my opponent Russell was right. She took a direct hit and she flew into the air. "Quick Attack into Dig!"

"Rock Throw!" Physics proved before that she wouldn't be able to dodge all of them while falling straight down. She took some hits on her way down but managed to hide again. Russell shook his head as the Rollout attack stopped. "Idiot… this time you won't be so lucky!" Magnitude was used again only this time it looked like it was in the middle of the damage scale. Furret being still faster jumped to avoid most of the damage but didn't quite get enough behind her attack.

"Finish it with a Return!" She charged head first into the one Pokémon that almost ended her life that night. Her attack landed right between the eyes. Critical hit.

The judge threw up my flag. "Golem is unable to battle. The winner is Mitch from Violet City!" Let's. Fucking. Go. Furret ran to me and grabbed onto my leg again except it was tears of joy
coming from her this time around. I managed to pry her off of my leg to hold her up and meet her eye to eye.

"You did it girl. You brought all of us into the Silver Conference while conquering your fear!" I said with a big smile on my face; she hugged me still crying. "Growlithe will be so proud of you," I whispered in her ear. "Get some well-deserved rest." Our referee made his way over to tell us that we were all cleared to go to the opening ceremonies. Everyone else gave us glares knowing that we were soundly in while they all will have to struggle to get in.

Russell jogged over with is hand out. "Congrats on winning. I want you to have this so that you can get out of a pinch against other rock types if you're at a type disadvantage with her." It was a disc for Iron Tail.

"Why would you give me this? I just ruined your chance at the title."

He gave me a serious look. "This year was the first time I wasn't around during the Dragon Festival. Deep down it pained me to be on the road for such an important event. My Dratini is obviously not strong enough to hold its own here and it's too young to use Iron Tail properly. I went with my strongest Pokémon to get me here. The fact that I'm here is a miracle since I won all my badges with a 1-0 score. Also I heard that you, an outsider, carried on our tradition despite a tragedy. This is the least I can do for you respecting and honoring my culture. You can bet I'll be rooting for you in the tournament. There's something about the way you handle adversity that makes me think you can go far."

Sunlight reflected off of the disc. "Thank you." Russell kept his head held high as he left the battle area knowing his glimmer of hope was now gone. I quickly followed so that I could get back to my room to plan for the real tournament.

What I failed to notice the first time was that there was a side room with another Pokémon Center reserved for hotel guests only. This Nurse Joy was much friendlier to me as she took my Luxury Balls over to the machine for a quick heal before going to my room. By the time I was back in my room it was roughly 10:30 so lunch would have to wait just a little longer for everyone. To kill time, I sifted through the rest of my directory pamphlets. There was so much more I never got to look at because of last night; a knock at the door forced me to put all of the papers down.

Davis stood in the doorway. "Hey man how's it going? Did you win all of your matches to get in?"

"I did. How did you know I had preliminary battles today?"

"Can I come in for a second?" I wasn't sure what he was getting at so I let him in so he could sit at the desk. "Now that we're in private, I can tell you what happened when you were gone." He took a deep breath before carefully telling me everything. "So many people from the league wanted to talk to you about what happened at the gala. They were about to disqualify you but I told them I would go to bat for you. I told them you overheard Sara talking about how she left your Espeon in the forest injured and how upset you got. When they brought her in for questioning she refused to talk. My guess is that if she admitted it then there would be an investigation based on your information. Like you, she was sent to the preliminary round for battling at the gala. I heard that she won all of her four rounds easily."

I took a moment to take it all in. "So they wanted to disqualify me for standing up for my Pokémon?"

"Well you did put a lot of people at risk to get hit. Look, the committee gave her two options: either both of you would be eliminated or both of you would be demoted to the preliminary rounds.
Obviously she didn't want to get disqualified so she chose the early battles. If she chose the other option, I would argue that the tournament hasn't started yet so that rule shouldn't be enforced." He looked at all of my papers on the bed. "Take some time to look at the rules before the opening ceremony later tonight. By the way… why were you gone for three days? You had us worried when we met at the other Pokémon Center."

I took a long pause. "That night almost cost me more than Espeon, Davis. By no means am I prefect… but I had to right a wrong so that all of my Pokémon can trust me from this point onward." He nodded and didn't press the matter on his way out the door. He told me that Carly would be wishing me luck as well. Rules of the tournament were staring me in the face until two stood out more than the others.

**Rule 2:** After the competition has officially started, at no point shall trainers engage in a battle on Indigo Plateau owned land. Any extracurricular battling on such land may result in expulsion from the Silver Conference tournament.

**Rule 2a:** A trainer may spar with members of their own team on an official practice battlefield. If two trainers wish to engage in sparring, it must be done with a league referee or committee member present. If any party deems the sparring to be excessive, they must communicate it to everyone present and the sparring shall stop at that point. Any Silver Conference authority figure has the right to expel a trainer for excessive sparring after a committee meeting is held.

Davis was right about the rule; I was saved on a technicality. All that was left to do was rest up before lunch and call everyone out. "Time to stretch everyone! I'll be back after lunch with your food." My Pokémon looked happy to be out inside of our big room. The best part was seeing Furret talk to Growlithe about her win that punched our ticket into the main stadium tonight. Both of them went on the balcony then closed the glass door to reduce the noise as they looked into the courtyard below. Only Gyarados was the last Pokémon that has yet to talk to me. If I remember correctly he's never really been through a traumatic experience that I know of. I hope that he's alright.

Lunch was available in a cafeteria on the main floor to the left of the check in table. It was an all-you-can-eat buffet of various foods ranging from meat to fish to vegetables to pizza. Most importantly there were Pokémon food dispensers so every trainer could bring bags up to their room since Pokémon are not allowed outside of their balls in the cafeteria. I basically binged on the variety of food fast enough so that nobody would bother me. After filling up the bags I went to my room to relax and look over more of the directory notes before the evening ceremonies while my team had their fill.

My notes in the guide told me to arrive on the stadium battlefield for the opening ceremony by 7:00. Trainers that were participating made their way into the large, 50,000 seat stadium with either nervous or excited looks on their faces. A long time passed as the stadium filled with fans before the start of the tournament. An elderly gentleman made his way to a podium in front of a giant bowl.

"Welcome to the Silver Conference tournament here at the Indigo Plateau! I am your master of ceremonies Mr. Goodshow. The time has come for these 256 trainers to put their skills to the ultimate test on the biggest stage in the world! In order for each trainer to show off their variety of skills, they will be placed into groups of four and will battle round robin style. Each win grants them three points, a loss zero points, while a tie gives them one point. The top two trainers from each group will move on where it will be a single elimination bracket style tournament. Good luck to all trainers and thank you!" Cheers erupted from the whole stadium while a woman took Mr. Goodshow's place.
"Now it is time for the story of the Silver Conference." Quiet descended over the arena. "According to legend, a great war ravaged the Johto region. Both Pokémon and the land suffered a great deal as the war raged on for years with no end in sight. Ho-Oh appeared once there was no more damage to be done and used its sacred flames to have the land reborn. One tree remained engulfed in flames to remind everyone of the damage that was done, never able to be put out. The first tournament was held in honor of the new life given to the region and Ho-Oh offered its blessing in the form of a flame that remained lit for the entire tournament. Today its flame at the Indigo Plateau represents the burning spirit of all who have battled their way here."

Mr. Goodshow took the microphone. "It is with great pleasure that I declare this Silver Conference tournament open!" The sacred flame of Ho-Oh was placed in the bowl and it soon lit the entire structure. "May you all battle with the spirit of a champion!"

My Pokémon and I have gone through so much to get to this point. Now it's time for us to show the world what we're capable of.
Chapter 36- Round Robin Round One

Ho-Oh's flame illuminated the platform above all of the hopeful trainers once Mr. Goodshow was done with the festivities. The entire stadium murmured in anticipation of the upcoming battle that was to take place where we were standing. All of us were escorted to a luxury box to watch the ceremonial introductory tournament battle where the previous year's champion would battle the Elite Four champion. Depending on what happened before this battle, there was a chance that Lance would be dethroned. Regardless of the stakes it was still going to be one hell of a battle. Once we were all lined up against the window, the two trainers made their way to the boxes. The public address announcer took the spotlight.

"Ladies aaaaaaaaand gentleman. As per tradition, last year's champion will face off against the champion of the Elite Four. Please give a warm welcome to Allison! Allison won by a dominating score of 4-0 last year with some aggressive plays." A roar came from the crowd as the 5'7" green eyed brunette appeared on the large video board waving. "Aaaaaand nowwwwwwwwww... forrrrrrrr Eee-leeet Fourrrrrrrrr chaaaaaaampionnnnn! For the past eight years he's held the title of best trainer in Johto. I give you Lance, the dragon master!"

A deafening roar from 50,000 spectators didn't even make Lance flinch; the man looked like he was all business. "The rules are a full six on six battle and substitutions may be made by both sides. It's over when all six of one trainer's Pokémon are unable to battle. When the flags go up, send out your Pokémon!" The match was nothing short of amazing from the get-go. Each trainer planned two steps ahead and it seemed rare that an attack would do massive damage; it took a solid 45 minutes for it to be one on one.

Lance was no longer calm. "Dragonite, use Thunder!"

Allison wasn't backing down either. "Scizor, go in for a Metal Claw!" The red bug/steel type used its superior speed from an earlier Agility attack to slip behind the large dragon type.

"Your aggressive style has gotten you this far but I'm afraid you took the bait. Hyper Beam!" Allison had failed to realize that Dragonite never started charging up for Thunder and could easily turn around to deliver the finishing blow to the frail Scizor.

The referee threw up the flag. "Scizor is unable to battle! This match goes to Lance of the Elite Four."

Unbelievable. The difference in skill down there was so marginal yet it made a world of difference in the end. No way on Arceus' green earth I could compete with that right now. Still, the spectators gave Allison a standing ovation knowing that a 1-0 loss is nothing to be ashamed of. A tear or two fell from her eyes as she graciously shook her competitor's hand and walked away with her head held high. Meanwhile in our box, almost everyone was clamoring for a battle with those two. The Indigo Plateau is where the strongest trainers meet and tonight didn't disappoint.

I was one of the few trainers who stayed after everyone else had left to take it all in. To make just one decision with basically the whole world watching would be a challenge in and of itself. I was sure I was the last person in the stadium until I heard a quiet female voice behind me.
"Looks like you made it." It was Ashley looking down solemnly. "My desk was covered with incident reports in addition to your file after the gala incident. Why would you do that?"

I gave her a stern look. "Some things are worth fighting for." Both of us stood in silence. "Look, did you stay behind just so you could lecture me?"

"No. I came here to tell you that you're on thin ice. Keep it clean for the round robin portion and you should be fine. Also, I received a call from Olivine the other day. Jasmine was wondering how you were doing; she seemed a little worried that you haven't called in a while."

That threw me for a loop. I did share a bed with her that night but I didn't know she thought of it as something more. "I didn't mean to worry her. Tell me something… did she ever call you? At all? For any reason?" Ashley's head shook in confusion. "Okay then, I need that favor from you."

"Does it involve shuffling you around so get the easiest matchups? I did say you could ask for a favor but I don't have that kind of authority."

"Hahaha! I'm not that conceded. I just want you to give clearance for my Umbreon to compete without penalty."

She looked skeptical. "May I ask what you mean by that? From the sound of it, it seems like you're trying to cheat in front of my face."

I sighed heavily. "It's late so I'll give you the short version. Umbreon knows six moves which would seem like an advantage to opponents but that's only if I get lucky. Pryce told me that other Pokémon could sense what's wrong with him but I have yet to see another Pokémon show signs of nervousness. Maybe it's because they're hardwired for battle or just don't care. So… can I get the okay from you?"

A light bulb went off in her head. "Oh right! Pryce told me about that case. Don't worry about a thing. When you go to register your team, there will be an inspector to make sure all Pokémon registered are medically able to battle. Umbreon is probably okay on the outside which means that he will get the all clear. Tomorrow afternoon I'll have a pass for you and I can input a code into our servers that grants Umbreon permission to battle. Is that it? I could help you with something else since you nearly kicked Cory out of the gym circuit."

"Hold up a sec. You're telling me that he's still allowed to compete after what he did!?!" She nodded in response. "Let me guess… he's here isn't he?" Another nod. "You're fucking kidding me," I said in a frustrated tone. "I'm too tired to deal with that right now. Thanks for your help with Umbreon. I'll probably be seeing you around."

We waved goodbye as the night continued to drag on. On the way back I had one thought: there has to be something bigger going on here, right? How on earth do you let a trainer stick around after blatantly giving money to opponents so that they would throw battles? Either this is pure stupidity by the league or money is making more sense than logic. And now I have to deal with Umbreon's condition plus the fact that Growlithe was owned by Cory in the past. I just stared at Growlithe's ball on the way back to the hotel knowing that he may have to fight a lot more than a Pokémon battle.

A line of people was waiting for me in the lobby once I made it back. Flyers with the word "registration" guided me to the back of the line while those in front were taken care of quickly. The line's progression was varied, but I was in the front of the line in about 15 minutes.

"Welcome to the Pokémon registration table," a smiling woman said. "So how many are you going
to register?" What was she talking about?

"Six I guess," I said while shrugging my shoulders. A laptop was tilted to me and I was able to punch in all of the necessary information.

The woman looked puzzled when I was done. "You seem to only have registered six Pokémon. Surely you have more that you would like to register. It is a fairly common mistake to register everyone in your party only." Oh shit…

"Those are the only six Pokémon I own ma'am," I whispered in embarrassment.

"Ooooh!" An awkward silence led to me being tapped on the shoulder by the person behind me; the clerk took notice. "Well good luck young man!" I walked away to the elevator guessing that I was the only trainer here without interchangeable parts. Once I got in, I hit the button that had my floor on it and then proceeded into my room.

Everything was as I had left it before I went to the opening ceremonies with papers all over the place. One paper labeled "FAQs" drew my attention so I took a look at that. It was a useless piece of paper by this point because a lot of these were explained by Mr. Goodshow except for two almost forgettable FAQs.

**Q: How do I know what bracket I'm in? A: the brackets will be constructed and released at 11:59pm the day before the tournament starts.**

**Q: Why did I have to register my Pokémon? A: Each contestant must list all Pokémon they plan to use in the tournament (maximum of 12) and submit it to our database. This allows trainers to prepare more thoroughly against one another. Final results can be found at our official website.**

**Q: How does the round robin format work? A: It works by… By this point I was too tired to keep reading and I saw the clock read 12:42 so I might as well look at my information now.**

Computers were in the main lobby for trainers to access so I dragged my ass out of the room to figure out my matchups. All 64 groups of four were labeled as numbers but it was much easier to type your name into the computer to find your bracket and/or opponents. About 30 or so trainers' names started with M but eventually it was filtered down to me. I was placed in group 47 along with Wesley from Azalea Town, Marissa from Goldenrod City, and Victoria from Cianwood City. The main thing about their teams was that their signature Pokémon was the same type as their gym leaders; diversity still prevailed in all of their teams. Wesley pushed it to 12 total Pokémon registered while the other two kept it modest with eight or nine total Pokémon at their disposal. Meanwhile I'm stuck with only six. Out of respect for myself and to keep my sanity, I chose not to look up anyone else participating; it really wouldn't make sense to hope for a future matchup unless I got out of my group. A very familiar voice came from across the lobby after I logged out.

"Yes! Looks like my team will have a good time in my group." It was Carly. "Rapidash should be able to run circles around… oh hey Mitch!" She waved me over to her computer screen. "So I'm seeing that you only have a total of Six Pokémon. Is there something wrong?"

"Not really. I just don't think I could do a good job of raising more than six Pokémon so close to the tournament. I mean my parent's Pokémon would listen to me but it makes zero sense to use Pokémon that aren't mine."

She gave me a confused look. "You do know that everyone will be able to prepare for your team with almost no effort, right?" I didn't respond because I couldn't think of anything to say. "So what are you going to do? I'd hate to see you have an early exit."
Again, I was too tired to deal with this. "Put it this way… I've been using the same team to win all eight badges. If everyone from group 47 has access to my team plus some time to prepare, then I should go 0-3 tomorrow."

Her shoulders shrugged. "Fair enough. I'm in group 31 so we won't be seeing each other too often. Good luck!"

For the last time of the night I went to my room. The bed looked so inviting after I took a shower and changed into some more comfortable cloths. The website said my match was set for 10:30 in the morning on field seven; a little closer to the center than my preliminary battles. Wesley had all of his Pokémon native to the Johto Region so I had to expect a dark or steel type in there. My six Luxury Balls lay on my dresser as I turned off the light. "Sleep well everyone. Regardless of what happens, I love all of you."

A feeling of uneasiness came over me when I heard that every other trainer had reserve Pokémon. Mitch has complete trust in us but I still worry that he won't be able to deal with the other side's strategies as the tournament moves on. My psychic powers are still pretty lackluster at this stage. What matters is that we survive and advance. Pomp and circumstance be damned, it's time to get out there and battle!

From inside my ball I could guess that the weather was warm yet cloudy; perfect battling weather if you ask me. The perfect weather was countered with a not so perfect opponent. Wesley was his name and he looked very intimidating with those amber colored eyes in a sea of people. I heard him talking with Mitch about how he originally was from another region so maybe there would be some new Pokémon to see. Our opponent mentioned he had his own Espeon and Umbreon but he said that their days of battling were over after some kind of mission. They shook hands and walked to their own sides of the field as the crowd started to murmur. My ball got much darker as Mitch's hand grabbed it.

"Alright gentleman this will be a three on three battle with substitutions. The battle is over when all three Pokémon are unable to battle. Ready? Go!" I was sent out to face Wesley's Hitmontop. From the get-go I knew something was very wrong with it.

"Triple Kick!"

"Don't back down Espeon! Use Psybeam!" The fighting type was spinning pretty fast as I went to fire my Psybeam. It took some damage but seemed enraged even more than normal.

"Come on Hitmontop you're already losing it! Focus Energy then Rapid Spin!" Everyone could hear the deep breath it took in before coming right to me.

"Stop it with Confusion!" It was easier said than done since it picked up its speed but I still managed to stop it entirely. "Send it for a ride." Hitmontop was slammed into the ground multiple times before fainting.

"Hitmontop is unable to battle so Espeon is the winner!" The crowd was surprised the battle lasted for such a short time. Even in defeat, that thing still is out for blood snarling in its unconscious state.

Mitch was looking cautiously optimistic as we scored the first knockout. Wesley's next Pokémon was the grass type Sunflora. Another Pokémon that had some overly aggressive traits except this one was much tamer than the previous one.
"Be careful Mitch. Something's not right with his Pokémon so I wouldn't change into Growlithe just yet. Please let me scout out the competition before you make a decision." He gave me a nod despite feeling a little nervous about what I just fed him.

Our referee threw the flags up; Growth was the move chosen to start the round. Ingrain shortly followed so that it would get continuous recovery even after I hit it. Very interesting strategy by not being able to substitute out.

"Quick Attack!" I let loose a string of Quick Attacks to keep it off balance but it showed no signs of being injured; damn thing has those roots deep into the ground to get back health.

"Solarbeam!" Sunflora charged up its attack but it was going to take longer than normal.

"After it launches it, switch me out. I'll take too long to attack again." Despite the long charge time I still took the full force of the attack due to Growth giving it some extra juice.

Mitch immediately held out the ball. "Espeon return! Go Growlithe!" The fire type took the field oozing confidence as it was matched up against the grass type. "Charge in with Flame Wheel!" He did so delivering a critical hit. Sunflora lost its mind and began charging him with no regard for either of their lives after uprooting itself from the ground. Growlithe was caught off guard with how physical this thing was because normal Sunflora use special attacks; Mitch panicked.

"Flamethrower!"

"Dammit Sunflora use Solarbeam!" Flames didn't stop it from rushing in and hitting Growlithe one more time before both of them fainted; the plea for Solarbeam fell on deaf ears.

Both flags went up. "It's a double knockout. Please choose the next Pokémon." A collective moan came from the crowd. Well I wasn't feeling any better after that Solarbeam so Mitch would have to choose someone else for the potential winning round.

Wesley stared down at his last hope to avoid taking the first loss in group 47. "Tyranitar I choose you!" Fuck… that means Mitch only has one option if he wants to win this fight.

"Gyarados!" It came down to the most intimidating Pokémon I've seen versus the one who told me that I belong here. This Pokémon was different in the sense that it was not overly aggressive at all. Since both of them are heavy hitters, this fight should be over in a heartbeat. Give 'em hell Gyarados!

Wesley looked like he's lost the will to fight. "Thunder," he ordered in a defeated tone. Tyranitar ignored his master's tone while landing a near fatal blow to a surprised Gyarados. Mitch couldn't have seen it coming either; this thing is just a monster.

"Hydro Pump! End the Match!" Mitch said in a very intense tone. As soon as the water move hit the rock type, it was all over. The flag went up and that was all she wrote. "Hold up a second!" Mitch ran over to his opponent to offer a handshake. "Are your Pokémon okay? Did I do something wrong during our fight to make them upset? I haven't seen battling that aggressive on the road."

He smiled. "I want to congratulate you on winning the first battle of group 47. As for my Pokémon, there is something I've been working on for years now that needed to be tested on this stage. Please accept my apology for how they acted." A finger pointed toward my ball. "Your Espeon is a strong one for sure. Unfortunately I couldn't bring mine today since they're resting up but I'd like to meet up again so our Eeveelutions can meet. You better treat her like a princess if you want her to succeed." The playful attitude left everyone feeling a bit better after an intense battle. I caught a quick peek at the standings from my ball after the battle had ended.
Mitch 1-0 3pts
Victoria 1-0 3pts
Marissa 0-1 0pts
Wesley 0-1 0pts
Our match against Wesley, or Wes as he calls himself, was some way to kick off the tournament... or at least group 47. There was some downtime in between battles so I asked if we could talk about our Eeveelutions since we both owned two of them. He looked nervous but it was justified on his part; he said it was the first time he entered a major tournament so the nerves were there. He also mentioned that this was the first time that it was okay to lose. From the sound of his native region, losing in tournaments led to severe consequences.

I offered him the chance to hang around if he was eliminated since he told me his work was nearly complete with the exception of the 11 "shadow" Pokémon he brought with him; thank Arceus that his Tyranitar wasn't one. We went back to the hotel so he could transfer over his Espeon and Umbreon since our next battles were at 1:30pm. He wasn't kidding when he told me their battling days were over because they looked mentally exhausted with their tired eyes. Playing around didn't seem to bother them as my own eons did so in the hotel courtyard.

Next to the courtyard there was a little video information board that had a featured battle streaming as well as a ticker on the bottom to show results of other matches. I kept my eyes on the bottom seeing if our match was officially recorded. Right after our information, I saw that Victoria had beaten Marissa. Usually winning your first match puts you in prime position to punch your ticket to the next round, but I know better than that. We really didn't do too much talking as they were playing, but I did call out Furret to use the Iron Tail TM on her and get rid of Slam.

Once the clock hit 1:15 both of us parted ways to our respective fields; my battle was set on field 12 against Victoria. There were a few rows of bleachers for spectators to sit on while looking on. At 1:28 she was still nowhere to be found so the judge came over to me with her score sheet in hand.

"Your opponent is not here yet and if she fails to arrive on time then you are to be declared the winner. Are you alright with those terms?"

How easy would it have been to lose my poker face and show a huge grin; I still had to keep my composure. "Yes." I called out Furret quickly to go over my game plan for round one and returned her when I was done.

"I'm heeeeere!" Victoria sprinted to her trainer's box with a ball in hand at exactly 1:30. "Let's get this show on the road!" Her bubbly attitude was definitely a façade.

Our referee took her place at midfield. "This match in group play will be three separate one-on-one battles. The winning trainer's Pokémon of round one cannot be used for round two or if necessary, round three so choose your three wisely. When one trainer wins two out of three rounds, it will be over."

I waved over to the judge. "Excuse me ma'am, how is this part of the official format? Wouldn't it make more sense to have a three on three battle?"

She rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Sir, the rules clearly indicate that this format will be
implemented in match two of group play. Some gym leaders overseas have this as an alternative method so it's only fair the league give those trainers who battled this way a chance to compete. "Damn… I guess I should've read more of that Q & A sheet before I went to the lobby last night. So what the hell is round three supposed to be? Whatever, I'll deal with that later. "If there are no more questions then let's begin!"

"Furret let's get it started!"

"Sudowoodo, show them why we're here!" The angry tree looking thing almost made me call timeout just to I could laugh. "Looks like I have the type advantage so this should be a piece of cake." Oh you have no idea lady.

"Go in with Low Kick!"

"Escape with Dig!" Furret easily outsped the rock type to avoid a serious hit but she remained underground for a lot longer than normal. The crowd started to boo at the stalemate and the judge looked like she was going to give Victoria the win. I stomped the ground twice and she popped up to deliver the equivalent of a sucker punch; I had a smirk on my face. "Two can play the waiting game you know."

Victoria was not happy. "You'll pay for that… use Rock Slide!" Sudowoodo stomped the ground and rocks rained down after they flew into the air.

Furret was unable to dodge most of the rocks as she soon was covered by them. "You're going to have to do better that that to get a knockout. Dig for cover Furret." The rocks shifted as my normal type hid under the field for the second time.

"I know your silent cue for her to come up so I'll be prepared this time. Say goodbye to your Furret." Again, we both listened to a chorus boos from the small audience before I stomped the ground once. "Now!" Sudowoodo jumped and used Low Kick where he thought Furret was going to come up but she never showed herself; I stomped once more and she hit it again.

"Looks like you almost had me but you weren't fully paying attention. Use Return!"

"Flail!" Uh oh, the move that does more damage when the user is almost out of energy nearly knocked her out at the cost of me getting minimal damage. "Can't use Dig anymore since I know what to expect. So how are you going to win?"

Now it was time for the big reveal. "Iron Tail!" Her tail shined brightly as she leveled the Sudowoodo square in the chest while Victoria's eyes went wide; there was no way she saw that coming. After some tense moments, the referee gave me the round. Victoria was truly unnerved by the unexpected turn of events. Our judge waited for the audience to stop clapping and cheering to ask me to send out my next Pokémon.

I want the kill now. "Gyarados, I choose you!" With Gyarados on the field, he can net me an easy victory unless she has a wall on her side.

"Raichu you're up!" Or an electric Pokémon. A four-times weakness to electricity can also put a damper on Gyarados' day unless the opposition is weak. He seemed uneasy as he looked at the electric mouse; he was shifting uncomfortably on the field. The flags went up for the battle to start. "Thunderbolt!"

"Dragon Rage!" My plan was to force the two moves to meet in the center and cancel each other out except I didn't get Dragon Rage at all. The new move missed the Thunderbolt but still hit...
Raichu while its attack leveled Gyarados. The result of battle was a draw after just one turn. Victoria was really showing signs of frustration after she thought she had an easy win.

"So you have to cheat to win huh? That wasn't Dragon Rage you dumbass… that was a Hyper Beam! I'm assuming you won in the preliminaries by calling out 'Tackle' all the time to confuse everyone? For the love of Arceus it's a miracle you made it this far." She then turned to the crowd. "Anyone wanna tell me why this kid is even here?" Her shoulders shrugged as nobody answered her rhetorical question.

"Let me tell you something… I only have six Pokémon registered but here you are hoping for a draw against me at best. How did you make it here? Apparently someone gave you a badge or two out of pity."

She clenched the ball of her last Pokémon. "Machamp... shut him up," she said in a quiet yet demonic voice that made me lose some confidence. "Master Chuck had found a Machop training by the coastline of Cianwood and entrusted it to me. I defeated him with it and now I'll do the same to your last Pokémon."

"Espeon let's do it!" She yipped, ready to battle as always. Before the official threw up the flags, Espeon noticed something and shook her head to deny it. I went to go say something but she looked back at me with a determined look so I kept my mouth shut and gave her a nod of confidence.

The tension was thick so Victoria made the first move. "Go in and slam it down with Submission!"

"Confusion to counter!" It seemed to be working but Machamp broke through the psychic grip and tossed Espeon like a rag doll across the field. This was far stronger than her previous two Pokémon. "Shake it off and use Psybeam!" Espeon scored some damage but Machamp seemed unfazed.

"Seismic Toss!" It came running to Espeon but she already relayed a plan to me with her telepathy as she used Quick Attack to get behind it before slamming into its back. "Psybeam then Swift!" The onslaught of attacks caused the crowd to ooh and ahh since smoke formed around the fighting type. We all thought that it was over; we were wrong.

"Dynamic Punch!"

"Don't let it connect!" This time the Confusion attack held it in place longer than last time until Espeon was too strained to keep up with Machamp's strength. The punch landed just below her neck in an uppercut fashion causing her to fly backwards.

"Again" Victoria said in a cold tone. The second one was going for her recently healed wound; I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

"Return Espeon!" My split-second decision had the crowd voicing their displeasure.

My opponent's flag went up. "Mitch has forfeited the round. With a score of one win, one loss, and one draw for each trainer, I declare this match as a draw." The announcement got mixed reviews from onlookers despite the fact that the ruling was correctly enforced. Neither of us got two wins so it was a draw. Our official looked like she was about to argue with me until I recalled Espeon with a straight face and she was in shock that I didn't lose my cool.

"Couldn't stand the taste of defeat so you ended it early," Victoria mocked. "What's the matter? Afwaid your wittle Espeon is gonna get hurt?" It felt like time had stopped and we were the only two people in the world. Surprisingly I kept calm since it would be easy to curse her out in front of
"Actually yes. She's been through hell and back once… and I intend to keep it limited to one time." I turned to our official. "Thank you for your time. Have a nice day." I left the field to a round of applause as did Victoria. Flashbulbs from various cameras went off as I exited the battleground to go back to the hotel before the evening match; apparently I'm some kind of superstar now.

The walk back to the hotel wasn't as peaceful as I would have liked due to a lot of other trainers finishing their battles around the same time. Nobody talked to me which was fine, but my room was a better place to decompress. A pit stop at the healing machine was a necessity since those gutsy performances got me one handy point. I felt like neither waiting to see the ticker on the screen to tell me who won in the battle of Wes versus Marissa nor looking it up online. What matters now is the chance to get some rest or some dinner considering I didn't eat lunch. The dining area was still loaded with food which gave me the opportunity to fill up in addition to getting my team some food as well. On my way out I made eye contact with Wes; he called me over so I went next to him.

"What's up?"

He finished his last bite of food. "I just wanted to ask about your second battle of the day. How are you holding up?"

"I was actually going to go to my room. You're welcome to join. It's just that I don't want to give everything away in front of everyone else."

Wes nodded. "Fair enough. Lead the way."

I took him to my room and closed the door so that nobody passing by could hear our conversation. "Let me start out by saying your final opponent Victoria has a strategy based on fucking with your head. She showed up in the nick of time for starters…"

"Well what does that have to do with fucking with my head?"

I was slightly annoyed that he cut me off. "The official tells you that if she doesn't show up then you are the winner. Think about it: it can break your concentration since you practically have the match in two minutes and then she shows up. Now you're thinking 'why do I even have to fight her?' since you were so close to an automatic win. I'm sorry but I don't want to give away my result; the competitive side in me still burns bright in situations like this.

"So why are you telling me about her strategy? Wouldn't it be easier to let me fail?"

Those words hit me hard because I said nearly the same thing to Davis when he stood up for me.

"Because she's a weak-minded trainer and has to rely on mentally overpowering her opponents. She wasn't prepared for what I did in battle. The best part was when I battled with Furret," I sighed with a smile. "Nothing in the rules says that I can't help someone who's done a lot more for Pokémon than I will ever do in my lifetime. If you want to tell me about Marissa then go ahead. Just remember that you don't have to tell me anything."

A smile came across his face. "Her battle style is very defensive to the point of stalling. Be wary of her attacks and strike when you have an opening. The final match of group play goes back to three on three battling so most of the field should be comfortable with that."

I extended my hand. "Thanks man. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to prepare my team for tonight under the lights." Wes exited the room knowing that he can't let his guard down against a trainer
who I frankly want to punch in the face. First… "Espeon get out here for a second." She materialized with her head tilted all cute-like.

"What is it Mitch? Something wrong?"

"Be honest with me… did you know how strong that Machamp was before the flags went up?"

She sighed. "I did. That Machamp was stronger than Gyarados in terms of raw power. Please understand that I still wanted to fight it because I didn't want to let you down."

I knew it. "All I can say is that I hope I did the right thing by calling you back after the first Dynamic Punch hit."

"You did because I was unconscious. Where was the second one going to land?" Curse me for being honest; I pointed to the scar on her underbelly. "Oh... I see. Mitch, I'm tired of this thing causing you and Shade to worry. I want you to promise that you won't call me back if I can defend myself. I told you that we're all in it to win." I can't argue with that.

"Fine, but please don't shut me out like that. I do trust you to make decisions on your own like when you used Quick Attack. My request for you is please tell me when there is a problem on the battlefield. No guides are made on how to be the best trainer. However, I want to walk that fine line of winning and being reasonable. Now get some rest because we still have to battle Marissa tonight."

I called everyone else out to eat while I plopped down on the bed to rest. My hotel alarm clock showed that it was 6:30 pm; the battle wasn't until 9:30 pm. Humming from the air conditioning unit lullled me to a peaceful sleep until I had a dream.

"Do you need something Growlithe?" It was a younger Cory staring down my first Pokémon. "It looks like you're fine so don't bother me." Growlithe sulked before walking away to lick at bread crumbs in a kitchen. All of a sudden, my dream flashed forward to him sleeping on a living room floor whimpering in the middle of the day.

"For fuck's sake Growlithe I fed you two days ago and you're hungry again? Tell you what... if you can beat Skarmory then you'll get something nice. See you outside." Plains surrounded Cory's backyard so there was more than enough space for the battle. Skarmory easily defeated the starving Growlithe so fast that Growlithe couldn't even launch an Ember attack.

"Ohhh tough luck there champ. Something nice is still going to happen; it'll just be for me though." Cory took pleasure in pushing it on its side then kicking it in the stomach multiple times. When it seemed like it Growlithe couldn't take the abuse, he fired an Ember attack at Cory's chest causing a second degree burn. He immediately was grabbed by the scruff and thrown quite a distance.

"That's it! I'm done with an undisciplined piece of shit like you! See this ball? It'll be broken by the time you're out of my sight. Don't even think about coming back unless you want six feet of dirt above you."

I woke up in a cold sweat noticing I had about 30 minutes to report to my location for the next round. My Poké Gear had a flashing which meant someone tried to call or text me. I might as well call my Poké Gear my phone since I don't need the map or radio function but the message was from Davis.

I saw some of the match against Victoria and congrats! You were supposed to be on field nine but
"Thanks Davis," I muttered to myself. "Guess flying under the radar isn't an option anymore. Better yet, what the hell was Espeon doing by showing me more of Growlithe's past? I know that she can't control it but come on. Who am I kidding? I'm just talking to myself. Gotta get going guys so come on back."

Field one was the closest to the hotel which was convenient for me since the trainer's entrance was much more discrete. Each trainer was given some kind of green room to wait in before the battle was started. A small television was in the corner showing the live broadcast while a coordinator waited with a clipboard right next to it. She signaled for me to go out to the battle area so I nodded and made my way outside with Marissa walking at the same time. She waived to the crowd while I just looked straight ahead trying to keep calm in front of 50,000 screaming spectators.

"Alright trainers it's time to take your place in the box," our referee said with a stern voice. "This will be a three on three battle with neither trainer being able to substitute freely. You are only allowed to switch Pokémon when it is declared unable to battle otherwise you will lose that individual round." Olivine flashbacks went through my head about how I couldn't switch against Cory. Frankly it sucks that they still use this format after how I acted. "The battle is officially over when all three of one trainer's Pokémon are unable to battle. Now begin!"

"Umbreon!"

"Miltank!" This was arguably one of the more interesting matchups that I've encountered in a long time. Both Pokémon are fairly defensive but can hit hard when they need to. Marissa looked ready to call the first attack after I quickly found out what four moves I should use. "Body Slam!"

It jumped at Umbreon quicker than I expected. "Faint Attack!" Power versus power favors Umbreon so it was no surprise that Miltank was knocked back. "Bite!" Umbreon charged ahead to get a good chunk of damage off while still hanging on.

Marissa seemed to have no problem with Umbreon holding on to her cow. "Defense Curl then Rollout!" Umbreon was forced to let go or risk getting dragged on the ground. Miltank charged straight ahead as it landed a weak albeit solid hit. "Keep going." It gained momentum and came around faster than last time to hit Umbreon again.

"Relax Umbreon and hit it with Toxic!" With Miltank not wanting to risk losing momentum, I knew it would continue to target Umbreon so why not poison it?

Purple blobs successfully hit the rolling cow as it came in for the third strike in a row. "You're fine Miltank, just keep going after it!" What? She's going to rack up more damage without fighting it?

"Dark Pulse at the ground!" Umbreon knew this strategy from his battle against Cory's Donphan; he forced Miltank to be uncomfortable rolling around by carving ramps or ditches.

"Stop yourself Miltank then use Heal Bell!" Her Pokémon was more than happy to heal the poisoning while adjusting to the field condition; Wes was right about her defensive style. "Body Slam!"

There was no way I could keep it at bay all day with Faint Attack. "Use Dark Pulse to send it away!" My plan failed as the Body Slam wasn't slowed down enough. The move connected with Body Slam's secondary effect kicking in.

"Charge in with Faint Attack!"
"Defense Curl!" Paralysis took some of the speed off of the move causing it to deal less damage than normal. "You made a mistake by getting that close," Marissa said while waiving her finger. "Rollout!"

I thought about using Quick Attack to gain an edge until I realized that a can of worms would open. Sure Ashley gave me the okay to battle with Umbreon but I prefer to keep that a secret as long as possible. Unfortunately Umbreon has to take the first hit. "Shake it off and use Dark Pulse!" Miltank stopped so that it wouldn't get caught in a ditch but I aimed straight for it; a critical hit made sure it wasn't getting back up.

"Miltank is unable to battle. Umbreon wins the round." A chorus of cheers rained down as Marissa called it back. It's not quite a stall fest yet but I have a feeling that it's only going to get worse.

She looked at me with a hand scratching her chin. "I guess it's time to get defensive. Shuckle I choose you!" The time went from 9:35 pm to fuck this shit o'clock in a heartbeat. The most defensive Pokémon in existence is my opponent this round. I wonder how Wes handled this thing.

As soon as the flags went up, I only had one option. "Toxic, Umbreon!" He went to spit out the poisonous move; paralysis stopped him in his tracks.

"Wrap attack, Shuckle!" Vines of some sort came out of Shuckle's shell to restrain Umbreon until it fainted from continuous damage. The worst part of it all is that Umbreon was fully paralyzed during the entire struggle. I recalled him knowing that my one trump card is gone. Wes did say that I had to wait to strike; question is when is that time?

"Gyarados I need your help!" Absolute monster versus a tank; this should be good. "Hydro Pump!"

"Bide!" Fuckfuckfuck this thing needs to faint now otherwise I'm in deep trouble. It started to store energy before the wave of water hit it; it was all or nothing at this point.

"Hydro Pump a second time!" The rush of water hit it to no avail as a blinding light covered the field with Gyarados falling to the ground. Double damage had been dealt to my strongest fighter; it was the first time that he has lost to something other than electric type or some pseudo legendary Pokémon. Forcing the Shuckle to drop was going to take a miracle.

Marissa kept a smile as she teased me. "Looks like I took out your best chances to win hehe," she giggled. "Do you have anything else up your sleeve?"

I stood firm despite hundreds of thousands of people watching across the region. "I still have Furret!" Our judge raised the flags. "Dig!"

"You blew it. Rest up Shuckle!" Nap time came quickly for Shuckle as it regained all of its strength while Furret came up well after it was asleep. "When you wake up use Wrap!"

Certainly it is tough to beat buy I have to try. "Iron Tail!" Furret landed a hit so hard that it staggered in its sleep; a critical hit for sure but it woke up. My luck ran out as it wrapped her up for a while before she finally broke free.

"Let's see if you have the guts this time around. Bide!"

"Dammit I refuse to give in! Iron Tail again!" It wasn't a critical hit this time around which forced me to call it out again. Everything seemed to be in slow motion as she missed the Iron Tail due to her trying to get more power behind it. As a result, she was right next to him as he unleashed the power of Bide. Furret lay motionless on the ground.
"Furret is unable to battle. The match goes to Marissa from Goldenrod City!" I lost. On the biggest stage I blew it in front of so many people. Furret was called back with my head held down.

She called from across the way. "I didn't even use my strongest Pokémon against you. No way you could've won against me." Her strongest must have been another normal type since she comes from Goldenrod.

After the cheering died down, the PA announcer droned on while the video board updated the final standings for group 47, my group. I had never checked online after everyone's second battle so I saw this before the update:

**Group 47**

**Mitch 1-0-1: 4pts**

**Victoria 1-0-1: 4pts**

**Wesley 1-1: 3pts**

**Marissa 0-2: 0pts**

So Wes *did* manage to get past her Shuckle if she used it against him. The standings were updated after my battle since we were the last battle in our group.

**Group 47 Final Results**

**Victoria 1-0-2: 5pts**

**Mitch 1-1-1: 4pts**

**Wesley 1-1-1: 4pts**

**Marissa 1-2: 3pts**

Perfect, Wes had the same result as me so I take it he took my advice. A league official came over to me from the stands with a microphone.

"Let's give a round of applause to our two battlers for that amazing battle!" Clapping continued for five minutes. "Victoria and Mitch will be advancing to the single elimination round to be held two days from now!" Video replays from other battles played as groups 32-64 had their two winners announced as well. It seems that the other half of the field will battle tomorrow. It bugged me why I was moving on so another official came over to me.

"Excuse me, how am I moving on? Wes had the same number of points. Don't we have a tiebreaker?"

A light-hearted laugh came from the official. "My boy you've already won the tiebreaker. You defeated Wes so you move on despite having the same number of points. Congratulations! Now you face the winner of group 48 while Victoria gets the runner up from group 48. After this is over go get some sleep." Video replays continued for another 25 minutes as I saw who ended up victorious. Carly was in group 31 so she would compete tomorrow while her boyfriend Davis actually ended up in group 32; it was no surprise that he went 3-0 in pool play. Once the stadium was empty, I went back to my room in silence at what transpired today.

I survived group 47.
Chapter 38-Survive & Advance

There was no morning sun to shine through my window since mother nature decided to let the clouds roll in. A temporary feeling of relief came over me knowing today I wouldn't have to battle because groups 1 through 31 had to finish their round robin matches. Carly was scheduled to battle in the afternoon portion on account of her group number. I guess the Pokémon League grouped us by skill but even then it makes little sense since there are 500+ trainers to rank. They probably have some lengthy formula to determine a score for everyone and if that's the case, Carly got the short end of the stick. I mean 11 badges has to place her and Davis near the top, right? I would be a little ashamed if I didn't show up to watch at least one battle to see her skills.

I dragged myself to the shower then took a few extra minutes to enjoy the water temperature after I was done cleaning up. Now that I have my own private room, I wonder if my Pokémon would actually want a bath. Growlithe is a no for obvious reasons and Gyarados would probably prefer a lake since he can't even fit in the bathtub here; everyone else is honestly a toss-up. Maybe the healing machine cleans them too? I don't know, I think they should be looking their best if I can help it.

Walking down to the little computer room next to the lobby was uneventful compared to the last few times on my way there. A few others were there on a scouting mission while I just wandered the league site looking for specific battle times. It only took a few seconds to find Carly's profile and her first match location which was on field 12 at 1:15 sharp. The clock in the corner of the room said it was currently 12:57. With that information in hand, I made my way back up to my room to grab my jacket before heading out to the field.

Field 12 had a fair amount of spectator seating but not many people were there; maybe 50 to 60 people sat in the stands. It also didn't help that the skies were opening up a little bit whereas fields one and two had retractable roofs. Knowing Carly favors fire types means that she's going to be in for a rough day but she wouldn't bring only fire types to a battle in the elements. She was in "the zone" because she never looked to the crowd while the judge was getting her things in order. A tap on the shoulder made me turn around.

"Hey man, how are you doing?" It was Davis.

"Pretty good. Just wish mother nature saved the waterworks for later tonight when we're all sleeping. By the way, congratulations on moving on!"

Davis smiled. "Thanks Mitch. And that goes for you too. Carly and I were there for your last battle; don't worry about it. You have to be honest with yourself and be thankful you lost in pool play as opposed to the single elimination rounds." He was right although I still feel like I could have salvaged a tie in front of everyone. "Look! They're about to start." Carly was swaying back and forth just waiting for the judge to go through her cadence. Battle rules were the same as yesterday so at least she knows what to expect in terms of formatting. Her opponent looked pretty content despite the rain gently falling down. While the judge signaled the start of the battle.

Her opponent threw out his first Pokémon. "Go Politoed!" It jumped for joy as it saw the rain coming down. "I can't believe you use only fire types! How are you going to handle a little rain, let
alone a bulky water type?"

Davis just grinned. "Looks like someone didn't do their homework," he whispered.

Carly didn't look phased as she held a Lure Ball. "Lanturn can handle herself just fine." Lanturn looked equally as happy to be sent out in the rain.

"Shit," he murmured. "Politoed return! Go Slowbro!" The small crowd was confused as he switched into another water type.

"Let me guess… you only brought water types to this battle didn't you?"

His immediately flushed. "N-n-no."

"Lanturn, use Thunder," Carly ordered nonchalantly.

Her opponent wasn't too concerned. "Psychic to redirect it!" Slowbro held the Thunder attack in place for a split second only to lose control of it; the attack was a one hit knockout to the dismay of the other trainer. "But how?"

Carly crossed her arms. "Didn't you pay attention in school? Water conducts electricity so Thunder will always find its target in the rain. You might have had better luck if it wasn't raining. It also doesn't help that your Slowbro is weak. So who's up next?"

He was gripping another Pokémon Ball but his body relaxed. "I forfeit."

"You cannot be serious."

"I am serious. Judge, I forfeit this match." Their referee gave a confused look before officially giving the match to Carly.

Davis turned to me again. "Didn't see that coming. Guess he really had nothing else to hit her Lanturn." Everyone watching left in disappointment knowing that one trainer somehow gathered eight badges and made it through preliminaries; one of them said that his 90-year-old grandma could do a better job. Eight ways to Sunday it was still three points for Carly.

"Hey Mitch! Hey Davis!" she waved to us. "Staying somewhat dry up there?"

"We're trying," I replied throwing up my hands in sarcastic frustration. I threw in a playful smirk. "Fire lover huh… I knew you'd have a solid backup plan."

I left the couple alone after she told me that her second match was slated for 3:05 on the same field. Rain would play a factor in match number two as the drizzle turned to a steady rainfall. Walking around until her next battle was the best way to kill time since I couldn't go back to sleep and I wasn't hungry. The temptation to stay inside would build if I went back as well. Just walking around I saw a majority of trainers taking advantage of the rainfall while I could sense the groundskeepers' frustration about maintaining the fields after the battles were over.

Round two was about to get underway so I made my way back to field 12 with the expectation that even less people were going to be there; I was right. Honestly I felt bad for Carly with only 20 people as an audience. Maybe more were watching the stream but it is what it is. Davis found me again so we sat in the front row of the bleachers as the battle was about to get underway.

"The second match format is interesting," Davis commented. "Three separate one on one matches and the winner gets two out of three. We're both used to this format so she should feel
comfortable.

She wasted no time making her decision after the flags went up. "Rapidash I choose you!" Her confidence is definitely up there.

"Meganium!" The animal-plant quadruped assessed how dumb its trainer was for sending it to battle a fire type and then cocked its head in confusion. "It's raining Meganium so don't worry about fire attacks." A light bulb went off in the Pokémon's head and it nodded confidently. "Body Slam!"

"Jump up and use Take Down!"

Rapidash waited for Meganium to start falling before jumping up to deliver a brutal Take Down attack. Its horn ended up leaving a sizeable cut on Meganium's front right leg and Meganium immediately favored it once it landed.

"Tough it out and use Giga Drain!"

"Fire Blast!" Rainfall hardly weakened the attack as the flames engulfed the grass type sending it down for the count. I just looked at Davis in shock. How could a Fire Blast not lose any power in the rain? Throwing in a grass type against Rapidash isn't smart regardless but come on.

He kept looking at his girlfriend while acknowledging me. "She's lucky that nobody is really paying close attention except for you Mitch. Ponyta was her very first Pokémon and since she caught it, she's been raising it to deal with water. As a result, it's the strongest member of the team by a mile. What's a little rain to a high leveled Fire Blast? Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Her opponent was still reeling. "How… is this possible? You foreigners are cheating I just know it! Johto will always have the better trainers!"

"Just shut up and battle!" Carly screamed back. "Flareon!" It came out feeling agitated; it heard everything.

"Hide it all you want but I'll still win this match. Stantler, come on out!" Raindrops finally stopped falling as the official signaled for round two to begin.

Carly wasted no time trying to end the battle. "Quick Attack into Flamethrower into Bite!"

"Stantler use Confuse Ray!" Confuse Ray was too slow to affect Flareon as it immediately got behind the Big Horn Pokémon before leveling it in the side. "Hypnosis!" Again the move failed to connect because Flareon was too close and fired a Flamethrower to break up its concentration. Finally, the judge called the match in Carly's favor after it viciously dug into Stantler; it treated the fainted Pokémon like a dead carcass.

"Go back home you little son of a bitch and don't you ever accuse me like that ever again," Carly said venomously.

Her opponent wasted no time running away. "You're fucking crazy!" Everyone looked on uncomfortably as the judge radioed the incident to someone else.

"Your victory is not official yet," she said coldly. "The outcome of this match will be determined by an ethics committee. I can guarantee that your results will be official before the end of your third match. Best of luck on field number two later this evening."

Anyone who still remained left immediately while only the three of us stayed behind watching in
silence. She was rattled and fell to her knees sobbing while pounding on the softened ground. Davis kept a stern face as he walked over and started to rub her back. I believed it was best for me to keep my mouth shut because I don't want to risk saying something to make the situation worse; going back to the hotel was my best course of action. On my way past the two, I saw that Carly was curled up in a ball lightly sobbing on Davis' lap as he rubbed her gently. My finger pointed to my phone and he understood what I was getting at.

The walk back to the hotel was eerie due to the dark clouds rolling in for a second time in the past few hours. Like last time, I ate alone in the cafeteria and grabbed some food for everyone on the team before going back to my room. Showering up came first since I wanted to feel relaxed as a torrential downpour started outside. Feeling a little uneasy, I grabbed my six Luxury Balls and let everybody out to get them relaxed.

"So… does anyone want a bath?" They all looked at each other for a while before Furret stepped forward. "Well Furret's up first. Come on girl." She happily yipped as I filled up the bath with very warm water; getting her to stay still was a different story. There was some Pokémon shampoo hiding behind a pile of towels so I washed her quickly then dried her off.

"Furrrrrrrrr," she purred after I wrapped her like a burrito.

"I knew you'd eventually like it. Now go on and send anyone else in that wants it. Get some food too, I brought plenty up to the room." I drained the water as footsteps came from behind me. "Alright let me get… Growlithe!? Don't you hate baths?" He didn't want to make eye contact with me. "Wait a second, is this for Furret?" A nod then a sigh, "The least I can do is make yours quick and put the water temperature to high. No heating it up on your own, understand? I don't want you to burn the place down." He sulked. "Save that for the field," I playfully added.

He too got the burrito treatment after his quick bath was over. Espeon came in next followed by Ampharos followed by Umbreon. Gyarados was pretty content with just sleeping in the corner next to Ampharos as the remaining couples nuzzled up at the foot of my bed. I really had no motivation to leave the room so I turned on the television in the hopes of catching a good battle while it was muted. Field one was obviously a fan favorite on the Battling Network although field two had its own channel. Carly was looking ready to battle in spite of the emotional breakdown she had earlier in the day. Her record on the screen stood at 2-0 which meant her previous battle was ruled a win. Rapidash steamrolled through the competition in a matter of minutes allowing Carly to finish pool play with a perfect 3-0 and facing the second-place finisher from group 32. A loss would have her facing Davis in the round of 128 as her final opponent had the same record as her but she dodged a bullet there. Video replays of the day's battles flashed on the screen along with tomorrow's matchups. Commentators briefly went through the matchups where the best of groups 32 through 64 would be duking it out all day tomorrow. Stacy from New Bark Town was my opponent for tomorrow since she won group 48 by going 2-1-0. An official letter slid under the door before I went to sleep; Espeon floated it over to me.

Dear Mitch,

Congratulations on making it past pool play in this year's Silver Conference Tournament. Your start time for tomorrow's battle is scheduled for 11:15 am on field four. As part of making it to the single elimination portion of the tournament, you are required to take part in a mandatory press conference before and after each match. Press conferences should last no longer than a few minutes and there will be a media liaison present to assist you. Failure to attend official press conferences will result in punishments ranging from a hefty fine to expulsion from the tournament. Your pre-battle press conference for the first round is scheduled for 10:45am at the field.
Everything will be set up before you arrive. Best of luck in the next round.

-The Pokémon League

Ah yes, the star treatment now that things are getting serious. At this point in time I think sleep is better than dwelling on this whole media part of the competition.

Morning came too soon like always only this time the sun peeked through a few leftover clouds from yesterday. I had my Pokémon eat their breakfast before I went down to the cafeteria myself. Wes was alone in the somewhat empty room so I sat across from him.

"Hey Wes, weren't you were going back to Orre?"

"Not yet. I've never had a vacation in my life so why rush it? Wish someone else came with me though. She's the reason I made it out of tough spots and I don't feel right just leaving her behind in Orre even though she didn't want to come here." We both ate in silence for a while since I didn't want to push the issue.

Something just clicked. "Wes, is my Umbreon a Shadow Pokémon?"

He was taken aback. "Oh no… not at all. Shadow Pokémon have their hearts artificially closed; all they care about is killing other living things. Why do you ask?"

"Because my Umbreon has killed dozens of times in the past and it's… not normal."

"Think about it for one second. Why did your Umbreon kill?"

Flashbacks of our conversation after I found him at Mount Silver reverberated in my head. "To protect Espeon and a wild female Ponyta."

Wes chuckled. "A ladies' man huh? Anyway, he did it out of defensive instinct. Sure he's not a normal Umbreon but he's far from a Shadow Pokémon. His mate, the rest of the team, and you keep him down to earth. Umbreon are rarely chosen as an evolution due to the stigma of dark types so it's great that you took him in."

Good to know that he's not as bad as he could be. "Look Wes I have to get going. Trainers have this whole press conference spiel once they hit the single elimination round. See you around."

Field four had more seating capacity as the spectators filled the 3,000 or so seats; the days of the sandlot fields are gone by this stage in the tournament. Blue tables with bottled water were near the entrance to the field. Stacy's press conference must have already happened based on the chairs being out of sorts in addition to about 12 reporters still there. I took my seat in front of the microphone ready to go.

"Thank you all for coming. Let's get started so we can start the battle on time. Please say your name and the media entity you represent."

That voice sounded way too familiar. "Ashley?" She waved. "Holy shit! How've you been?" The reporters' eyes went wide. "Oops… forgot this was on haha. So you guys have questions for me?"

One hand went up. "Jason Steele, Silver Conference dot com, how does it feel to make it this far only having six Pokémon to choose from?"

"It's been stressful on my Pokémon more so than me. They're the ones who put in the work."
One more hand went up. "Margret Bell, Goldenrod Weekly, what do you think about the competition so far?"

"Ummm, my opponents so far have been really tough. I have watched a few battles on my own where I did question how some people got here. BUT they have eight badges just like me."

"Do you realize that a lot of people, not just trainers, question how you made it here with six Pokémon? Some would argue that it's a miracle you made it past the preliminaries."

Should not have asked that question. "Put it this way, our Pokémon that we select for entry are public record. So if the field knows I have only six, why am I here in front of you now? Because I won in the midst of a so called disadvantage. I'll admit that I could have easily gone 0-3 but I didn't."

Ashley sensed it was going to get worse so she dismissed everyone to press row while ushering me to the trainer's box. "That was… interesting Mitch. Did you plan that out?"

"Nope. Straight from the heart." She casually shrugged then went away.

Our official waited for Stacy to arrive in her box before starting. "This first round bracket style elimination match will be a two on two battle with either side being able to substitute. When both of one trainer's Pokémon are knocked out then the battle is over. Begin!"

What was with the sudden change to two on two? Oh well, gotta adapt to the rules. "Gyarados!"

"Crobat get out here and use Wing Attack!" Stacy wasted no time going for damage off the bat as is it hit Gyarados.

"Hydro Pump!" Crobat was too fast for Gyarados' attack to hit home. "Change to Thrash!" A large flailing sea snake that could essentially jump was going to find its target one way or another.

"Wing Attack again! Don't be scared of it!" Gyarados met it in the middle of the field and tossed it aside like a joke. While on the ground, Gyarados hit it for a second time. "Use Haze for cover!" Black mist shrouded the field; I smirked.

"Hyper Beam when you find it!" Crobat thought it was covered but Gyarados was too experienced to let a little smoke get in the way. Since it wasn't expecting the hit, Hyper Beam delivered a critical hit earning our first win. "Thanks to you I could get off that Hyper Beam. Haze is like a reset button on the battle and my Gyarados was about to be confused. Unfortunately for you it didn't pay off. Come at me with your best if you want to stick around!"

My opponent from New Bark Town clenched her fist. "Be careful what you wish for. Noctowl!"

Option number one is to keep Gyarados in since he still wants to go. Option number two is to switch to Ampharos. Gyarados has been putting in work so far so he can stay. Besides, I have Ampharos in the back.

"Use Ice Fang Gyarados!" It lunged at the brown bird and bit one of its wings scoring an efficient hit.

"Ha! It didn't freeze. Noctowl use Hypnosis!"

"Thrash attack!" Chuck's battle immediately came to mind on how to get out of Hypnosis' mesmerizing powers: you move around recklessly so the attack doesn't draw you in. The only way to calm my Gyarados down proved to be useless as it came down on the flying type on three
Noctowl was hanging on by a thread but the finishing move couldn't be delivered right away due to Gyarados throwing himself against the ground multiple times from the confusion. "Go in for a Take Down!"

She made a horrible mistake. "Gyarados, Hyper Beam now!" There was no way to evade the powerful attack and the referee had ruled in my favor as quickly as possible. Cheers erupted from the audience as my arm was raised by the judge. Ashley took me back to the press conference area only this time, there were well over 60 reporters this time around. Nobody looked like they were going to follow the formalities with all of them raising their hands to talk. Guess they liked what they saw on the stream or in the stands. Throughout all the commotion I only heard one question that I genuinely wanted to answer: are you really prepared to face all 126 remaining potential trainers?

"Hold on!" I said into the microphone; they all stopped. "I don't have to worry about the other 126 trainers. All I have to do is survive and advance."

"But what does that mean?" someone shouted from the back.

"You'll see soon enough." It got so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

I walked out of the press conference with my footsteps echoing throughout the silent room.
"The Silver Conference started off with a bang as last year's champion Allison went undefeated in group one without losing a single Pokémon! Newcomers Carly and Davis from the Kanto region managed to go 3-0 as well. It's fair to say that having 11 badges as a foreigner means that you're prepared for anything. One trainer is making his presence known the most and that's Mitch from Violet City. He's made it to the round of 64 with only six registered Pokémon and he's still talking the talk."

"So if the field knows I only have six, why am I in front of you right now?"

"Mitch's overconfidence may be his downfall as he finished in second place in the group stage on a tiebreaker."

"I don't have to worry about the other 126 trainers."

"It will be interesting to see if the trainer from Violet City can actually walk the walk. That's all the time we have on this week's edition of Battling with Brandi. And remember everyone, you can get tickets to the Silver Conference championships only at www" *click*.

"I guess making honest statements and taking them out of context passes as journalism," I mumbled as I sat in my room the morning after my first true elimination match. Truth be told, this whole media element is kind of dumb since I really don't benefit from them. If I win then I could potentially get mobbed with requests for battles after this is over whereas a loss could give people the opportunity to remind me about how much of an asshole I was on top of the choke job I might pull off. Nobody remembers losers unless they did something incredibly stupid. The pressure would only increase for anyone who made it deeper into the tournament but my mind cleared when there was a knock on my door.

"Yo! It's Davis! You in there?"

"Yeah. Just give me a sec." I reluctantly left the comfort of my bed to go open the door in a pair of really baggy shorts and a tank top. "What can I do for you Davis? And don't you have a match today?"

"It's in the afternoon but I'd like to spar beforehand. I want to see if one of my newer Pokémon has the skill to compete at a high level. I just recently caught it on Mount Silver the other day."

An interesting proposition; usually sparring happens in the group stage so that weaknesses are fixed before things get serious. "Sure. I'll meet you out on the practice fields out back in about five minutes. Did you request for an official so we don't risk being tossed?"

"Of course. See you in five." He made his way to the elevator while I went to change out of my sleepwear. People probably have friends that come to help them spar or do it with people that were eliminated. I never thought something like this would happen.

Small groups were already out back getting in some practice reps before their first round elimination battle. Davis waved me over to a sloppy looking field where a judge was standing. We
all gathered around for how this was going to take place.

"Gentlemen, this session is meant for a one on six battle where Davis is only using one Pokémon. As the partner, you can make substitutions as you wish or when Davis requests it. If either of you wish to stop, please be vocal about it. Are there any questions?" Neither of us moved. "Avery well. Please stand opposite from each other and begin when you're ready."

Davis took out an Ultra Ball. "Quagsire I choose you!" Blue as the fountain water out front, it stood there wagging its tail slowly while holding a blank smile on its face. I also couldn't tell if it clapping was its way to pump itself up or to taunt me.

"Okay then… I choose Umbreon." He came out looking to get some more battling in his system but when he locked eyes with Quagsire, he became more hostile. "Maybe I choose…" Umbreon shook his head defiantly. "Umbreon this is a sparring contest not a battle! You're not supposed to go all out. Go on and use Bite." His aim was for the head but at the least second he went for the midsection to avoid a fatal blow; still too close for my comfort.

"Slam attack!" Quagsire used its tail to slap Umbreon aside. "Hit it with Earthquake!" Rubble from the ground eventually covered Umbreon as he sunk into the ground a little bit.

"Blow the debris off with Dark Pulse then go at it with Quick Attack!" Dark pulse easily got rid of the debris but Toxic was the follow up move. Quagsire braced for the poison as it covered it from head to toe.

Davis remained calm despite Umbreon's condition. "Rain Dance into Water Gun!" Rain from the attack washed or at least diluted the poison and he managed to score a hit on Umbreon. "Charge in and use Slam!" Another solid hit on Umbreon as it came in; Quagsire looked like it flashed an evil grin.

"Faint Attack!" Umbreon went from down and out to a fast sprint… too fast. "Umbreon return now!" My Luxury Ball's beam almost couldn't bring him back in time. All three of us looked at each other trying to digest what happened until I felt comfortable talking. "Do you want to continue or…"

"It's fine," Davis said with a hint of annoyance. "I still want to go. Bring someone else out."

Damn I felt guilty about continuing. "Furret!" She looked up in the sky after feeling the raindrops. "Iron Tail!" I figured that going easy on Quagsire would make it feel a little better about the whole situation.

"Water Gun!" Furret got pushed back with the boosted water move.

"Dig!" Softer ground made for an easier time to hide underground before coming up to deliver a hit. "Quick Attack!" Quagsire ended up falling on its back as Davis waved for the sparring to stop; if this were a real battle then I would have won the round. However, Davis would have probably used Earthquake when I ordered Dig so maybe I would have lost.

An emotionless look was across his face. "Mitch, what the hell happened with Umbreon? Why the hostility?"

I stared at his ball. "I have no clue. I can get Espeon to help me later. Really, I'm sorry about that. Good luck in your battle today." Guilt riddled me on my way back to my hotel room since there is always a chance that I could face some type of punishment by the league if not Davis. Instead of my room, I made my way to the courtyard so I could call out the Eeveelution Pokémon. "We need
to talk." Both materialized intent on listening. "Espeon, translate please. I need to understand the sudden emotional change with Umbreon." She nodded. "Why the hostility Umbreon? I told you it was a sparring match."

He put his head down. "That piece of shit was one of Sneasel's followers. You couldn't tell by his dumb look, but he almost caused me some problems if I didn't have some help beside me. Who cares if that was a sparring match? I wanted to kill him. He'll never know what type of Pokémon he looked up to. Also, how could you forget what environment I came from? You should know damn well that anything less than 100% effort got you killed. Call me back now. I'm too pissed off to deal with anything else."

"As you wish." The red beam brought him back in the ball; I turned to Espeon. "Well Espeon, I wasn't there when everything went down but he has to keep his emotions in check. Once your mind goes, everything else follows. Attacks start missing, your logic is messed up, stuff like that. I've been in my fair share of fights and I always made it a priority to keep my mind focused. I don't know if you can communicate through your balls but could you try to talk to him for me?"

"Of course. Just curious, when's our next battle?"

"Tomorrow. Battles are on alternate days so Davis and Carly have their battles today. It pains me to say this but anything less than 100% effort is going to send us home. There are no redoes, there are no more weak trainers, there are no good mistakes, and there is no way on Arceus' green earth that I will ever give up. I'm sure you felt it, but that loss to Shuckle almost made our hard work worthless. All I ask from you is that you keep going." She nodded sternly. "By the way… has Gyarados wanted to talk to me yet?"

"No. As far as I know, he's been in his own little world since pool play ended. I'll let you know when he wants to talk." That was all I needed to hear as I called her back.

Footsteps came from behind me. "You alright?" It was Wes.

"Me? Yes. My Pokémon? For the most part, no. I think the stress is getting to them with Umbreon handling it a little worse than everyone else. By that I mean he tried to go for a kill during a sparring session."

Wes sat down next to me. "As you've probably found out, Umbreon as a species are naturally loyal. They fight harder when someone they care about is on the line or if they want revenge on someone. Just curious, how long did it take you to evolve you Eevee?"

"Not too long. Actually I found it as an Umbreon." I paused. "Didn't I tell you this already?"

He shook his head. "You only told me he killed a lot of Pokémon in the past. Now my question is who the hell gave it up? It's rare that someone would just leave an Umbreon roaming around."

I've told this story so many times so I gave him the condensed version. "He was somebody else's, the trainer was killed by Team Rocket, he was taken to a lab and experimented on, he escaped before living in a forest, then I found him after he was running from something. When we got here he told me that he could never fully trust me because of Team Rocket. I know that he's under a lot of stress since his previous trainer was on the same path as me."

"Well it seems like you have your work cut out for you," Wes said as a matter-of-factly. "Even though your Espeon can help you in translation, it'll be up to Umbreon to sort it out. I have to tell you as an owner myself that there are times when Umbreon acts differently and sometimes… it's best to wait it out if the problem is a trainer death. If he wants to be let go, then you have to be
prepared to do it; I sense you're a caring person."

"But that's just it; I don't want to wait it out. I don't want him to self-destruct if you know what I mean."

Wes' hand grabbed my shoulder. "Look Mitch, you've done more than anyone else would've. Everything will sort itself out eventually. I'll be sticking around to watch and maybe I can convince Rui to come too. She needs a vacation too." With that, he gave me a pat on the shoulder and went through the side door. Guess the only thing left to do is dwell on how to approach my next match back in the computer lab; the walk back felt longer than normal.

Battles were being played on the various televisions in the lobby as I made my way into the side computer lab. Nobody else was in there as I pulled up a chair to log on. My expected opponent was supposed to be the winner of the group 49/50 matchup so I did my research on the potential opponents for about 45 minutes or so; both of them owned a Heracross which could cause problems for half of my team if I'm not prepared. I had no desire to go out to the fields to watch Davis on field one after the earlier events of today so I opted to go back to my room after snagging some food.

Pajamas were the way to go as I felt like being a bum while watching Davis' battle on television. In the interest of relaxing, I kept everyone inside of their balls, especially Umbreon. He wasted no time using Quagsire to dismantle his opponent's first two Pokémon and cleaned up as his Hypno tossed around a poor Smeargle; the fact that Smeargle had no offensive moves compounded the beat down even more. Instead of going through video replays, Mr. Goodshow took the mic.

"As we congratulate our remaining trainers, I want to tell everyone what to expect from this point onward. Starting tomorrow, the matchups will be determined by a lottery at 8:30 tomorrow morning on field one. You'll be able to see all 64 trainers before they fight for the right to advance as all trainers are required to attend if they wish to continue. Thank you all!" He left down a set of stairs as the play by play announcer tossed it to break.

I turned to my nightstand with the six Luxury Balls on it. "It sucks that I wasted 45 minutes today instead of spending it with you guys. I messed up big time and I'm sorry. Let's see what we can do tomorrow." I turned the lights off. "I'll always be proud of you guys."

The other 63 trainers were all on the battlefield of field one in front of what could be described as a bingo machine. All of us had no knowledge of what number we were assigned so we had to take the matchups as they come. It took 19 matchups before I was matched up with a guy named Jason from Pewter City; I was number 21 from here on out while he was number 43.

Knowing all Kanto trainers, he would have a rock type on his team. The real question comes down to if it's his best Pokémon. As per the rules, the matchup number also determined your time slot in the day starting with a press conference 15 minutes before the scheduled battle time; my time was slated for 11:00 am on field three. Only four fields were to be used so that all fields had optimal conditions and could accommodate fans in addition to the press.

I made my way back to the hotel dining area since I had some time to kill. Breakfast was the classic bacon and egg combo with a side of hash browns with choice of any fruit juice so I just ate that while hoarding Pokémon food for the rest of my team. Wes wasn't there this time around but I needed some quality time in my room with everyone before our second elimination battle.

"Okay, everyone out," I said with a hint of enthusiasm. "We have a battle in about two hours so eat up and do whatever you need to do so that you're ready. I need to get a power nap in." They scattered onto the large balcony except for Gyarados and Espeon. "Is it time now Gyarados? I
expected you to go eat with Ampharos." He nodded solemnly.

"Everyone else said that you're a great trainer so let me officially say it: you're not only the best trainer a partner could ask for... you're also pretty smart in how you approach battles. If I didn't have you all this time, then I'd probably lose all my battles despite my strength," Espeon relayed to me. "I feel that I have to battle so that nobody can knock out anyone else and expect to walk away unharmed. Take the battle against Steelix for example. I trust you, but that doesn't mean I can't get upset when someone beats one of us.

I smiled. He's very loyal to everyone and makes sure that he takes care of problems; not your typical Gyarados. "You have to understand that battling pissed off could tire you out more in the heat of the moment. Thrash attack is much different when you add in too much of your anger. When the adrenaline wears off, you're going to feel exhausted. I've actually been pretty lucky with that because you finish battles before you can't move."

He looked uncomfortable. "Unfortunately you're right. I've got this nagging feeling that I have less in the tank after every major battle." I looked confused. "My battling is getting more reckless and now that we're here, the hits are going to be harder. I'm not afraid to tell you that my battling days are almost over if I keep doing what I'm doing."

My fist hit the bed in frustration as my smile turned to a frown. "Why didn't you tell me when we got here!? I wouldn't have used you so much in the earlier rounds. Hell, I would've had a whole new game plan. I knew resting you against Pryce was the right decision and we're both lucky that Espeon came through in Blackthorn."

Gyarados scowled. "Because I didn't want to blow our shot at winning this thing. Look Mitch, I knew as a more aggressive Magikarp back then that I'd run out of steam at some point. It doesn't help that there are so many battles in such a short period of time too." He relaxed his face. "But all of that means nothing. I will battle even if I'm the last Pokémon you have and I'm helpless. No way am I going to let the best trainer in the whole damn world lose here on a forfeit; I can handle the pain that comes with the adrenaline rush." A quick point to Ampharos with his head. "Besides, I have to battle for her. I have to be strong so that she can look up to me. What would she think of me if I just gave up?"

I could feel myself losing control of my emotions. "Well it wouldn't do you much good if you ended up in the ICU ward now would it," I said raising my voice a little bit; tears started to form. "I don't want to lose any of you in any way. I want all of you to all be able to battle for as long as you can because you all love it so much. What kind of trainer would I be if I let something happen to you?" This time I slammed the nightstand. "Dammit! Your health and resting up is more important and you're willing to give it up just so I could take all of the credit!?"

"I care about you too much to let you down when you need help the most; I can rest easy when I'm dead." A sigh escaped his mouth. "Growlithe with getting a new owner, Furret escaping death as a Sentret, Espeon being taken in after being abandoned, Umbreon looking to be happy after being hopeless for most of his life, Ampharos gaining the ability to confidently battle after she nearly drowned... all of them got a second chance under your care. Little do you know that you gave me one too but that's another story for another day. Point is that a long time ago I decided to give my all for you no matter the consequences."

"So what can I do so that you won't get hurt?"

"Trust your judgment; you've been doing great since the beginning. I'll support your choices but please don't hesitate to use me. I am forever in your debt and owe you a lot. Now get some rest and kick some ass when you get there." Gyarados made his way outside to eat with the rest of the team.
as Espeon looked at me with my head in my hands then offered her head to pet to make me feel better.


She pushed me so I was lying down on my back and soon cuddled on top of me. "Win. We're going to win. Last night you told us you'd be proud of us like always and we've always been proud of you."

"I," Espeon put her paw on my mouth.

"Rest easy." I could feel Espeon using a little bit of psychic energy to lull me to sleep and I didn't bother resisting since I really needed it. I could have sworn I heard her shortly after I was knocked out but I know the footsteps and sudden increase in temperature weren't just thoughts in my head. Soon I could hear more purring from all directions.

For a split second in time, the pressure of it all was gone and was replaced with unconditional love by six of the most loyal Pokémon in the world. It was their turn to give me a second chance.
Chapter 40- Round of 64 vs Jason

I felt a switch flip in my mind as I saw my trainer sobbing uncontrollably just a few hours before another elimination battle. Mitch has done some unusual things since I've been with him, but this was the most concerning because it was something he had zero control over. He could have waited in the lobby after the battle with Pryce. He could have let me stay in my ball when he saw Sara at the Gala. This time he has no choice in the matter; Gyarados' body is breaking down through no fault of Mitch. My best guess is that the process sped up after battling Chuck but I'm not omnipotent. Hell, I'm not sure if any psychic type can see everything going on with a person. The only thing I could do was calm him down.

"Oh A-A-AArceus" he sobbed. What am I going to do?"

"Win. We're going to win. Last night you told us you'd be proud of us like always and we've always been proud of you." His confidence definitely rubbed off on me. About a month ago, I would've said something more traditional like 'it'll be okay' or 'we'll find a way'. No. This time was something different. At this point there is no more room for doubt. Either we win or go down fighting so that nobody will be able to move for weeks even with a Pokémon Center's help.

I seized the opportunity to push him down on his back and stand over him as a sign to relax. When he thought about getting up, I curled up on top of his stomach while staring him in the face. He tried to respond but I started to use a little bit of my power to make him fall asleep. I gave him enough of a push to be out cold while he could still wake up in time for the next match.

"Pssst. Guys. Get over here" I said softly. Growlithe was the first one to notice my wave while everyone else followed suit. "I'm going to be blunt: Mitch's… everything isn't 100% at the moment. By that I mean his mind, confidence, immune system, stuff like that, isn't at normal levels. I'm surprised he hasn't been heaving his guts out. I don't want to tell you how to battle but when something seems off to you mid-battle… go with your gut."

Growlithe stepped forward. "So we shouldn't trust him or listen to him anymore? Is that what you're telling us?" he asked with some offense taken.

"No! I'm saying that I don't want anyone to get really hurt." I put my head down. "Not after my first time at the Blackthorn Gym. All it takes is one mistake out here and…"

"Alright alright, we get it. So how do we know when to freestyle battle?"

Shade spoke from the back. "You'll feel it naturally. I freestyled an entire gym battle some months ago with my old master. The best way to describe it is that time slows down while you're ignoring all outside distractions; it's like tunnel vision only you're aware of everything else." Everyone else tried to wrap their heads around the concept of freestyle battling while I got ready for a nap.

"You guys should rest up too. I made sure Mitch would wake up in plenty of time." They all got as close as they could without getting right on top of him. Shade hopped on the bed next to me then nuzzled me.

"Confidence is contagious and I think I'm coming down with something" he whispered while
smiling. "Now let's get some sleep. We only have a few hours before we're out there. How are you holding up?"

I shifted on top of Mitch's stomach so I was looking straight at him. "Nervous. Very nervous yet confident. Who knows? Maybe I'll throw up on the field. I guess it finally hit me that we could all be kicked out if we lose." Shade kept a straight face before gently rubbing my head and eventually went to sleep. I know he's feeling it too. I felt something awkward happening with my psychic powers as soon as I fell asleep.

"Get up Quilava!" It was no use as the fire type lay unconscious. "U-U-Umbreon, g-g-g-go." The display of battling by Umbreon was nothing short of amazing as the trainer in the shadows just stood silently. Not a single command was issued to either Pokémon as Umbreon ended up the winner over some dark colored Pokémon with red eyes. Wait a second… Gengar! A paw tapped me on my forehead after the vision was done; it was Growlithe. But what does that vision mean? Why did Espeon replay that specific memory?

"Everyone ready?" He nodded as the remaining five members had already let themselves back in their Luxury Balls. I made my way over to the field while wondering if Espeon knows she let me see into the past again. Honestly, that ability might cause her more harm than good if she can't control it since all she's seen is negative images whenever she does it. That will have to wait since my press conference is about to start.

Ashley wasn't there this time around to act as my liaison but it really didn't matter. A slew of reporters packed the seats in a designated area as the guide went through the usual media protocol speech before they got the chance to ask questions. A woman in the front was the first to go.

"Brandi Carlson, WJTV. Some might argue that your confidence is bordering on cockiness. Realistically speaking, how confident are you in your abilities?"

What a dumb question. Hold on… "Before I answer that, are you Brandi from 'Battling with Brandi' on television?" She nodded; I held nothing back. "First off, I have to talk the talk because everyone and their mother wanted me to just lie down and go home. Second, who said I was overconfident? I had no fucking clue that I took second in my group until another judge told me. Third, I don't have to worry about everyone else because I don't have to face everyone else."

Brandi's facial expression told me that she expected some run-of-the-mill response. "But you have…"

I cut her off. "The point of 'survive and advance' is to only focus on the opponent in front of you. Why would I worry about last year's champion Allison if I don't have to face her today? Use your head people!" Audible gasps could be heard all over the room coupled with a few quiet laughs. "Now to actually answer your question Brandi: I'm very confident in my abilities. We've all earned eight badges plus the right to be here today. Next question." Reporters from all over the room waved their hands in the hopes of getting picked by the liaison; somehow an older man was picked from the back.

"Harold Drew, Pewter City Daily. How does it feel to battle someone from another region?"

Thank Arceus this was a decent question. "Just like any other battle. I've made some friends here from the Kanto region while battling others." I smiled a little bit. "One Kanto trainer used a Johto Pokémon in the preliminaries so I think it'll be fun to see a diverse team with a rock type as a staple. I'm well aware of the influence of gym leaders on Kanto trainers."
The liaison scanned around for another person. "Last question before the battle begins. You there on the right end seat."

"How will you handle your defeat?" Uhhh what? Questions are usually more open ended than that.

"Excuse me sir, you must state your name and media organization you are representing" the public relations officer said with a little hostility.

I could see a smirk forming on his face. "Name's Jason and that's all you need to know." He sprinted out of the room while we all looked on in confusion. My poor liaison sighed while wrapping things up for the remaining reporters.

I was led to a locker room/lounge area with a couch, television, fully stocked mini fridge to my delight, a training table for smaller Pokémon, and a little clock in the corner with a timer counting down to the battle. For simplicity, I kept everyone inside of their balls as I took a bottle of juice from the fridge knowing I wouldn't have much time to lounge around. The timer didn't move until the actual time reached 10:50 so it started to count down from 10 minutes.

By far this was the most nerve-wracking battle of the tournament for me. At least if I lost in the group stage then I could get some help but out here I was alone with just my team. I closed my eyes while remembering what I had done to get to this point. Each gym battle was a testament to either my skill or showing off Gyarados' raw power. Time seemed to fly by as a somewhat quiet buzzer woke me up at the two-minute mark.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the…” the public address announcer blared over the microphone to the crowd of about 20,000 screaming people.; I just kept my head down and eyes closed while in the tunnel trying to down out everything. "Will the two trainers please make their way to their respective boxes?" Jason arrived at his box first while I took my time soaking everything in. Due to the environment, the PA announcer laid out the rules instead of the referee. "This will be a three on three battle with both sides allowed to substitute at will. A trainer has lost when all three of their Pokémon are unable to battle. Without further ado, begin!"

"Growlithe I choose you!"

"Magnemite!" You could hear the cheering dying down in some parts of the stadium as both of us brought out unevolved Pokémon. I know that there's an advantage to not evolving but for Magnemite not to be evolved is unnerving. Growlithe would have evolved if I found a Fire Stone along the way; they're pretty hard to come by in Johto.

Jason grinned. "I thought you'd start with a water type but I guess I was wrong. Magnemite come back! Go Onix!" Time for my own switch.

"Growlithe return! Furret, your turn!" She looked intimidated for a split second then regained her focus knowing her arsenal of moves.

"I thought you were smarter than that Mitch. Onix use Slam attack!"

"I am. Dig underground Furret!" Her smaller body allowed her to escape the full brunt of the attack and also let her strike quickly on the counterattack. "Return attack let's go!" Onix wasn't able to get out of the way as she hit him again.

"Rock Throw!" Its tail slapped the ground causing decent size rocks to fall all over the battlefield in the hopes of hitting Furret.

"Di…” No. If she digs then she could be stuck underground. "Quick Attack! Get out of there!" The
first four or so rocks were dodged but unfortunately the remaining ones around her landed on top of her. "Now that you know where they landed, use Dig to reset yourself!" Some of the rocks fell into her hole as Onix looked on.

"Screech!" Onix let out a deafening roar that could easily find its way underground to stop Furret from moving around. "Follow up with Rock Throw!" It was rinse and repeat with Furret popping out of the ground. "Slam it into a crater!" The long tail sent her into a crater on the edge of the battlefield while some smaller rocks landed on top of her. "Looks like it's almost done. Rage attack!"

"Don't give in! Quick Attack to escape and follow with Return!" Her speed got her out of the rubble before landing another blow; now was the time despite Onix getting stronger. "Iron Tail!" Anyone who saw Jason's face saw a look of disbelief as Furret leveled the rock snake and put it down for the count.

Our judge ran up to Onix as a formality. "Onix is unable to battle. Furret wins!" One down, two to go.

My opponent held his head down as he recalled his star Pokémon. "How dare you mock me in front of everyone with that bullshit" he said just loud enough so I could hear it. "How about I permanently knock out your Pokémon in the next rounds?"

His threat didn't sound idle but I had to keep my composure. "Look Jason, I've actually sent Pokémon to the West Johto Regional Hospital before. Believe me when I say that you have no Pokémon capable of doing anything severe to mine. However, if you want to try then go for it. Just don't expect any mercy in return. So what's it going to be?"

"You better have some body bags back in your lounge because I'm not giving you any of mine." Damn… this escalated quickly. Still, you can't threaten me like that and expect me not to say anything back.

"Guess I have no choice but to defeat you quickly."

He grabbed his second ball and sent out a Noctowl; obviously a counter for any grass types. "It was fun crashing your press conference and I laughed a little about when you said that Johto Pokémon are better. Onix is my most loyal Pokémon but one thing's for sure: this is my strongest Pokémon by far. Start begging for mercy Mitch."

"How about I switch Furret out first before you continue." I beamed her back into her ball. "Ampharos, shut him up!" She came out looking to go after not being used for quite some time. Also, she wasn't looking to playfully poke at anything. I think she heard our little exchange; the flags went up and she was running straight ahead with a Thunderpunch charged up. "Ampharos you can't lose your cool!"

Jason substituted the angry tone for an arrogant one. "Confusion if you please" he said in a fake aristocratic tone; Noctowl stopped Ampharos on a dime. "Throw it into a different crater this time. One that has no rocks in it." It's bad enough that I'm already behind in the round but the fake voice is getting to me. "I don't care if it's holding a magnet to boost its electrical attacks… it still won't be able to touch my Noctowl."

"Discharge!" Ampharos quickly got up and fired off several bolts of electricity only to be dodged. "Get closer and use Hypnosis!"
"Ampharos close your eyes!" I banked on the move failing since she couldn't fall into a trance if she wasn't looking at it.

"Take Down!" It came in too fast for me to answer with my own attack. "Hypnosis again!" Its eyes turned red as Ampharos was too close not to look and soon she eventually fell asleep.

I went into full panic mode. "Wake up! You have to wake up!" No signs of that happening anytime soon. Growlithe or Furret could come back in for a little bit while I figure out a way to deal with this. "Come back! Go Furret!" Even though she's in bad shape, she can still wear this thing down. "Quick Attack!"

"You're asking for it Mitch. Take Down!" Both Pokémon met in the middle of the field with Furret being sent flying backwards. "Hypnosis!" Noctowl looked directly into her eyes as she succumbed to sleep. "Finish it with Dream Eater" Jason said coldly. A transparent Noctowl flew straight into Furret and sent her to the ground.

A flag went up. "Furret is unable to battle. Noctowl wins!" Looks like Ampharos has to wake up eventually otherwise I have to rely on Growlithe to take down this monster plus the Magnemite in the back. I wonder when…

"Hey! Call out your next Pokémon already! Don't just stand there staring into space" the referee said. Oh, so you'll let him threaten me but ride me when I actually think about strategy.

"Fine fine. Come ba…" Furret rose to her feet as if the last Dream Eater didn't knock her out; I turned to the referee. "She can still go ref. Reverse your decision."

He folded his arms. "It's still not in fighting shape. All official's decisions are final. Now call out your next Pokémon or you will forfeit." She turned to me and took about three steps before falling over and vomiting.

"Furret!" I sprinted out of my box to see her. "Oh Arceus what happened to you?" She moaned in pain as her eyes stayed shut. I gently pet her all over until she winced; pain was on the top of her head. "Has to be a concussion" I mumbled to myself. The crowd clapped in support as I walked back to the box with her in my arms. "Get some rest girl. We'll win then figure out what happened." I gave her a small kiss on the side of her head away from the sore spot then recalled her.

"Are you all done Mitch? My Noctowl's getting bored over here."

"Yup. Ampharos! Entertain our opponent please" I said in a fake tone similar to his. Forget stooping to his level; I want to win and maybe I can get inside his head. Unfortunately, she was still asleep.

"Now what? You expect to win with this sleeping sheep? I heard people count sheep to help them sleep which begs the question: does she count sheep even though she's one herself?" His tongue needed to be dulled. "Dream Eater!" Jason wasted no time taking advantage of my sleeping Pokémon.

"Discharge!" When she hit the ground, I could tell she was awake yet she didn't move. What was she doing?

"Again Noctowl!" It came in fast but Ampharos got up and delivered a Thunderpunch uppercut. How did she know that tricking him could be so easy? I can't afford to risk everything on trickery like that but that was a gutsy maneuver. A Take Down would've been deadly.

"Cotton Spore!" Balls of cotton materialized before clinging to the flying type with ease.
"Take Down! Show no mercy!"

Got inside his head for sure; it's moving a lot slower than normal. "Tunderpunch!" Ampharos opted to punch downward thus slamming Noctowl into the ground; something happened to her hand since she started shaking it and blowing on it. She fired a Discharge for good measure.

The official made his decision quickly since he knew that I would give him hell if he didn't do it this time around. "Noctowl is unable to battle. Ampharos is the winner!" Now he had already revealed his Magnemite so I have this match in the bag.

Jason clenched his fists knowing that his chance to move on was gone. "Magnemite… go" he said in a defeated tone.

"Ampharos return! Growlithe!" It was back to square one only this time I had every advantage. "Flamethrower!"

"Swift." Stars were no match for the powerful Flamethrower as the flames disintegrated them all on the way to hitting the steel type.

"Magnemite is unable to battle. The winner is Growlithe and the match goes to Mitch from Violet City!" Loud whistles and cheers rained down from the crowd as I waved to them with Growlithe on my shoulder. Jason slammed an extra ball on the ground before walking back to his tunnel as a final sign of frustration.

The PA announcer took over. "Give our trainers another round applause for an amazing battle! Now Mitch will face the winner of our next battle between…" A clicking noise was heard in Jason's box before a Nidoking emerged from its ball looking ready to take out Jason's frustration on me personally. Growlithe looked ready to fight until a horde of security guards surround the poison type and defeated it with their own Pokémon. Man that guy has problems.

A public relations officer escorted me back to where I had my pre-battle one with the room even more packed than last time; we're talking borderline sardine level status here. The officer couldn't stop everyone from taking pictures or asking for their question to be answered.

I lowered my head at the podium. "This press conference is postponed until further notice." That got everyone silent.

"What do you mean?"

I looked up and spoke very clearly into the microphone. "My Pokémon's health always comes first."
Chapter 41- Battered & Bruised

Angry shouting echoed throughout the tunnel as the press were prevented from following me back to my lounge as the public relations person radioed for more security to block the way. He tried to convince me to go back to the podium since I risk some kind of punishment from the league for dodging my media obligations.

"Does it look like I give a damn?! Radio for a nurse," I snapped at him. Two of my Pokémon are hurting more than normal and I'm not doing anything until I get a diagnosis from a professional. "I'll be in the pre-battle lounge on the right side. If another trainer is there for their next battle, then so be it. I'll find a way to meet up."

He understood my predicament and my attitude as he radioed for a nurse. Fortunately for me, the next match was scheduled in a manner that allowed me to take the room to myself. I took out Furret's ball wondering how bad she must feel after taking a head-on collision while she was already beaten down. *knock knock knock*

"Is 'Mitch' in there? I was called in for medical assistance." Thank Arceus it took only 15 minutes for someone to get here. To some people, the Indigo Plateau is a maze.

"Come in." A younger looking doctor in her lab coat was followed by Nurse Joy. "I'm afraid to call them out so would you mind if I told you what happened to them?"

The doctor smiled. "It's okay young man. My name's Melissa Harrison and I've been studying medicine for over a decade while specializing in Pokémon anatomy. Just stay calm and tell me what happened. We'll take a seat and sort this out." Both of them pulled the other couch around so it was facing me while I took the loveseat.

"My opponent Jason had a Noctowl that put my Ampharos to sleep so I switched to Furret as a way to wear it down… butthenitusedTakeDownandIusedQuickAttackthentheybothmetandFurretgotsentflying..."

Dr. Harrison threw her hand up. "Slow down. Breathe. Relax. I'm not here to judge your actions; I'm here to treat your Pokémon. Please continue slowly."

I took a deep breath. "She got sent flying and took a Dream Eater while asleep which caused the ref to give the round to Jason. After he did that, Furret got back up like nothing was wrong, tried to walk to me, vomited, then collapsed."

Both medics whispered to each other before coming up with a consensus. "It's safe to say that your Furret has a concussion," doctor Harrison stated. "But we'll have to run some tests in a more controlled environment to see how bad the damage is. There is a chance that she won't be able to battle for quite some time but our tests will determine that later." I put my head down while twiddling my thumbs pondering the worst-case scenario.

"Can I tell you about my other Pokémon? She can probably be healed in this room."

Nurse Joy took the opportunity to take care of the smaller issue. "Of course."
"My Ampharos hit that same Noctowl in the head with a Thunderpunch, sending it into the ground. She shook her hand afterwards. I don't think it's broken but a diagnosis would help. Come out here Ampharos." She came out still favoring that hand as she backed herself into the corner.

"Oh she's scared" Nurse Joy said softly with a hint of concern. "Could you get her to calm down just a little bit?" I walked over to her balled up form in the corner underneath the training table.

"Come on girl, you have to come out. All they want to do is help you." She defiantly shook her head before burying it again. "What if I have Gyarados out here for support while they help you?" Her head slowly popped up. "I wouldn't let anything happen to you and neither would he. What do you say?" She sniffled as she slowly made her way over to the two. "Gyarados, I need some moral support out here." It emerged looking the least threatening I've seen it in my life. He got down to her eye level and had a quick talk as she gave him a quick kiss.

"Wow… you have something special going on here," Harrison said a little stunned while writing down notes. "I'll ask about that later. Now come on Ampharos, hold out your injured hand. We're going to gently do a few tests here to see how bad it hurts." Gyarados nudged her forward as Nurse Joy went through a specific order of tests. Every now and again Ampharos would wince in pain or quietly yelp. Nurse Joy dug up the common first aid kit out of their bags of medical supplies.

"It seems to be a bone bruise. A human would take about 12 weeks to fully recover while your Ampharos would take about four days. If you decide to fight with her and land another strong punch, that bruise could easily turn into a fracture. Let me work on it now." A roll of bandages was wrapped perfectly around the tender area. "When we get back to the center I'll give you an ice pack to apply so the swelling stays down. Let's get moving."

The walk back to the Pokémon Center by the main entrance would feel like an eternity. The only ways out of the stadium were through the field followed by going up into the crowd or going back through the press conference room. Since I couldn't interrupt the ongoing battle, I had no choice but to sprint through the room. Luckily there were some televisions were keeping the small amount of reporters occupied with the battle; a majority had gone to press row to witness the match in person.

"Yoo-hoo!" Of course it was Brandi that saw me trying to hide between the two medical experts. "What's the big idea dipping out of your press conference like that?"

"I already addressed that. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to tend to my Pokémon."

We continued walking out of the stadium to the front gate of the Indigo Plateau with Brandi following us. She didn't ask any questions along the way which was a little unnerving to me but I wasn't complaining about the silence. A few curious onlookers decided to join Brandi whether they be reporters, trainers, or casual fans. By the time we entered the sliding glass doors, a crowd of about 35 followed us in. The resident Nurse Joy looked surprised to say the least.

"Okay, if everyone could make a single file line…"

"Us three need the back testing room now," Harrison interrupted while pulling out her ID badge. Nurse Joy immediately understood what that sentence meant.

"Everyone who doesn't need their Pokémon healed needs to leave now," she yelled so that the entire lobby could hear her. Our group of three made our way back to a room with advanced looking medical equipment as a majority of the crowd left.

Dr. Harrison guided me to an exam table. "Call out your Furret so we can start the protocol." I wish
there was a way to have them check her while she was still inside the ball but I really don't have much of a choice. She materialized looking groggy then looked intimidated at all of the machines.

"Furret," I said very softly while getting eye level. "These two are going to help you okay? I'll be right here the whole time." She still wasn't quite sold on the idea as her ears drooped. "Growlithe, come out." He stood as confidently as ever. "Furret's going to go through a few tests and she needs your support. Think you can do that?" He walked over to her as she was still cowering at her situation then did his best to hug her then nuzzle her; she became less frightened after a few minutes. I gave her a quick scratch on her chin just the way she likes it. "Hop on up. When we're back at the hotel, I'll get you a little present." Dr. Harrison took down some more notes before starting.

The concussion protocol took half an hour with some basic tests like following the end of a pen with the eyes only all the way to some basic agility and balance drills. Nurse Joy organized her notes while sharing them with the veteran doctor. My own eyes saw some very shaky performances compared to what she could normally do. All testing stopped after she nearly fell asleep during some kind of vision test on a machine. That was when I called both Pokémon back.

"Could you come over here please?" Nurse Joy asked with a hint of concern in her voice. "Dr. Harrison and I have come up with a diagnosis." I walked up to her a little uneasy. "We believe that she has a grade two concussion."

"What exactly a grade two concussion? That sounds like a pretty big problem."

She looked up from her clipboard. "A grade two concussion's symptoms can be, but not limited to: severe headaches, vomiting, the desire to doze off randomly, excessive sleeping, glazed eyes, unconsciousness, and confusion stemming from memory loss. We recommend that she not leave her ball for 24 hours except to eat or take our medication which should be delivered to your room. Absolutely no battling either. If you send her out to battle in your next match, there's a good chance she won't be alive when it's over. Win or lose."

I thought about my next battle. "So any movement can be fatal?"

"Not necessarily. We just want her in the ball to keep her condition as stable as possible." More directions were written down on a piece of paper and placed on top of an ice pack. "Take this with you and we will see you before your next battle. When would it be?"

"Two days from now. All the trainers were split up and half of them battle today while the other half waits until tomorrow then the cycle repeats. I'm hoping everyone gets more time to rest as time goes on through."

Nurse Joy nodded knowing that I wasn't a trainer who would lie or ignore her advice. "If you don't mind, the doctor would like to ask you a few unrelated questions."

"I'm sorry, but maybe next time we meet up; here's my number. I have to take care of something else."

"Before you go, you could give Furret to us if you want to relieve some stress. Obviously nobody just gives their Pokémon so think it over. Have a nice day!" I left the room with the information feeling anxious at the information presented to me. No mob followed me out of the center as I made a mental list of my current state.

-The rest of the field has the luxury to substitute party members while I'm now down to five Pokémon.
Four healthy Pokémon (Umbreon's random attacker status prevents him from being 100% all the time)

Only Gyarados can easily deal with rock types.

Probably going to get fined for the delayed presser.

Bullshit gossip shows eating this up.

Random questions from Dr. Harrison later on.

"Get back here!" It was the in-house Nurse Joy with a thick stack of paper Wait… "You're lucky that someone else healed your Pokémon for you this time around, but you're still going to get it!" She still hates my guts? "I'm under obligation to report any back room admittance to the Pokémon League in this packet. Your days as a trainer are numbered young man. I've already had to deal with a few other trainers these past few days."

I had to keep my cool. "Understandable. You also need to have those two on the witness portion as well because I know it will help my case." She went to speak only to stop with her mouth wide open. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to do a press conference to get over to since I told everyone to wait until I was done here." Her body language got much more relaxed; her head lowered.

"I'm so sorry. Usually trainers want to show off and grab the spotlight here by any means necessary. You have to understand that I've healed a lot of Pokémon that were severely hurt in avoidable situations. My first impression of you was that you were just another trainer looking for 15 seconds of fame at the risk of your Espeon bleeding out. Then you stayed up all night with her and now you came here immediately after your battle to take care of Furret instead of relishing in your win. Can you forgive me?"

No doubt I was upset that she had the power to end my existence as a registered trainer but I feel for her. "Yes. I can see how you've grown accustomed to selfish people but maybe you should dial it back in the future. Although I admit I can get too blunt for people's liking."

She smiled. "I can help with anything if you want. Good luck moving on!"

I felt great about clearing the air with her as I made my way back into the stadium side entrance. The security officer recognized me and escorted me to the doors of the press conference room. Another one was going on so I would have to wait before I could redeem myself. A series of codes blared over the officer's radio as he told them I came back to speak to the media and I was eventually let back in. My public relations guy met me halfway to the podium.

"Where the hell were you!?" I didn't answer as I took my place in front of a packed room.

"Hey everybody" I said sheepishly. "Pokémon League officials, please don't fire this guy. I made the decision to run on my own. There was no way he was keeping me here even if he had a legendary Pokémon. I'll take some questions now." I gave him a signal to relax; this was my time.

"Is it true that Jason threaten to kill your Pokémon?"

"What did you actually say on the field?"

"Why is your Growlithe not evolved?"

"What is that status of your two Pokémon that suffered injuries?"
"Too fast!" I said in annoyance. "In order: yes he did, no comment, Fire Stones are very hard to find here in Johto, no comment."

"Do you know your next opponent?" Now that I think about it, I ran off before I got the chance to hear who I would be facing. The blank stare forced the reporter to give it to me. "The kid's name is Davis. Says that he's from Kanto plus he has 11 badges. How do you plan on battling a trainer with those credentials?"

I just stared in confusion. "You're kidding, right?" His face told me that he wasn't telling a lie. "To be honest… I don't have a clue how to face him. Guess I have to go study some film. Any other questions?" Silence filled the room; they all probably banked on me telling them our whole conversation on the field while Jason may have said it already. Everyone worked their way out knowing their time was up and that the next press conference was going to get underway soon.

The PR person motioned to come over to him; I did. "Don't shoot the messenger but you're going to get fined for delaying your press conference. We're on a tight schedule and you sort of messed it up. Your fine is expected to be anywhere from 10,000P at the least to 50,000P at most."

Holy shit that's a lot of money. "Can I appeal the fine?"

A hand went on his chin in thought. "You could do that. Not sure if you'll win though since they base it on your track record at this tournament." Looks like I'm losing a nice chunk of change in the near future. Now I have to focus on battling someone who is definitely a step above me.

"Thanks for the info. I really do hope nothing bad happens to your job status because of what I did. If anyone has a problem, send them my way." He smiled at my kind gesture then ushered me back to the entrance to the stadium.

I walked a little faster than normal on the way back to the hotel in the hopes of making sure I knew what to do going forward while in the privacy of my room. A quick stop in the cafeteria led me to get an apple for Furret since she loved them and it's a nice change from Pokémon food. My room must have just been cleaned as I could still smell the scent of warm linens when I sat down.

"Furret, we have to talk." She still looked a little out of it so maybe she would take the medicine; she didn't fight it at all. "You're going to have to sit out the next battle." That jolted her to reality while she whined. "It's for your health. I care about you too much to let you get hurt any worse than you are now. Besides, Growlithe would like it if you rested too. He wouldn't want to see his mate really hurt would he?" She stopped whining and put her head down. "I know you want to battle. How about your treat for being a good girl earlier today hmm?" I pulled out the apple and she beamed at the bright red color before nibbling at it. When she was done, I called her back per doctor's orders. I turned on the television to see a breaking news story.

"WJTV has received information from our top reporter and battle expert Brandi Carlson that one trainer is out a Pokémon for the next round. She reported that Mitch's Furret has suffered a concussion during the round of 64 match. The exact details are still unknown but let's go to Brandi live at the Indigo Plateau. Brandi?"

"Yeah guys, I found out that the upstart trainer will not be able to use his Furret in the next battle against Davis. Now Davis is from Kanto and holds badges from both regions so this is a heavy loss. We will be keeping an eye on this situation as it develops. Back to you in the studio..." *click*

How? How did she know? Is that stupid form that goes to the league a public document? Did she ask someone for that information? My phone vibrated from an incoming text shortly after I turned off the news. It was Davis.
Hey man, just saw the report. As a sign of good faith, I will ask for a reschedule so that Furret is healthy enough to battle. I was in complete shock.

But why? You could wipe the floor with me knowing I only have five Pokémon.

Some time passed before I got another message. I wouldn't feel comfortable battling someone who isn't at 100%. Carly feels the same way. Think of it as me owing you for supporting her in the torrential downpour a few days ago and coming to her defense when the crowd turned against her. Everybody's wary of us except you.

A gentleman for sure. Thank you for your kindness. I hope that the league listens to you. If not, then it is what it is. When's Carly's next match?"

Tomorrow afternoon at 2:30 on field two. We can meet up beforehand if you'd like.

Great! See you in the cafeteria at 1:30 for a quick lunch. Thanks again. You don't have to do this.

Another long wait. I want your all Mitch. I expect nothing less :). Davis is something else. It sucks that I have to think it's a bluff though. Unless I see it in writing, then we're still on two days from now.

If he wanted my all then he would get my all.
Chapter 42- Repaying Some Debt

I spent the remainder of the day in my room trying to get my mind off of the situation I was in. It was the first time I truly wanted to do nothing on my journey and just be a bum in front of the television. No watching the late night battles, no interacting with other trainers, no keeping my Pokémon out, no nothing. Meeting with doctor Harrison would happen before my battle with Davis along with her questions but I really didn't want to for a variety of reasons.

For what it's worth, I'm not an inviting person in the eyes of everyone here which is probably another reason to stay in for the rest of the day. All that's been thrown my way is hostility with the exception of Wes, Davis, Carly, and the doctor since I got to the Indigo Plateau. Tomorrow would be a better day knowing I could take in Carly's battle for fun; my mind needs a break for a little bit.

The change of pace in my day changed for the better as I slept in until noon. Noon! Almost every day here was "wake up at 8:30 to walk over" or "leave at so-and-so o'clock so you won't be late for your press conference" except for today. Today was the day I could basically do whatever I wanted to do. Since I'm a man of my word, I'll still eat lunch with Davis before walking to field two. My phone started buzzing so I checked it.

*We still on for lunch?*

_Yup. 1:30 in the cafeteria._ Glad he remembered too. Now that he reminded me of lunch, I was subconsciously reminded to ice up Ampharos before she would be done for the day.

She took the ice pack outside on the balcony before peacefully reclining on a chair and putting it on her injured hand for the 90 minutes before we had to go downstairs which left me time to think. Pokémon are obviously different from humans, but how do their bones continue to get stronger like that? Yeah, the skull is meant to protect the brain so it has to be hard but apparently Pokémon's skulls can only be damaged by other Pokémon. Then again, I have no clue regarding Pokémon anatomy nor do I care enough to ask.

To Ampharos' displeasure I had to call her back so I could go eat with Davis. She poked it after her hand returned to the normal body temperature and she didn't wince as much as yesterday. Probably a few more days of rest will make it 100% again; too bad I don't have that time at the moment. Using the elevator to get downstairs didn't take that much time either. Davis was checking his phone outside the cafeteria when he saw me.

"I'm starving so let's eat." We snagged two plates each of food before sitting next to a window. "So how's everyone else doing?" Not sure if I want to give him any more information than what's already been given out.

"Fine. They're getting anxious though. At least they haven't tried getting into fights outside the sparring courts. Apparently a few years ago a Bulbasaur and a Meganium almost got their trainers kicked out of here. How's your team?"

He smiled. "Well I'd say they're too energetic sometimes. My round of 64 match got them riled up so much that they kept using the wrong attacks at the start of the fight. Calming them down made
the battle so much easier to manage."

"What about your girlfriend? I know field two has the roof so her fire types would love a more level playing field." He looked up from his lunch. "I know that they're fine in the rain but you have to admit that downpour wouldn't have mattered if she got a good field."

Davis shrugged his shoulders. "Can't do much about it. It's not like they want us to win."

"I thought Kanto trainers were treated better than Johto trainers at the Silver conference? One opponent didn't have their hometown mentioned during a preliminary battle and you know how much influence gym leaders have over there."

His fork dropped onto his plate and I could see his face get red from across the table. "They do. We get treated like shit because we beat the best gym leader in Johto first even though Clair didn't complain to us or the media. Everything else after that point was a cakewalk. Falkner didn't use his weakest Pokémon like he would against a newcomer but we still steamrolled him. That is why we've been at a disadvantage since our first gym battle. I wish I could tell you all of the scrutiny we faced throughout our trip."

Damn… looks like I hit a nerve. "Sorry I asked," I said with a hint of guilt. "By the way, whatever happened to that appeal you put in?"

"It's fine. You had no idea. As for the appeal… they said you'll get something in writing. Now let's finish up so we can watch Carly's battle. Her opponent is some young kid named Joey from just outside Cherrygrove City. Apparently he's only 14 years old." That threw me off for sure; not a lot of trainers are under the age of 16, let alone make it this far in a major tournament.

Scores of people were lined up to get into all of the stadiums while we were shown to a suite to watch the battle. We're still in the field so we could just waltz in to any stadium with our identification and security had a list ready, or so I was told in the suite. The match was set to begin when we got situated with the PA announcer taking over.

"Llllllladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this Silver Conference second round elimination battle between Joey of Cherrygrove City and Carly of Kanto. Send out your Pokémon on the referee's signal. Good luck to both trainers and here we go!" The crowd roaring could be heard through the plexiglass windows.

Carly already had her ball in hand during the entire introduction. "Typhlosion!"

Joey looked like he went with a split-second decision as opposed to a thought out one. "Stantler!" This should be quick considering her fire starter is her most battle tested in the Johto region.

"Stantler, use Hypnosis!" Its horns started to emit psychic waves in the hopes of lulling Typhlosion to sleep. Unfortunately for Joey it had no effect.

"Flamethrower!" Flames engulfed at least a quarter of Joey's side of the field as Stantler was torched. Carly was surprised to see it still able to hardly stand. "Charge in with Flame Wheel!"

Joey looked a little too confident. "We're not out yet. Take Down!" His Stantler got up to meet the charging fire type head on and even used its horns to toss it to the ground. "Stomp the leg!" Its hooves stomped squarely on the inner thigh of Typhlosion; a very dirty yet legal move that was compounded by a stomp directly on the kneecap.

Now Carly turned just as brutal. "Flamethrower! And don't stop until the referee calls it!" From what I had seen on the ride over, Typhlosion was no stranger to cheap shots or rough battles based
on its rough appearance. It fired another wall of flames until the referee was forced to give the round to Carly as an act of mercy.

"Dammit woman! What the hell was that?!" Joey screamed over the chorus of boos. I couldn't tell which side the audience hated more between the intentional leg stomp and the merciless frying.

The judge intervened before it escalated. "Send out your next Pokémon or you will forfeit sir!" He pouted as he casually sent out a Raticate for his second Pokémon.

"Let's see how your fire type can do with a bad leg," he smirked. "It can't keep up with my lightning fast Raticate by the looks of it." Carly looked worried until Typhlosion gave her what can be best described as a look of trust; it looked hell bent on staying in until the end.

"It won't have to keep up" she said calmly.

Joey's facial expression changed instantly. "Your overconfidence is getting on my nerves you overrated trainer! Hyper Fang attack!" Lightning fast was pretty accurate to describe the rat Pokémon as it got over to the downed fire type before it could even look up. "Send it backwards!" Raticate dug in with its teeth and threw Typhlosion close to Carly's trainer box.

"You made a horrible mistake kid," she whispered. "Do it Typhlosion!" When I looked to Davis for what that meant, he looked a little nervous.

"He went to a place that nobody should ever go," he trembled. For once, he was genuinely scared at what was about to happen.

I still looked confused. "I don't…"

"Mitch…" he interrupted. "Never battle dirty against her if you want your Pokémon to live."

I turned back to the field to see everything in front of Typhlosion from its mouth level down covered in flames. With no effort at all its flames covered a quarter of only Joey's side of the field. She gave it permission to engulf the entire field with even some blue flames scattered on her side of the field. At less than 100% it can still produce blue flames; this thing could seriously stay on par with Entei in a battle of fire.

The official called the round before the fire completely subsided. "Raticate is unable to battle. Typhlosion wins!" Now the boos were for Carly. Most of the crowd thought that her moves were overkill but I don't blame her one bit.

"Get a medic for Arceus' sake!"

"You should lose your trainer's license now you dumb bitch!"

"Come on ref, kick her out!"

"I'll come down there myself!"

Threats continued to rain down as Joey was still recovering from the near-death experience he just witnessed in shock. A pair of medics soon arrived on the field to treat his injuries while a second group took his Raticate out on a stretcher as Carly slumped to the ground going through a wave of emotions.

Davis turned to the suite exit. "I have to go down." I grabbed his arm and shook my head.
"I know how you feel, but she still has to win one more round. If you jump in there now, then you'll disqualify her." He tried to break free; my voice got more stern. "I might not know her as much as you, but I know she's capable of keeping together long enough. Am I wrong?" He punched the door in frustration. "Let's go down by the tunnel then rush out when it's over."

I let him shake me off as he sprinted down four flights of stairs to a tunnel entrance. Police officers positioned at the tunnels couldn't get him to calm down until I explained the whole situation. He was relieved to see them grant us permission to run out onto the field after the battle. Our one condition was that we couldn't talk to her from that distance because we had the potential to give her advice.

Everything at field level went back to normal for the most part once all medical personnel left the scene. Temperatures returned to normal although you could easily see where the blue flames burned. Only one thing hadn't changed: Carly sobbing on her knees while Typhlosion was panting heavily in front of her. The will to fight is still in it, but it has nothing left in the tank. Its leg is severely bruised in addition to having no fire to use. Frankly I'd be surprised if it could dry heave a single spark after its last attack. The PA announcer gave the signal to start up again.

"I'm not done yet Kanto girl. Heracross!" Carly was getting progressively worse as she covered her head while wailing louder than before. "Megahorn!" Heracross had no problem ramming straight ahead into the vulnerable Typhlosion; the impact sent it flying over Carly's head and landing near the wall behind her. She struggled to grip its ball.

"Typhlosion, get in the ball!" she screamed as it looked upset about getting called back. "Rapida..." she couldn't finish as she curled up in her trainer box after the ball was tossed onto the field; Rapidash defeated Heracross with no commands which earned her the match, much to the chagrin of the audience. Debris soon started to fly onto the field as two league officials quickly ushered them to their respective tunnels. Davis met her as soon as she was out of the line of fire while also calling back her Rapidash. Carly was still an emotional wreck while Davis held her.

"I'm here. It's going to be alright," he repeated over and over into her ear. "I'll sit right next to you for your press conference. Afterwards, we can do anything you want." My stomach felt like it was knotted up from suppressing the desire to teach her opponent a lesson. If she had actually lost, then I might have considered it. She made her way to the press conference doors very slowly with Davis still holding her for support. I didn't feel the need to stick around so I nonverbally excused myself from the area.

"Wait!" Carly had finally noticed me. "Where are you going!?" she asked hysterically.

I turned back to face her. "To be honest... I don't know how to help you now. What I can do is help you out for later. And to do that, I can't be here now." We both exchanged stares before I left to take care of business. "Make it through the press conference and I promise that you'll be fine," I said in a calm yet confident tone as I walked out of the stadium.

"Excuse me, are you Mitch?" It was another official in a suit and tie.

"Yes. Why?"

"A note regarding your next battle. Have a nice day." The letter was addressed to Davis and me.

Dear Mitch,

It has come to our attention that you and Davis mutually wanted to push back your matchup another 24 hours or longer. Unfortunately, that is not possible due to the nature of this
competition. However, your match has been pushed back to the last time slot tomorrow night (your regular day to battle) and your battle will be at 9:00 pm on field number one. We did our best to accommodate Davis’ request to delay the match. Feel free to contact anyone in the league office for any questions. Good luck in the round of 32.

-The Pokémon League

Well I’ll be damned… he actually followed through and tried to buy me some time.

The video board inside the stadium showed the entire bracket then a zoomed in version of our region as Carly would face the winner of… us? That has to be a fluke. The longer it stayed up, the more I realized that either of us could get a free pass to the quarterfinals. I have no doubt that there will be an investigation into today’s battle and Carly might get kicked out after what her Typhlosion did. I found an area where there was nobody else around so I could make a call. It was time to repay some of the debt that I owe to those two.

"Hey Ashley? It's Mitch."

"What is it Mitch?"

I sighed heavily. "You might have another incident report to fill out after a battle today. Please do everything you can to keep Carly in the tournament."

It was quiet for a while. "What's that supposed to mean? What the hell happened over there?"

"You'll see later on. I'm counting on you to keep her in." I hung up knowing that pleading my case over the phone with no hard evidence yet might actually hurt Carly's chances to stay in the field. It had to be me to make that call; Davis calling in to protect his girlfriend could be seen as a conflict of interest whereas I'm a neutral third party in the eyes of the Pokémon League or even a beneficiary of her dropping out.

I can start to feel the desperation creeping into the minds of the remaining trainers, morals being tossed aside, questionable ethical decisions being made on the field, and most importantly, the brutality of the remaining battles increasing.

My moral compass will be tested these next 24 hours and I pray to Arceus I pass.
Chapter 43- Round of 32 vs Davis

Chaos descended outside of the press conference room as word of Carly's battle spread throughout the Indigo Plateau like wildfire. It was no surprise that dozens of reporters had to be held back by extra security but it also came as a surprise to see a lot of trainers try to crash the presser. Four of them must have been her previous opponents based on how specific they were with their threats to her Pokémon. I just sat back as she had to exit the room surrounded by even more security guards and their Arcanines. She looked like a criminal going from court to prison, not someone who advanced at a major tournament.

I stepped back outside the stadium as the sun started to set knowing that I had a battle to prepare for. Davis was already no pushover, but how would he handle today's actions in our battle? Would he be more aggressive? Would he be distracted? Would he hold back on purpose knowing that he has target on his back? All I wanted was a clean battle against him. That's it, just a clean battle! Halfway back to the hotel I felt a buzz from by phone; it was from Davis.

*Hey… can you do me a favor and meet me in my room at 9:00 tonight? We need to talk. It's room 312. I don't know what could happen in that room just 24 hours before our match. The poor guy's probably reeling so maybe he needs a shoulder to lean on.*

*Sure. See you then.*

I made my way into the dining area to grab food before going up to change into something meant for a hot tub. As fluffy as the beds are, it pales in comparison to the warm jets on your back. My only problem is that I didn't have a bathing suit; maybe there is such a thing as being too frugal. On the way out of my room I saw a notice.

*Dear Mitch,*

*The disciplinary committee has issued you a 50,000P fine in regards to delaying your post battle press conference in the round of 64. You have 48 hours to appeal this decision or pay the fine.*

-*The Pokémon League*

Dammit… forgot about that. I can understand the fine but the amount is absurd; guess that's what happens when you're too blunt. I'd rather sit in the hot tub now than deal with this.

Nobody was in the pool area although I could see people in the courtyard through the tinted windows. It was worth the risk to have Gyarados relax in the heated pool since he couldn't fit in the hot tub. The look on his face told me he was relaxed in the warm pool water; it's no professional hydrotherapy session but anything to help him ease the pain is better than nothing at all. The door opened about 15 minutes later.

"Excuse me Mitch do you have a sec… What the hell is going on in here!?!" It was Ashley.

"Well nobody's here so why not have him relax? He's harmless now." Gyarados started to shut his eyes and go to sleep.
She kept an eye on Gyarados before turning to me. "Yes… well… I'm here to tell you that your friend is still in the tournament."

Thank Arceus. "Are there any extra conditions she has to follow?"

"Not really. She was told to watch her back though. We can't provide her with security 24/7 for the rest of the tournament."

"So how'd it go down?"

Ashley sighed then smiled. "Let's just say that you played a big role in that conversation. The older guys can't remember the last time someone wanted to keep someone in the tournament.″ She turned to leave. "You're not that much older than me but you're more mature than a normal 21-year-old. How can you act like this all the time?"

I took a deep breath. "My parents. They kept me in line more than I wanted and I hated them for it back then but now I see why. They set the foundation then I made my own decisions as I went along. Don't be fooled though; I've made some questionable decisions in my life.″ I looked at the Luxury Balls next to me on the pool deck. "Six of the best ones will last me a lifetime."

"That's a lot deeper than what I expected."

"But it's the truth. Anything else for me?"

"Nope. Rest up." She started to walk away.

"Hold up!″ A quick look back to me. "Thanks for moving our match back. Furret gets a follow-up tomorrow." She waved back as she made her way back to the lobby.

As much as I wanted to stay in, I had to shower up before my conversation. Gyarados was looking refreshed after sitting in the heated pool for the hour which made me feel a little more at ease knowing I could use him tomorrow if I need to. Ampharos was still iffy at best while Dr. Harrison would have to run more tests to see how well Furret really is. What matters now is a shower then this talk. I'd love to hear what he has to say.

"Yo Davis, you in there?″ Footsteps could be heard on the other side of the door.

"It's unlocked. Come on in." The room was completely trashed yet nothing was broken; Carly was passed out on one bed. "Sorry about the mess. She needed to let it out knowing she might be kicked out." Thank Arceus I wasn't in here when she did. "I just wanted to say thanks again for what you've done up to this point. Tomorrow we meet on center stage and I'm telling you that I might not be all mentally there."

"Since you've helped me out so much, I'll help you out by offering advice." I sat down in an empty chair. "Fuck the distractions. Pre-battle press conference? You control it; tell them about the battle and not what happened today. Also, my Umbreon is…different."

"Besides the aggressiveness," he said bluntly. "I can't believe you're giving me intel on your team."

"You don't deserve to be surprised tomorrow so I'm telling you now. Umbreon was an experiment Pokémon so he has two issues. One is the ability to use up to six moves while the other one is that he may use the wrong move on accident. Team Rocket nearly killed him so that some rich asshole could have a so-called better Umbreon."

He recoiled a little bit. "Jeez… what a horrible life. I thought Team Rocket disbanded years ago."
"I wanted to be honest with you like you've been with me. I'll also tell you that Carly will be advancing to the round of 16."

"But it looked like she was gone. That Flamethrower nearly killed…"

I looked at her sleeping. "I'm just a messenger Davis. Just a messenger." Carly started to wake up still having tears in her eyes.

"Mmmrggg… what's going on?" she said groggily. All three of us looked at each other waiting for someone to break the silence; I was nudged.

"Carly… you're still in. You made it to the round of 16," I said softly with a smile. It took a second, but the magnitude of my words sunk in.

She sprinted across the room then practically squeezed the life out of me. "Thank you so much. If there's anything I can do for you just ask and I'll do it no questions asked."

Davis put his head in his hands then rubbed his forehead. "Sounds like all the loose ends are tied up for now. Man… what a day." His eyes met mine then he extended his hand. "May the best trainer win tomorrow," he said with a smile on his face.

My hand grabbed his. "It'll be a clean battle. Trust me."

After I left to go to my room I realized that we're still far from even. Favors can wait; we have a battle tomorrow.

Dr. Harrison had texted me in the middle of the night about meeting up after breakfast to evaluate Furret for a second time. Her medication should have helped considering she could hardly perform well in simple drills while staying inside the ball protected her from any potential setbacks. Nurse Joy from the main gate Pokémon Center escorted me to the back room where only the doctor stood.

"Hello! So is your Furret ready for another round of testing?" I called her out to see her much more aware of what was going on.

I kneeled down to her level. "Do you want Growlithe out?" Surprisingly she denied the request as she confidently stepped up to the first machine in the lab. The same tests were administered as the doctor jotted down more notes on a graph. Furret ended up finishing all of the tests as opposed to stopping due to fatigue; she curled up around my neck as all of us sat down to discuss the results.

"Okay then let's get to it. She's doing much better than last time although her movements are still a little off. Maybe it's physical or maybe she's mentally stopping herself from going all out. As a medical professional, I'd like to err on the side of caution and recommend that she sit out for your battle tonight."

Furret looked a little nervous so I scratched under her neck. "What could happen if I battled with her tonight?" Doctor Harrison put down her notes.

"On a spectrum, it can be anything from nothing serious to second impact syndrome to death. Honestly there is no way to tell after just two days of rest. My personal theory is that she's more likely to have a negative experience. You're the trainer though."

Risk still outweighs reward; not what I wanted to hear. "Thanks doctor. Not really sure how to thank you for your help."
"Could you answer some questions for me?" Oh yeah, almost forgot about that.

"Shoot."

"How long have you had each of your Pokémon?"

"Growlithe was the first Pokémon that I ever owned. Furret and Gyarados were with me a few weeks after I set out. Ampharos came after my first badge. My Umbreon and Espeon were found after my fourth badge about a month ago."

She nodded. "Interesting... how often do they spend time outside their balls?"

"When it's safe; usually at night so they all can sleep. I know that Espeon got everyone to break the ice when it came to this whole mate thing too. What are you getting at?"

Dr. Harrison stood up. "I had my suspicions but your team could be classified as an outlier in terms of cohesion." I stared at her in confusion; the hell does that mean? "Basically your Pokémon have a near perfect mix of physical strength, emotional strength, and mental strength while working alongside one another."

"But what does that mean? You're losing me here."

"In layman's terms: this team rivals some of the top trainers in the world both past and present. Physical strength is the easiest to assess since you made it this far in the tournament. Your Pokémon's mental strength is a little harder to measure but when they start to battle on their own, it's a sign that they've been in a lot of adverse situations and are comfortable trusting their instinct. Emotional strength's definition is still up for debate in the scientific community but the ability to help one another out when possible or finding the will to get up after a hard hit means that they can handle adversity better than the competition. The Pokémon League has a complex formula for measuring trainers against one another and I'm sure they would love to look at my notes."

I stood up to leave. "Thanks for everything. Do you need anything else from me?"

"Nope. Good luck in your battle and come back if something is wrong." I exited the Pokémon Center with a renewed confidence in my team. As for my team arguably being compared to the likes of Red, Gold, or Silver... no way am I going to let that distract me.

"Davis said earlier that he was expecting a good battle out of you via text messages. Is it true you guys talked before getting here?" the reporter asked in yet another crowded room. After the second evaluation was done, I ended up going back to my room to let everyone out so that they could relax with some fresh air and see each other face to face. Gyarados continued to stay away from everyone as he took a nap. I left them in the room to study up on Davis' team for a few minutes then went back to the room to relax with the television on. When the clock hit 8:15 I had to go over for the press conference.

"We did. For someone I met on the ferry over, we've become good friends in a short time. Nothing really unusual to talk about though; just wishing each other the best." The public relations person pointed to in the back for the last question.

"Brandi Carlson, WJTV. Are you going to use your Furret in this battle? Are you sure you can handle the bright lights of center stage this time?"

She sounded uncomfortable asking the question so I was a little nicer in responding. "No comment on my Pokémon and I'm not scared of being on the big stage anymore." Last time I was on field one, I got dismantled by a Shuckle so it makes sense to makes sense to ask the second question.
Still upset that she leaked that my Furret's health to the public though.

She obviously didn't like my answer. "Why do you put yourself in a hole all the time? What are you trying to prove here?" she said with a smug tone.

"Nothing special. I'm here to battle with the best and see if I can win the Silver Conference. Who wouldn't want a shot at the Elite Four?" It hurt to lie like that. I know damn well that Espeon and Umbreon give me more motivation I need to win on top of what I already had.

Everyone was ushered out as I went to the lounge area for final preparations. Davis said on the way over that he was from Saffron City which meant that he likely had a psychic type registered. He did use a Hypno in one of the earlier rounds but I'm not sure if he has any other psychic types at the ready. Quagsire could also be a problem based on our sparring match.

Time stood still as I walked out of the tunnel. Some 50,000 spectators erupted in cheer as both of us made our way to our trainer boxes under the lights. The roof was open since there wasn't a cloud in the night sky and the temperature was a perfect for a summer night. Our judge called us over for the rules.

"Okay gentlemen, this will be a three on three battle with substitutions being allowed. When one trainer loses all three of their Pokémon, the battle is over. Any questions?" Both of us shook our heads. "Return to your boxes and start on my signal." Davis extended his hand.

"Good luck Mitch." Probably the first display of sportsmanship this entire tournament.

I shook his hand. "You too. Show me the experience of winning 11 badges." That got him smiling as we squared up and saw the flags go up when after walked back. "Umbreon let's go!"

"Hypno!" He's got something up his sleeve.

I've been in so many fights but I haven't seen a psychic type stand against me so confidently. It ran straight ahead for a Headbutt but I easily dodged it. I turned to Mitch for orders since something didn't feel right.

"Stay focused Umbreon. Use Dark Pulse!" It came out of my maw with much more force than normal; how I missed battling. The move hit Hypno square in the chest.

"Meditate!" My opponent closed its eyes as a mysterious aura surrounded it. "Now charge in again for a Headbutt attack!"

"Meet it with Faint Attack!" We collided in the middle of the field as I eventually got the upper hand and shoved Hypno off to the side; I still took a good amount of damage from the impact. "Dark Pulse!" Mitch wants this over in a hurry alright.

"Psychic to hold the attack!" For a split second, Hypno held my attack in place before it came at it slower than normal.

Mitch looked surprised. "I'm surprised that you reduced the speed since psychic attacks should have zero effect on anything dark oriented."

His opponent kept a serious face. "Sabrina gave me a little advice back in the day on dealing with dark types. I'm still not as strong as her yet. Headbutt again Hypno!" Mitch ordered a Faint Attack like last time expecting the same result; that wasn't the case. "Poison Gas!" Its breath emitted a purple cloud of smoke that consumed my body from such a close range.
Mitch went into a bit of a panic. "Quick! Use Toxic!" There was no way it could get out of the way fast enough to dodge my own poisonous attack. We found ourselves back where we started the fight only we were both poisoned and worn down.

"Meditate again Hypno!"

"Don't let it set up Umbreon! Dark Pulse!" I readied myself for a potential knockout blow but I ended charging at it with Quick Attack. The result was me clipping it instead of getting the full force behind my attack; not now. "Try again!"

"Headbutt!" My body didn't respond to his command as I got tossed aside without anything to defend myself. After a few seconds on the ground I started to feel much healthier while my rings started to glow a little brighter; Moonlight. It was weird to see my opponent not screaming or wondering why I have more than four moves.

"Faint Attack! Don't let it sit still!" I ran up to level it in the chest and send it to the ground. Hypno got back up panting heavily before collapsing from my earlier Toxic.

"Hypno is unable to battle. Umbreon is the winner!" Breathing started to become a hard thing to do as the referee gave me the round. Despite healing up before the knockout, I was still on some kind of timer.

My opponent looked collected as he casually picked out the next Pokémon. "Heracross I choose you!" Nobody said winning would be easy. "Megahorn!" Or painless.

"Dodge and use Toxic!" Megahorn just missed on my left side while I missed my Toxic since I was moving too fast to hit it accurately. "Umbreon return!" I'm all for grinding it out… but there's no way I can win at this point. "Growlithe let's go!" A good switch as I watched from my ball.

"Take Down!"

"Go in with Flame Wheel!" Both of them met with neither side giving an inch as the flames slowly started to cover Heracross. "Take Down! Give it more power!" Growlithe put a little extra behind the attack as Heracross was losing ground and taking serious damage; the man just smiled.

"Reversal." Somehow Heracross found the strength to grab Growlithe still covered in flames and pile drive him into the ground. He stood up and tried to fire a Flamethrower but the flames failed to reach the bug/fighting type as he collapsed.

"Growlithe is unable to battle. Heracross wins!" Damn... this thing is a monster; I want the pleasure of beating it. Mitch was very hesitant to pick a teammate because his opponent's Pokémon is so close to fainting yet it can hit hard. My view started to get obstructed by his hand.

"Umbreon!" I was thrown back out with a grin on my face. "I believe in you Umbreon. Ready to go?" Damn straight I'm ready. Poisoned or not, I won't hold back. "Faint Attack!" Now that's what I'm talking about. My speed surprised Heracross as I rushed in and hit it hard; I immediately felt the poison take away my energy after it staggered to its feet.

"Charge in with Megahorn!" I was in no position to dodge as I stared down the glowing horn. For the first time in a while I felt nervous.

"Dark Pulse!" My maw opened up to try and slow down the attack but purple blobs of poison flew right into Heracross' eyes instead. Mitch couldn't have predicted that would happen… right? My attack had to be a fluke. Megahorn actually missed since it was forced to wipe away the poison in the middle of the attack.
"Shake it off and use Reversal!"

"Quick Attack to dodge it!" Unfortunately, I still couldn't dodge as I was loosely grabbed and tossed on my back. I could feel myself lose consciousness as both of us had labored breathing from the poison.

You'll always be stronger than any opponent Umbreon the voice reverberated in my head. You'll always be stronger than any opponent Umbreon. You'll make it to the top. Quilava and I are rooting for you. My eyes snapped wide open and I hurried to stand back up.

"Moonlight!" My rings returned to their glorious yellow as I felt much more energized. "Faint Attack full power!"

"Reversal!" Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I added the speed from a Quick Attack to make sure Heracross would get blown backwards for good. A satisfying *thud* sound made me flash a quick smile as the referee ruled the round in my favor. Thanks Tom.

The other trainer looked at me. "You weren't kidding about that Umbreon. I just wish you told me how much willpower it has," he joked. "It's been a long time since I've been put in a corner so let's see what you have for my Girafarig."

Mitch thought about his next move carefully before going to my ball. "Return Umbreon." I shook him off. "No Umbreon. I'm not making any more mistakes." Poor excuse to call me back; Mitch stroked his chin. "Hard to believe that you don't trust your mate to win." Okay I'll allow it. Come on Ruby, take us home.

Shade was battling like his life was on the line. Whenever he gets into intense battles I get scared despite knowing that Mitch is right there and we're only a few minutes away from a Pokémon Center. Deep down he still doesn't feel safe in battles since the night I nearly died at the hands of four poison types while he fought a brutal Pinsir that didn't have an ounce of mercy. He has to always understand that everything will be okay regardless of what happens.

Mitch's hand reached for my ball as I saw the psychic/normal giraffe Pokémon looking a little nervous since it was the last chance for the other trainer. The crowd noise startled me as I looked around to see the people waving to the video board before our round would start. Come to think of it, I'm really the last option by default. Furret's out, Ampharos' out, Gyarados is iffy, Growlithe already lost and Shade is about to collapse; this time I won't panic.

"Girafarig, use Agility!"

"Quick Attack Espeon!" Our battle turned into a track meet as we ran around the field trying to juke each other out. It took some time before I got in a solid hit on its right side. "Psybeam!" Regardless of the resistance, it still packed a punch.

"Stomp!" Its movements were faster from that Agility and I felt the impact of its hind legs kicking me in the chest. "Show them your Psybeam!" The move came at me a lot faster than I expected and I staggered backwards. "We got 'em on the ropes! Crunch attack!"

"Don't let them get close Espeon! Swift!" Girafarig's mouth bore sharp teeth as I fired off Swift to keep it away.

"Agility into Crunch!" My attack became useless since it swung around behind me and bit down on my back.
Mitch kept his composure. "Take it for a ride Espeon." I fired up a Quick Attack and took off around the field with it hanging on by its teeth. Despite the pain of its teeth digging in I kept running before it finally fell to the ground. "Psybeam!"

"Counter it with Psybeam Girafarig!" A cloud of smoke formed after our attacks collided in the middle of the field. "Stomp!" I couldn't see or sense where it was coming from so I took the attack head on again. "Finish it off with Crunch!"

"Hold it with Confusion!" I knew that grabbing it would be hard since it's a psychic type as well but I felt a huge jump in power when I grabbed a hold of it. "Send it flying!" The moment it landed was the moment I knew we won.

"Girafarig is unable to battle; the winner is Espeon! The match goes to Mitch from Violet City!"

In the battle of hyper offense, I came out on top. Onward to the round of 16 we go!
Chapter 44- Round of 16 vs Carly

Cheering echoed throughout the stadium as Davis reached to call back his Girafarig with a small smile. The man has been through so much in his time here yet he showed no signs of fatigue or frustration; it's almost like he was relieved that he lost. Espeon took it in too as she stared into the crowd grinning. The video board showed the final score along with the results of the previous battles as the next round matchups were decided. I had noticed that Sara, Cory, and Allison were still alive after perfect 3-0 wins in their battles despite the competition getting fiercer. My reminiscing was cut short by the sight of Davis walking over.

"Congrats man, you outplayed me at every turn."

I shook his hand. "Not every turn. Heracross beats half of my team."

"But you didn't let it. Good luck in your press conference." He walked back to his tunnel to a round of applause as did I. It was no surprise to see the room crowded to the brim with media personnel as Ashley guided me to the podium and went through the usual rules. Everyone's hand went up once she opened the floor to questions.

"Mason Pirro, WKTV. Your Umbreon used more than four moves in the battle. Care to explain how that happened?"

I knew the question would come eventually. "I'd rather not say. What matters is that Davis was okay with me using him." The group started to mumble and then it turned into chaos.

"Fiona North, WMOG. So you told Davis about this? Did you bother to tell the league? From what I understand, Pokémon experimentation is the only way to get it to learn more than four moves. How has the league not taken it and revoked your license?"

Keeping my cool was getting harder to do. "The league has listened to my case and they have given clearance for Umbreon to participate."

Fiona gave me a weird look. "Let me get this straight… the league doesn't care that you experimented on your Pokémon. And now you sound like you don't care that you'll probably lose your Umbreon."

"Bullshit!" Must… keep… composure. "The circumstances are something that I don't need to go public with. If you have a problem with it, then talk to the league about it." More mumbling echoed through the room as Ashley started to sweat. "Now does anyone have questions regarding the actual battle?"

"Yes actually. Marion Jefferson, WGOL. For your next battle, how do you feel about battling Carly? Her Typhlosion nearly got her kicked out after she burned over half the field."

No way in hell I'm telling them that I kept her in the tournament. "She's obviously very good to reach the last 16; frankly I'm looking forward to a tough battle. We've sparred a little before the tournament and I'd love for the gloves to come off. It would be an insult if she didn't go all out against me."
"But she doesn't look like she's mentally stable. Aren't you putting your Pokémon in danger?"

"No. She is my scheduled opponent and I have to face her to move on. If I didn't think I'd win, then I'd withdraw from the tournament." I took a short pause. "Write this down too: stop attacking her because she's from Kanto."

"Kantro trainers…" my fist slammed the podium so Marion stopped.

"Everyone says that they get treated better but that's not true with her or Davis. I've seen enough of her battles to understand what she's experienced in her time here. Now I know that the gym leaders are impartial in this case, but I find it petty that other trainers in Johto rip on her for getting her first Johto badge in Blackthorn. Most trainers outside here wouldn't land a hit on her Pokémon. Why? After winning 11 badges, she's earned her place in history."

"What has she done? You can't just say that and expect us to believe you," a voice from the back mocked. I just smiled.

"No other trainer has been here with this many badges." These people take this competition very seriously so dropping a stat like that definitely made them perk up; I turned to Ashley. "Could you look that up for me please? I know the league website has data on every trainer that's ever battled here in the Indigo League or the Silver Conference." Ashely nodded as another staff member handed her a pretty small tablet. "Go to the Champion's Room and see that all previous champions had eight badges." I would've started a full-blown riot if I said that those champions did the bare minimum in terms of getting badges.

Ashely read off the information on the tablet once she found it. "According to our records, only two other trainers came in with 10 or more badges. Gary Oak had finished with 10 badges in the Indigo League but failed to win the league. Davis, Mitch's opponent he just beat, also has 11 badges in addition to Carly."

"Thank you Ashley. So I have my work cut out for me don't I?" A few sarcastic nods from the back at my rhetorical question. "Thanks guys, I'll be back for the pre-battle press conference in two days."

Ashley guided everyone out as I took a deep breath reflecting on how much energy I spent defending someone who offered me support when I needed it the most; I could only imagine how much she spent comforting me when Espeon was bleeding out. Come to think of it, I asked if anyone had a question on the battle I just got out of but it ended up being about my next battle. Why do I let myself get sucked into the media trap? My fingers snapped when I remembered about my fine.

"Hey Ashley. Ashley!” She turned around as I pulled out the large wad of cash. "Here's the fine money for you. I've decided not to appeal." She smiled.

"No letter was sent to you? They've talked it over and your fine's been removed. Keep the money." Thank Arceus I have good karma on my side. Sweet, sweet karma.

I made my way back to the lounge area for a little bit to heal my Pokémon seeing as there were no battles after me. The fridge was basically calling my name with its assortment of cold fruit flavored drinks so I took one out and chugged it down in a matter of seconds. I took a second one for the room followed by six bottles of water to bring back in my bag; if only there was food here.

Walking back to the hotel was such a relief as nobody was really out so late at night. Hoothoots waddled around completely oblivious to their surroundings but they were just as happy as I was to
be out enjoying the night. A lot of thoughts regarding my next battle ran through my head as I was supposed to face Carly.

One that stuck out the most was that she'd never used a grass type in the time I've been around her; it's been a combination of various fire types and a Lanturn so far. Maybe she did rely on pure power to get her so far. My second thought was how much I've changed in battle. My gym battles starting out were won on Growlithe alone, but I realized that style of battling could only get me so far. If it weren't for Morty forcing me into a close battle, then I might not have ever changed despite adding Espeon and Umbreon.

Mentally, I thanked the cleaning staff for making my room clean upon my return. I took a quick shower then let everyone out of their Luxury Balls with the exception of Furret because of the concussion symptoms; Growlithe whimpered before pawing at me.

"No buddy, you know how careful I have to be with her and any loud noises or contact." He brought out the puppy dog eyes. "Alright alright alright. Fine. Just let me give her medicine first." Furret materialized looking normal but keeping her movements slower than normal as I gave her a pill to swallow. "Go on the balcony and relax you two" I said as I ushered them along before shutting the door. After I turned on the television, Espeon hopped up on the bed next to me.

"Can you believe it master... err, Mitch? We did it! Who's next?"

"Carly. She's probably our hardest opponent yet. Her Pokémon are well beyond battle tested and she has eleven badges. It's going to be a grind-it-out type of battle."

"Then we'll be ready to grind it out. Remember, we're willing to battle until we drop for good."

She's so much more confident compared to when I found her. "So what about Umbreon? The machine healed him, but is there something on his mind?" Umbreon was staring outside at Growlithe and Furret with no emotions showing. "He seems distant."

Espeon put her head down. "He shut me out; I can't communicate with him at all but he's still as loving as ever."

"I thought psychic types could read minds."

"Depends on what we're trying to read. We can pry our way into almost any mind with a bit of effort. Dark types have an extra defense where they can lock out psychic types because of their natural type advantage. Shade lets me in his mind, otherwise I would be kept out all the time. Now he just wants to be alone. Besides, my skills aren't completely honed even after all this time."

"Then I'll give him space," I yawned. "When I pass out, you guys can turn the television off and let those two in from the balcony."

"Before you fall asleep, I want to tell you something."

"What is it?" A short pause.

"Psychic. I can use Psychic." She buried her head in the sheets. "I-I still can't b-believe that I'm a-alive. Almost every night I wonder 'what if' despite everything you've done for me. I'll never be good enough, even with this powerful move. I'm sorry!" Everyone looked at her on the bed with her head still buried in the sheets as Umbreon jumped up next to her.

"Oh Espeon..." Umbreon moved over to gently nuzzle her. "What have I always said to you?" I whispered; she still was whimpering. "I'm proud of you. I always have been and I always will be."
For the next few minutes I fought the sleep overtaking me until sleep won out; a calm voice snuck into my dream sometime later.

"No matter the obstacle, you never get annoyed. I'm glad that you're such a compassionate trainer."

Morning came out of nowhere as the sun snuck its way into my room. Today was our one day off before we would go face Carly so I could visit Doctor Harrison with a more definitive diagnosis on Furret. She was looking normal as Growlithe stroked her head to wake her up. I gave them all breakfast before calling them back so I could walk to the Pokémon Center at the main gate. Nurse Joy was having a conversation with the doctor as I walked through the front door.

"That Typhlosion did a number on… oh hi Mitch!" Nurse Joy turned to me as Dr. Harrison when into the back room. "What can I do for you today?"

Yup… that Raticate needed much more than a simple healing machine. "I was wondering if I could get Furret checked out again before my battle tomorrow."

She started to tap on her keyboard. "Well she does have one patient that she needs to care for extensively but I can help you," she said with a smile. "I'll take you back there now while the center is empty." There were other rooms in the back for severely injured Pokémon, yet the testing room was wide open for Furret to run around; Nurse Joy compiled her data and walked up next to me.

Furret wrapped around my neck like a scarf again. "So what's the deal?"

"Her tests came back with no abnormalities. You can use her in the next battle without risking further trauma. However, there is always a possibility that she could get another one because of the nature of concussions."

I scratched Furret's favorite spot. "Ready to go girl?" She yipped in pure joy. "I'm going to need some speed tomorrow."

"As a reminder, I'll make a note to the doctor regarding her condition. Anything else?"

"Actually yes. Would you mind giving Gyarados an x-ray? He's got a nagging pain" I said a little embarrassed.

She checked more papers on her clipboard then waved me over to the door. "We need to go to a room with a larger x-ray machine." We were led into an enormous room where the machine was the only thing in there aside from the monitors and small table. "Call it out and have it lay flat. Let's get it started as soon as he's in position." Gyarados was rarely intimidated so it came a surprise to see him freeze up at the machine; I was one step ahead.

"Come on out Ampharos." She came out in awe of the machine. "Don't even think about poking it," I said in a fatherly tone. "Would you calm Gyarados down please? I need him to be still so we can check his health." She walked over and started to talk to him. He shook his head a few times until she got him to bend over so that she could kiss him on the cheek; he finally gave in after that. It felt like an eternity before the scan was done and it would be an hour before the results were posted on a series of boards.

"Mitch, would you come here please? I need to show you something." Nurse Joy led me to a board where it held the last third or so of Gyarados' body. "There's a bruise here on the C-52 vertebra then another one on the front of its body by the torso."
"But I thought Gyarados was all spine? I mean they're giant sea snakes but…"

A small smile formed on her face. "Most trainers would think that too but they do have distinguishable areas if you're well versed in the medical field. Anyway, it's lucky that the bruise is so low on the spine otherwise it's at a high risk for permanent paralysis."

"It was complaining of pain so I had to get it checked out."

"Well I'm glad you did. The human spine's problem areas are C-1 and C-2 vertebra because if those are severely damaged, then you're paralyzed. Longer or taller Pokémon obviously have a larger spine, but anything between C-1 and C-25 is usually trouble." She took a pause before speaking again. "I recommend one month's rest for it to fully recover. A break of that C-52 means that anything below that point is unusable; basically its tail. The bruise on the torso is a simple bruise so it should heal by tomorrow." Gyarados was right about his body breaking down although he may have exaggerated it just a bit.

The three of us turned to leave the room. "That'll be it for me Nurse Joy. Thanks for your help."

"Hold on a second!" We turned to her. "Please consider your options before using it in your next battle." We all left in silence with the knowledge I need to make my decision. On the way back to my room in the hotel, I quickly checked Carly's public profile on the Silver Conference website in the computer area.

Name: Carly

Age: 25

Hometown: Celadon City (Kanto)

Badges won: 11

Registered Pokémon: Lanturn, Rapidash, Typhlosion, Arcanine, Ninetales, Hitmontop, Magmar, Flareon, Vileplume.

Ah ha! She does have a grass type. Hell, her team actually has some decent coverage. Hitmontop for rock, dark, and normal types. Lanturn to handle water types and rock types. And then there's Vileplume; very threatening as a status inflictor and attacker. That thing's going to be annoying.

My best guess is that someone inside the league wants Ashley to keep me in check because she ended up being my liaison for the third time this tournament. Not complaining or anything, but I just find it weird as the media made their way into the press room at field number two. Ashely broke away from her usual cadence to send a message.

"Listen up everyone! Mitch will only answer questions about today's battle. Any other questions can result in you being ejected from the room or Mitch denying to answer your question."

Murmuring stopped as nobody could think of a decent question. "Anyone? At all? Okay then…"

"Brandi Carlson, WJTV." Oh for Arceus' sake. "Two things: what is the status of Furret and how do you plan to counter her fast team?" Well it could have been worse.

By this point in the contest, it didn't bother me as much with the intrusive questions and it helps that I definitely know how Furret is feeling. "Furret is fully recovered and will be on call today. As for her team overall, I might have to fight speed with speed. The real question is how are her three Pokémon going to mix as a team? Guess we'll have to wait." Journalism act aside, Brandi gave me
a genuine smile. Maybe I could get one ally in the media before I'm out of here.

My lounge area still looked the same as I tried to gather myself before the battle. Carly had done so much for me and can connect with Pokémon on about the same level as me. The more I thought about it, I was lucky to have made it this far. I scraped by in the four preliminary matches, especially the exploding Forretress, finished second in my group instead of third because of a tiebreaker, a dicey 2-0 win over Jason with Furret and Ampharos getting injured, and finally a 2-0 win over Davis that could've been bad if Heracross was healthier or if Umbreon fainted.

A message on the television soon read: PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE FIELD. With only a few minutes before this battle is set to broadcast in front of the world, I'd better make my way down there. The PA announcer led the introductions once I made my way to the tunnel.

"Llllllladies and gentlemennnnnnn. Tonight's contest of this Silver Conference round of 16 match-up is sponsored by your local Pokémon Center. Pokémon Center International; we hope to see you again. Also sponsoring this battle is the Moomoo Milk Farm, located just outside Olivine. For the best tasting and healthiest treats around, visit the Moomoo Milk Farm; family owned for five generations. Without further ado, let's meet the trainers." Wait… they got a sponsorship!? Last time I saw them, they could barely afford a stand at Olivine! A large spotlight shone across the way.

"Hailing from Celadon City and entering the tournament with a record eleven badges… give it up for Carrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
Both Pokémon rammed into each other with full force and were sent staggering backwards. "Quick, use Ember!" It had recovered from the blow just enough to land the fire move; it went back to shaking its head to clear the cobwebs.

"Quick Attack!" Furret still had her speed as she charged in from the side to knock the fire horse to the ground. "Go in with Iron Tail!" My goal wasn't massive damage, but lowering its defense was.

"Sorry Mitch, I can't let that happen. Fire Blast!" Shit! Horrible miscalculation as Fire Blast hit her head on and her tail was engulfed in flames.

"Dig deep Furret!" My only chance to stop the flames from spreading was to force the fire to go out via lack of oxygen. That, and the dirt should provide some temporary cooling relief. Carly wasn't expecting an attack because Furret coming back up could easily be heard so she was planning out her next move; I had to reset her position. "Come on back up." She still was blowing on her tail.

"Alright Rapidash, charge in and use Stomp!"

Iron Tail would be a risky defensive maneuver. "Quick Attack to dodge!" Furret easily dodged the hooves. "Dig again!"

"Fire Blast!" The flames just grazed her as she made her way underground yet again. "Damn… so close. I can't remember the last time something kept up with Rapidash."

"She doesn't look like it, but she can hold her own in a battle of speed. Now come on up with a Quick Attack for more power!"

Carly didn't expect Dig to hit so hard. "Fire Blast into Take Down!" A huge wave of fire can at Furret as Rapidash started to run a split second after the fire traveled a few feet; there was no escaping this.

"Furret come ba…" She furiously shook her head in defiance; she wanted this moment to prove she was back. On the inside I was torn. Just coming back after a concussion and charging into something like that is insane. Maybe if she avoids the horn then it'll be alright. "Quick Attack into Return! Lead with the shoulder!" The two collided with a pile of smoke showing how strong the attacks were. For a split-second I saw her hit Rapidash in the chest; dodged a fatal blow. When the smoke cleared, they both stood until Furret started walking to me and Rapidash tried to walk after her.

Our referee was on top of it all. "Both Pokémon are unable to battle!"

Even in an unconscious state, Furret had a grin on her face. "Good job girl" I cooed while carrying her back to my side. Carly was also out on the field as she helped her loyal partner stand back up.

"That was amazing Rapidash! Don't feel bad about forcing a draw. We're not dealing with an ordinary trainer or an ordinary team." She turned to me. "Mitch, that hasn't happened in a long time. Now let's see how you handle the rest of my team."

"We'll be ready for 'em. Ampharos go!"

Carly took a lot longer to make her decision this time around. "It's been a long time," she said softly. "But I need your help. Vileplume!" Even the crowd was surprised to see something other than a fire type out on her side of the field.

"Ah, so the grass type is out. Erika probably taught you a lot when it comes to grass types."
"Yes she did; time for a showcase. Use Poisonpowder!" Vileplume launched a purple ball into the air before dispersing.

"Back up Ampharos!" She tried to dodge the spores, but the flow of air provided Carly with more area to cover and Ampharos started to keel over. "Are you alright?" She stood back up after a little delay; she's on a timer.

"Follow up with Acid!" Black sludge came flying out of Vileplume's flower.

"Discharge!" Electricity broke through the wall of acid and hit it. "Cotton Spore!" Balls of thick cotton were flung from Ampharos' fur to Vileplume's body causing it to slow down; Ampharos bent over in pain from the poison.

"Again with Acid!"

"Discharge!" It was rinse and repeat as I got off more damage while taking some; can't drag this out any longer. "Charge in and use Thunderpunch!"

"Dodge it!" Carly banked on the poison slowing Ampharos down but unfortunately for her, the effect of Cotton Spore made her Vileplume much slower than it already was. The move was an uppercut which resulted in a critical hit. "Petal Dance!"

"Thunder Wave!" Vileplume fired off the first round of razor sharp petals as Thunder Wave connected. "Use Discharge again!" Again another hit for me.

"Keep firing!" A second round of petals whizzed by before Vileplume started running off the field and into the side walls. "No!" Confusion took its toll and it fainted from ramming into the wall repeatedly.

"Vileplume is unable to battle! This round goes to Ampharos!" Yeah I won the round… while my Pokémon is on its last leg. Substituting would've been a dangerous move since most grass types carry a wide variety of ways to wear down other Pokémon; she knows how to turn a battle in her favor down the road.

"I was debating if I should've poisoned your Pokémon or put them to sleep Mitch." Sleep powder in that arsenal too huh? Glad I didn't switch. "Since you pushed me into a corner, I have no choice but to use Typhlosion." That thing had a busted thigh and a busted kneecap from the last battle yet it's still able to go? Either the hits it took weren't that bad or medical science is more advanced than I thought.

Ampharos was heavily panting as it raised an arm into the air. "So are you still able to go?" Her arm still remained in the air; just one attack left. I saw what it was getting at.

"Typhlosion versus Ampharos. Begin!"

Poor Ampharos was starting to lose consciousness so I had to act on it. "Discharge! Fill the battlefield!"

"Flame Wheel as a shield!" Ampharos let loose a powerful blast electricity with no specific target in mind. Typhlosion's Flame Wheel didn't negate all of the damage; the electricity dissipated with Ampharos on its knees from the poison. "Charge in!" Ampharos waited until it was roughly three strides away before it looked up and started to spark up; I thought she used up all of her electricity. "Flamethrower quick!" Flame Wheel was cancelled as it went to fire a powerful Flamethrower. Again without my command, she got off a Thunder Wave before collapsing from poison; the Flamethrower stopped charging.
"Ampharos is unable to battle! Typhlosion wins!" Cheering turned to silence as Ampharos tried to crawl back to me.

I met her halfway on the field. "Just lie down and relax girl." She ended up on her back and started to close her eyes. "When did you learn to battle that way?" Just a grunt as a response. "It won't be wasted. Especially when Gyarados is up next." Her eyes shot open. "Trust in us like I trusted in you. Get some rest."

Carly kept a straight face but I know she was getting excited. "Gutsy move Mitch. I like it. Let's finish strong."

"Gyarados hates to lose so I hope you're ready for the most intense battle in your life. It'll be over in only a few moves"

"Gyarados versus Typhlosion! Begin!"

"Use Swift Typhlosion!"

Hydro Pump would be too valuable to use as a defense. "Thrash!" You could feel it powering up before flailing around and hitting the fire type square in the head.

"Flame Wheel!" It rammed Gyarados with enough force to cause a stalemate on the field with neither side giving an inch. Eventually Gyarados won out when it continued to thrash about. With all the contact, it suffered a burn.

"Hydro Pump now!"

"Smokescreen!" A large cloud of smoke aided in the dodging process. "Swift!" Nobody in the stadium except those two could see where to hit Gyarados from as he took a shot to his bruised torso.

With burn damage racking up, I had to make a decision with the smoke still clouding the field. "Hyper Beam! Fire away!" Gyarados wasted no time firing at will but the size of his beam made it so he nicked Carly's Pokémon for some pretty decent damage despite not getting a clean hit.

"All out Flamethrower!" It backed up as far as it could before it launched its blue flames at Gyarados; he had no choice but to endure it. "Finish it with Flame Wheel!" Just like Ampharos, it saved enough fire to deliver one more hit. After four steps it stopped dead in its tracks.

"Quick Gyarados, Hydro Pump!" Ampharos' last ditch maneuver forced Typhlosion to stay in place as the wall of water crashed down on it. Typhlosion stood up and let out a roar; Gyarados did the same thing. The only difference was that Typhlosion's stopped first and it dropped to the ground.

Our referee was about to give the match to me until he noticed that it wasn't unconscious. By all accounts, it was still able to battle. Flashbacks of Olivine ran through my head as I remembered attacking two completely defenseless Pokémon owned by Cory. I couldn't do that to Carly though. Her Pokémon don't deserve that treatment. Then again, Gyarados is losing health with every passing second with that burn. In a tough spot, I have to go with my gut and accept the consequences.

"Hydro Pu..."

"I forfeit!" Carly sprinted onto the field as Typhlosion started to cry at the fact he was in limbo; not ruled out of the battle yet unable to fight. "No more! Please!" She was starting to act like how she was in her last battle until I called back Gyarados and walked over to her and kneeled down next to
I hugged her gently yet firmly. "The battle's over Carly," I whispered in her ear. "I won't hurt you or any of your Pokémon in any way now."

"Y-y-y-you w-w-won't?" she sniffled.

"Of course not," I said gently. "There's nothing to fear. You put up one hell of a fight all the way through."

"Carly has forfeited the round. Because that was her last Pokémon, the winner is Mitch from Violet City!" the referee stated to make the battle official. The crowd roared in approval of the battle but I drowned it all out to focus on Carly. All that mattered was two things:

She wouldn't have to worry about a thing this time around.

My ticket was punched to the quarterfinals.
Chapter 45- Preparations

The crowd let out a roar of applause after I had won my round of 16 battle against one of my newest friends. Carly still lay huddled up next to Typhlosion even well after the referee retired to the locker room. Announcements from the PA announcer regarding the next round of battles droned on as she managed to get to her feet. It still shocked me how much her personality changed her last two battles considering she showed no signs of acting that way every time I've been around her. Eventually the cheering gave way to boos as some league officials dressed in blazers had to come out.

"Please return to your tunnels so that the next battle can start," a woman asked politely.

"She's not feeling good at the moment. Can I come with her?"

"We can call a doctor for her if you'd like."

Arceus, what a moron. "She's not sick or anything like that." Their facial expressions changed to confusion. Really? Is this the first time they've seen a nervous breakdown? "Soooo... I'm taking her back with me."

Now their faces turned serious. "No. It goes against policy."

Typical answer. "Can we do a joint press conference then?"

"Afraid we can't do that either son."

"Why not?"

"Well, her last post-match presser had another competitor in it and we let it slide since it was her boyfriend. How do we know that you won't try anything funny?"

Okay, they have me there. "This time, I'm her opponent as opposed to some 'random' person. What if you guys are up there with us? I'll leave if you tell me to; just get another table or something."

All of them looked at each other before shrugging their shoulders.

"Fair enough. Rule of thumb: do not answer any of her questions. Got it?" I nodded knowing that I couldn't afford to mess this up. We were escorted to Carly's tunnel after officials used their walkie-talkies to relay the change in plans. They actually showed us a path to an auxiliary media room that looked slightly bigger than one designed for one trainer. "Wait here until everything's set up. It should take five minutes or so." All of them walked in to redo the room.

Carly sat down on a bench with her hands running through her hair very slowly. "Hey Mitch..."

It hit me that I dragged her into something that she might not have wanted to do. "Carly, I'm sorry that I dragged you into this. Let me go in there and..."

"Don't!" She looked at me. "Sorry. Anyway, I'm glad you went out of your way to make me feel more comfortable."
"Don't worry about it."

"But why? I don't want to sound rude, but I could have handled myself."

"Because I've been there before and know what it means to have a friend there for you when you can't hold it in anymore."

"When?"

"You showed up in the Pokémon Center the night when I had to get Espeon to the operating room because I fucked up big time at the gala. It would've been so much easier for you to stay away from the shitstorm I created but you didn't. Hell, you and Davis are the reason I'm still in this tournament and now I'm doing my best to pay you back." An arm waved us in after we sat in silence for a little bit.

She took a deep breath. "Let's kill it."

After every battle, the media presence seems to get larger so I'm not surprised at this stage. "So we will try something different today with a joint press conference," an official said with a hint of nervousness in her voice. "We'll be taking fewer questions due to the nature of this conference so let's begin." A lanky man from the middle was picked first.

"Martin Roth, Vermilion Weekly. For Carly, interesting using Vileplume considering you aren't known for using grass types. Why the adjustment?"

By this time, Carly was much more composed. "My opponent has a very threatening team so I thought it would be good to get a mix of status conditions off on all of his Pokémon. Paralysis, poison, or sleep would've been a tough obstacle to overcome if I did it to every one of them."

He still looked puzzled. "Vileplume looked considerably weaker than the rest of your team though. Would you go back and change your team?"

"Not at all. I trust in all of my Pokémon so I wouldn't send them out if they stood no chance."

Sounds like something I said during my journey. "To be honest, it was a tough decision since I prefer a battle based on offense. Erika's style didn't sit well with me but I still remembered what she taught me about grass types."

An official pointed to a woman in the far back left. "Jamie Stevenson, Johto National Radio. Mitch, Gyarados seemed like an obvious choice from start to finish. It didn't make a lot of sense to hold it until the end. Explain your thought process."

Obviously I'm not going to tell them that he's injured and that Typhlosion may have caused more damage. "Using Hydro Pump repetitively seems easy when talking about it, but it can leave my Pokémon wide open if I'm not careful. Besides, her Pokémon are too good to get beaten by water type attacks alone." That got a smile on her face. "Next question."

Our press conference might have been one of the longest in Silver Conference history because there were nine questions asked… for each of us. Carly kept herself in check for the most part as I kept peeking over to the people in blazers for any signs of me getting kicked out; there were none. Nobody from the press asked aggressive questions as we left the room with some pressure off of our shoulders. Davis picked up Carly on the way out as I gave him a look that said "take care of her," to which he nodded sternly. For Arceus' sake all we want to do is have fun out here and win. Getting some sleep was the one thing that could reset my mind; the sound of paper coming under the door woke me up very early in the morning.
Dear Challenger,

Congratulations on making it to the quarterfinals of the Silver Conference! In order to bring out the best in your Pokémon and your personal abilities, there will be an explanation of the rules from this point forward:

- All battles for the remainder of the tournament will be full 6 on 6 battles with both trainers being able to substitute freely.

- The match is over when all of one trainer's Pokémon are unable to battle. A 15-minute halftime period will be granted once one trainer loses three of their Pokémon unless both sides clearly state that they do not want it.

- The field will be a plain, dirt field with chalk lines indicating the boundaries.

- All battles will take place on field one with the roof closed in the event of extreme weather. Otherwise, the roof will be open.

- All trainers are required to stay in their boxes for the duration of the match. Any trainer running onto the field is subject to either a one Pokémon penalty (you pick which Pokémon will not battle) or ejection from the match. We value trainer safety, especially at this stage in the tournament.

- We understand that you experiencing higher levels of stress, so you have the option to decline any pre-battle press conference to be more prepared. However, you must attend your press conference after your match(es). To further alleviate stress, you have the option to select entrance music when your name is called. Please go to the check-in desk on the morning of your match to make your decisions and the receptionist will take care of those things for you.

- Every trainer will have two or three days to rest instead of one, depending on when they battle.

- Each trainer will get five (5) VIP passes to give out before each of their match(es). Tickets may be purchased individually as well.

- All initial rules from when you arrived still apply.

- All decisions made by the referee are final regarding an actual battle on the field. Other league official's decisions can be appealed within 12 hours of a ruling by the offended party only.

These rules can be found on the official Silver Conference website and the participant page if you happen to lose or misplace this paper. You may enter your trainer ID on the participant page to chat with a live representative 24/7 if you have any questions or concerns. The brackets will formally be posted online at noon today. We at the Pokémon League wish you the best of luck from here on out!

-Mr. Goodshow

Well now we're talking here. I expected the battles to become longer, but I didn't expect the jump to full battles so quickly; frankly I expected 4 on 4 then 5 on 5 then 6 on 6 but whatever. Halftime seems like it benefits the trainers who are reeling as opposed to the ones who are winning; at least they put in a clause that both players can cancel it. I'm 100% okay with the field conditions since an open roof allows for Umbreon to recover more under the moon. The rule about not leaving the trainer's box definitely directed at me which I understand. But come on, if I'm willing to risk my health then let me do it. It's not like I'll win if I decided to sue.

Stress levels have spiked for me plus my Pokémon so it's great to have the option to decline
basically 50% of the press conferences from this point on. Although I'd probably think that it wouldn't make you any friends in the media. The prospect of entrance music is probably the funniest thing on this list. Might as well show some flare while showcasing the top eight trainers. Also, I have an idea of who my five VIP guests will be. Finally, the most important thing that extra day of rest. Gyarados has some more time to physically recover while everyone has more time to let their minds rest.

I had gone back to bed after mulling over the expanded possibilities that the rules provided. After mumbling a potential entrance song for so long, it was time to actually drag myself out of bed. Paying a visit to Dr. Harrison would probably be in my best interest since I had today and tomorrow off per the rules. The Pokémon Center at the main gate was empty since most participants either went home or stayed in their rooms.

"Why hello Mitch! What can I do for you?" Nurse joy cheerfully asked; I probably was the first person to walk in all day.

"Is the doctor in? I want to check up on Gyarados' injuries."

She typed away at the keyboard. "Just go back there since nobody's here. She'll be eager to talk with you." My footsteps echoed throughout the empty hallway as I approached her office. Even knocking softly on the door made me uncomfortable since the echo loudly reverberated.

"Doctor Harrison? It's Mitch. I want to have a check… up…?" My voice got softer as I saw a fairly muscular man in her office talking to her. In all honesty I did feel a little uneasy trying to disrupt a conversation with a bigger man behind the door. The man stood up after noticing me through the small square window and exited; he was also taller than me by about six inches.

"I'm sorry for overstaying my appointment with the doctor. Could I just have five more minutes tops please? We're just about done."

Five more minutes didn't hurt since I had all day to rest up. "Sure. I'll just stay out here until you're done." He nodded with a hint of understanding before going back into her office; I sat down with my back against the door to wait it out. True to his word, he left within the timeframe and I made my way in.

"As I was saying, could I get another x-ray…" she looked really pale. "You okay doc?"

She snapped out of her daze. "Sorry about that, I'm fine. I assume that you want Gyarados to be evaluated again?" I nodded. "Well let's bring him back to the machine again." He was let out once we got to the machine and sprawled out so that the machine could fully scan his body. Everything went exactly as planned with the machine spending more time on the two problem areas. "Give me a minute to retrieve the images and we'll take it from there." Doctor Harrison left the room while the two of us closed our eyes for a little bit; the sound of the door opening woke us up.

"How's the torso? It took a bigger hit than the vertebra area so I'm a little more concerned about that."

She let out a small sigh of relief. "Well the affected vertebra is fine. The torso…" she tried to form an accurate assessment. "The torso is only slightly bruised compared to last time."

"Will I be able to use him in the quarterfinals? It's going to be a full battle so I need to know how far I can push him."

Now she went back to looking nervous. "You could battle with him if you wanted to. At this stage
though, I can't give you a definitive answer of how long it could last in a battle.

"Thanks for the quick check-up. Maybe you can come to the battlefield in two days to watch me? I have five VIP passes waiting for me when I get back to my room."

Again she started to look nervous. "I'm not sure if I could…"

"Come on, lighten up," I interjected. "Cut loose a bit."

"...I'll think about it." Good. Seriously, when was the last time you took a break? Medicine and anatomy study makes it hard for a person to unwind. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to back to my office. Good luck in your next match." Doctor Harrison practically sprinted out of the room while Gyarados looked at me with a confused look on its face.

"Let's head back and check the brackets; probably past noon by now," I mumbled. Gyarados nudged my belt. "Oops. Forgot you can't fit through that door haha!" He poked at Espeon's ball this time; I knew something was up. "We'll talk when we get back. Return."

A lot more fans were milling around the stadium or the room where past champions were enshrined. Someone noticed me and asked for my autograph so I signed a piece of paper. More people followed suit as if I was magically scheduled to appear at some public relations event. A lot of my so-called fans wished me well in my quarterfinal match while others acted star struck; people couldn't form a complete sentence or even talk when standing next to me. Eventually the line died down after I gave them a notice that I had to prepare for my battle.

I made my way into the computer room to log on to the Silver Conference website seeing as the time was well past noon. Navigating the page was a bit interesting since apparently I was the featured profile of the day. I goofed around by looking at my previous press conferences while either laughing at my awkwardness or burying my head in my hands at the dumb things I said on camera. Curiosity finally won out as I clicked the official bracket. The page had a lengthy introduction to the rules, competition, stuff like that while the bracket was below.

**Quarterfinals**

- **Quarterfinal 1:** Sara vs. Sydney, Field 1 1:00pm

- **Quarterfinal 2:** Allison vs. Damien, Field 1 3:00pm

- **Quarterfinal 3:** Christina vs. Kyle, Field 1 5:00pm

- **Quarterfinal 4:** Mitch vs Cory, Field 1 7:00pm

**Semifinals**

- **Semifinal 1:** TBD vs. TBD

- **Semifinal 2:** TBD vs. TBD

**Championship**

- **TBD vs. TBD

"Mitch versus Cory," I mumbled like a zombie. "Mitch versus Cory," with a little shock in my voice as I read it over a second time. "Mitch versus Cory!? No fucking way!" Luckily there was
nobody else in the room to hear me yell in a mix of confusion and surprise among other emotions. "How the hell… you gotta be kidding me."

For the next few minutes I stared at the screen in a hopeless attempt to have the matchups changed before accepting my fate. Luckily I could be distracted temporarily with Gyarados' conversation once we got up to the room. Still can't believe I have to battle against him in the quarterfinals out of all the trainers in the field. Throwing all that aside, I called him out with Espeon to let him talk.

"Thanks for taking me to the doctor today Mitch; that Typhlosion hit me good."

"Yeah, it looked pretty intense out there last time. Thanks for coming through in the clutch; I forgot to thank you properly in the heat of the moment.

"Don't worry about it. As much as you trust that doctor, she wasn't being completely honest with you today." I immediately froze up. "I'm much more beaten down in the torso area than she let on. I can still breathe normally, but a few good hits and I could've easily had a broken rib."

"But why… why would she lie to me?"

"She's obviously being intimidated. I've been around long enough to sense when something or someone is being intimidated. My best guess was that muscular man, but that's a stretch. Maybe she lied so that she wouldn't feel bad about keeping me out. At this stage, we're all beaten up a little more than usual despite the healing machines and trainers could flip out on her if she told them that their partners were unable to battle before the battle started."

"Okay, let me break it down into one simple question. Can you battle? Yes or no?"

"Yes. However, she's bullshitting about how long I can last. Realistically, I can shake the pain off for one Pokémon, maybe two depending on how the battle is going."

"Does your back hurt as much as your torso?"

"No, my back is fine. She felt relieved after seeing the x-ray because she didn't have to lie to you."

"Alright then. I might lead off with you so that we can scare Cory a little bit. I'm not so sure about using you so late with this information now. In the meantime, we'll continue to rest up."

"Of course. That way when I do battle, I'll slaughter that bastard's Pokémon."

Very unusual coming from a Pokémon who's calm under pressure in situations where I might lose my cool. "What makes you say that? You've never faced him before."

"I could see that he went out of his way to make that little girl cry. She nor her Growlithe deserved that and you know it. Let me go all out; to hell with the pain."

I stood up after remembering how much he loved being used as a slide for Marybeth when we first stopped by the ranch. "Revenge on a whim will only get you hurt. Battling all pissed-off with just emotions controlling you isn't going to work," I said softly as I thought about the time I sent out Espeon to face Piloswine. "You have to trust me so that you can still hit hard and be safe. Believe me, I want to make my own statement." Flashbacks of that night in the lighthouse played in my head at a fast pace; I sat back down. "I just need more time to think and separate my emotions from logical decision making. We'll go over the game plan tomorrow. Rest up." I recalled both of them back then just laid down flat on my back.

When life had pushed me into a corner, I've learned to shove back.
Chapter 46- Quarterfinals vs Cory Part I

For the rest of the day in addition to my second day off, I turned into a hermit. It was a little scary when I realized that I avoided social interaction save for the television or going into the cafeteria to eat. No matter how secluded I would get, I still let my Pokémon roam around in the room and in the courtyard below with Espeon lowering anyone down if they wanted to play some more. As for what I did it that span, mainly catch up on sleep. Almost every day on my journey started with me waking up at the crack of dawn in cold temperatures. Not these two days; no sir. Other times, I looked up the remaining seven trainers to see their teams but failed to remember them by memory. On the day of my match against Cory, I made sure to stop at the desk.

"Hey, is this where I can do my pre-battle stuff?"

The clerk looked up from the computer as a person came behind me. "Yes. Let me look you up first." More pounding on the keyboard. "Here are your VIP passes. Would you like to have a press conference before your battle tonight at 7pm?"

"Yes." It was a tough decision to make considering our history.

"Okay so your conference is scheduled for 6:30pm. Would you like any entrance music?"

"Let me whisper it; don't want to ruin anything," I said with a smile while the person tilted their head in confusion.

"…You're all set Mitch. Good luck tonight!"

"Yeah, try not to get swept," the person behind me sarcastically said.

I didn't even bother to look at him. "I won't. Not too sure about Cory though."

Looks like I pissed off a fanboy by the sound of him shuffling around to meet me eye-to-eye. "Everyone in the world knows you've made it this far by dumb luck. This might be the weakest field in the past decade."

"You talk a lot for someone who's not even in the field."

He pulled out his trainer ID. "Name's Damien kid. I'm in the field and battling second today."

I folded my arms. "Congratulations! You're a part of the weakest field in the past decade. Pot, meet kettle."

Damien downplayed my insult. "Well when I take down the reigning champion, then we'll see who's talking."

"You go do that. I've got to get ready for my battle."

Before I left the lobby, he got in one last word. "What do you have to prepare for? You only have six Pokémon so just wing it like you've always done." It took every ounce of will to keep my mouth shut and a fraction of an ounce of blood as I literally bit my tongue. Damien began talking to
the clerk as I went to the computer room to finally get Cory's information.

**Name:** Cory

**Hometown:** Cherrygrove City (Johto)

**Badges won:** 8

**Pokemon Registered:** Donphan, Electrode, Skarmory, Nidoking, Feraligatr, Jumpluff, Tauros, Ursaring, Persian, Slowbro.

This man came prepared for basically everything on my team. No… this group of Pokémon is prepared for everything except the Dratini line. Hypothetically speaking: Electrode beats Gyarados, Skarmory walls Umbreon/Espeon/Furret, Nidoking or Donphan walls Ampharos, Feraligatr beats Growlithe, and all three normal types could give Umbreon a run for his money. However, Ampharos puts some pressure on his team. Then again, he's probably got more Pokémon in storage. Seeing Donphan on the list was a surprise considering I thought I straight up murdered it back in Olivine while Electrode took a lesser yet still brutal beating. Before I go up to prepare, I messaged Davis.

*Hey, hope everything is going well. Would you guys like some VIP passes to get in the stadium for my battle tonight?*

A few minutes went by until he responded. *Sure! You can just slide them under my door. We're out all day today but we were going to watch you anyway. As I went to message the next person, he added another one. Thanks for all you've done again. Carly said that she couldn't have gotten through the press conference without you while she broke down in her room. Considering what we've gone through, I'm glad that you of all people put us out of our misery; it just wasn't fun after a certain point but you made it fun again.*

Holding in all of those emotions must've hurt. *I wish you guys could've waited to face me later on or in the group stage. I feel bad that I kicked you guys out kinda early.*

Davis was quick to respond again. *Put it this way: we own a Pokémon League record and can easily shut people up by battling them lol. For real though, we'll be out in full support. Man oh man I'm not sure if they'll ever set foot in Johto again except for the Indigo Plateau when they make it back here. Not if… when. Having a record like theirs would come with a lot of sponsorship opportunities with the Pokémon League or at least in Kanto.*

I went outside to the courtyard to see a few trainers that didn't go home just enjoying the nice weather. My hope was to find Wes and my guess was correct as he sat on a bench facing the grand fountain in the middle with a girl next to him.

"Hey Wes! How's it going?" I asked from behind him; he jumped.

Wes and the girl turned around. "Oh, what's up Mitch? I'm doing pretty good. This is that girl I was talking to you about earlier. She's helped me more than anyone else in my life when the whole world was against me. This is Rui."

She stood up to bow. "It's nice to see you in person! Wes has told be quite a bit about you even though you two just met about two weeks ago."

"It's nice to see you too," I replied with a smile. "Wes told me you were due for a vacation. Anyway, I have some VIP tickets for my battle tonight if you want to get in for free. It's up to
Both of them looked at each other as if they were mentally talking about my offer. "We'll take them!" Rui said enthusiastically while clapping. "You're the first person to beat Wes in a long time so the least we can do is watch how you battle!" A complete 180 compared to what the average trainer thinks of me around here. "Oh by the way… I've heard that you have an Espeon and Umbreon. Can I see them? I miss Wes' already."

"Sure. Come on out you two!" They materialized looking refreshed after the two days' rest. Their attention turned to the girl with the red hair as she approached them slowly. Espeon tilted her head while Umbreon just sat still when she went to go pet them. "I don't know what kind of magic's going on, but nobody could get close to these two without either one backing up or growling."

"Actually, I've studied up on the behavioral traits of the species," Rui proudly exclaimed. "Espeon probably poked into my mind and saw I wasn't a threatening person before relaying that to Umbreon; they're at least friends, right?" I nodded. "Bingo. And Umbreon is a little warier of people as Espeon is more naturally shy."

"Holy shit you're good."

"Watch this." She started to massage both of them to which they responded by practically melting into the ground. "They're going to feel even more energized after this so you'll have a slight edge going into your battle."

My two Eeveelutions lay on the grass nuzzling each other when Rui was done. "Oh how I wish I knew how to do that when I first found them."

Rui's face turned sad. "Wes told me how you found these two and it broke my heart."

"Dammit she knows. "You should've been there when I found out the truth."

She looked at the ground. "We could use more people like you in Orre. There's still a long way to go over there." Wes changed the topic after an awkward moment of silence.

"Can't wait to see you battle with basically no limits. Three on three is okay, but I wish they upped it during the elimination rounds."

"Goofing off in that format will separate the weak trainers from the strong ones. If you can't make adjustments that quickly then you shouldn't be here," I droned back still thinking about the day Linda told me about those two. I eventually snapped out of it. "Until 6:30, I have nothing to do except plan out my strategy. Hope to see you there!" I made my way back inside while texting my last potential VIP.

Doc, it's Mitch. Still up for the VIP treatment?

As a member of the medical staff, I actually have priority seating for all of the remaining battles she immediately relayed to me. I'll be rooting for you though! With all of that out of the way, I had a few hours for some fine tuning.

Press from all over the world, including other regions, graced the slightly bigger auxiliary room before my scheduled press conference. Ashley unsurprisingly was my liaison as we both waited outside for the clock to strike 6:30 as per the rules of the media contract. Just before we went in, I made another tough decision.

"Ashley, I want you tell them that I'll be controlling the conference."
"Mitch you can't be serious. They have their oblig…"

"I don't have time for bullshit. I want to say what needs to be said."

"Dammit! You're letting your emotions get the better of you!"

"Better here than out on the battlefield!"

She twiddled her fingers thinking about it. "Fine. Be ready to deal with some backlash."

"Worth it, now let's get in there. I just want to fight already." Flashbulbs practically blinded me as the podium awaited me.

"Welcome ladies and gentlemen of the press. As per his request, Mitch will be only make a statement and will not take questions." Everyone was unsettled.

I cleared my throat. "I don't know if Cory had his press conference yet or not but let me tell you that we have some history from when we were in Olivine. I'm not going to say what happened back then due to extenuating circumstances. Believe me when I say that an ambulance might have to get involved today. Obviously I don't want it to come to that point. Finally, respect is a fickle thing. I do not respect him one bit, yet I will still give him a fair fight out of respect for the spirit of competition. If he plays dirty, then I'll do the same thing. Enjoy the battle." The lounge area would be my saving grace due to the lack of media access.

The comfy couch calmed me down a little bit as I called out the whole gang. "Alright guys, you know what I'll say so I'll make it quick: fight like hell and let me take care of you. Let me also add that it's okay to go with your gut in close combat. Win or lose, I love you all." I called everyone back except for Growlithe and Umbreon. "Both of you are smart. This battle will get heated whenever you two are out there because of last time. Battling pissed off is okay as long as you keep it under control. Got it?" They sternly nodded. "Return." With nothing else left to do, it was time to go out to the field.

"Welcome to the last quarterfinal matchup of the day," the announcer droned on as I went into a Zen-like state. Only the introduction music for Cory broke my concentration. He came out surprisingly calm because I thought he would be cocky with the trumpets blaring underneath some snare drums. "And now… please welcome Mitch!" No music played on my way out to my box; just like I wanted. Sometimes all you need is the roar of the crowd. I looked up to the VIP section to see all of my guests there in addition to all of the Johto gym leaders; no shortage of star power here at the Indigo Plateau. Cory shot me a glare as the referee signaled the battle to start.

From my ball, I could see nature was on my side for this battle as it was a clear night sky with a crescent moon. A full moon would've been better but I'll take what I can get against this guy. Mitch was emotionless for probably the first time in a huge battle; it actually made me shiver seeing him like this. Darkness grew as Mitch wanted to start with me.

"Umbreon." Arceus, he sounded like he had no soul.

"Donphan!" The elephant Pokémon went from pumped to nervous. There was no way… "Rollout!"

Rollout took slightly longer than normal to start up as Mitch thought of a counter.

"Dark Pulse!" There's that emotion. I fired a shot straight ahead which actually caused Donphan to stop rolling. "Bite!" It looked scared as I bit down on its side.
“Shake it off then use Fury Attack!” No good Cory, it flinched. This thing's scared of me.

“Dark Pulse!” From close range, the move delivered a massive hit.

“Get up and use Fury Attack dammit!” Donphan still lay on the ground obviously able to battle. At the risk of getting hit, I got a little closer to look at the eyes; fear was written all over them as it backed away from me slowly. Flashbacks of Olivine flickered in my head until the referee made the decision.

“Donphan is unable to battle. Umbreon wins!” Lies… it's refusing to battle. That thing could kill if it wanted to. I can't believe that he brought it here of all places after I nearly killed it.

Cory frustratingly called it back then stared at the ball. " Fucking pathetic," he mumbled. "Nidoking would've been better but I wasn't sure about a traded Pokémon. So much for that decision." Opting not to go after Mitch verbally, he threw out his next Pokémon. "Tauros!"

"Stay focused Umbreon. Use Dark Pulse!" Tauros is a very threatening Pokémon so wearing it down would be better than brute force initially. The dark energy built up deep down, but it changed to poison on the way up and I missed the Toxic horribly.

His eyebrow raised up in surprise. "Okay then... Horn Attack!"

"Keep it at bay with Toxic!" A charging bull of its caliber actually got me a little scared but I managed to get it off with no problems.

"Dodge left and keep charging!" Speed from the charging Tauros cause me to miss two more times as both horns nailed me in the chest. "Push forward!" Cory was trying to bowl me over!? Nope. I won't let myself get skewered.

"Bite!" Being locked with the side of its horns to chest and in pain, I found a way to dig my teeth into its mane. The grunt of pain game me the adrenaline rush to back up then ram it with a Quick Attack. "Dark Pulse!" I was never more sure of a knockout... until my rings started to shine brightly.

"While it's healing up, use Take Down!" To get the most recovery I opted to stay still as I recovered. Unfortunately, it lowered its head so far that it hit the scar on my paw for a critical hit. "Rock Smash!" What!? Since when does a Tauros have a fighting type move? A glowing hoof came down on my back like an axe. "Now that its defense is lowered, Hyper Beam!" Impossible! What the hell is this monster? The beam wasn't as accurate as it could've been; doesn't mean that it didn't hurt. I looked over at Mitch for a change.

"Great job Umbreon! Return!" It was the first time in my life I got some rest without being defeated first. I'm going to need my strength for later.

Something was up with that Tauros. Rock Smash is already one of the hidden machines but Hyper Beam? Hyper Beam is also a technical machine. But where did he get it from? No place in Johto comes to mind off the top of my head. Forget about it Mitch, gotta send out someone else. Maybe…

"Growlithe!" He looked slightly intimidated while Tauros whipped its tails aggressively. "Flamethrower!" He cowered a little bit before firing off a line of weak fire.

"Dodge into Take Down! Use the momentum!" Tauros flawlessly moved about as a sped up Take Down dealt heavy damage.
"Flamethrower again!" The cowering back reminded me who exactly he was fighting. "Don't worry buddy! You got this!" His attack looked a little stronger than last time but still was avoided by Tauros.

"Take Down!"

Growlithe's switch flipped on as he took a more aggressive stance. "That's what I'm talking about. Flame Wheel!" Flames covered it as they ran to the middle of the field with neither side giving an inch. The fire grew bigger as Tauros retained a burn before collapsing down on the ground.

"Tauros is unable to battle. Growlithe wins!" Cory was actually making me nervous as he calmly recalled the Tauros that threatened Jasmine back in Olivine. I snuck a quick peek at Jasmine as she looked stiff in the crowd of gym leaders enjoying the battle; obviously she still remembers that night.

"Man oh man… I can't remember a time when I was put into a corner so early. I wasn't holding back before, but now it's time to step up the intensity." Another powerful Pokémon came out in the form of Feraligatr.

"Return Growlithe!" He shook his head violently. "No way in hell you're staying out here!" His Luxury Ball barely brought him back in. "You'll get yours later. That much I promise" I mumbled. "Furret! Get out here and use Dig!" She happily dug a hole in the ground and wasted no time coming up to deliver a solid hit.

Cory still kept calm in the midst of the quick strike. "Hydro Pump!"

"Burrow underground!" Furret just got away from the powerful blast of water.

He flashed an evil grin. "Earthquake." No! Nonononono.

"How…"

Furret flew out of the ground and onto the ground. "Hydro Pump!" Water pressure forced her against the side wall and the pressure caused her to collapse once the attack stopped. "It's amazing what you find lying around in Victory Road. Now Bite!" Furret was already teetering on unconsciousness but this was unnecessary: the referee was forced to call the match after he flung her across the field twice while I fumbled to get my ball.

"Furret is unable to battle. Feraligatr wins!" Two moves. It took two moves for my Furret to go down and then some… ridiculous.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" I shouted at myself knowing how careless I was. This time I had a plan. "Ampharos!" Earthquake wouldn't have a chance to hit her. "Thunder Wave!" A weaker bolt of electricity found its target that made the gator uncomfortable.

"Hydro Pump!" Paralysis didn't kick in as a wave of water pushed my sheep backwards.

"Discharge!" Electricity wasted no time following the water back to the source for some massive damage. "Again!"

"Earthquake!" Now paralysis was coming through as it went down to one knee struggling to even stay up.

"Thunderpunch!" With no chance to stand up and fire off a move fast enough, running in to land a strong right uppercut seemed like a dose of payback for how Furret was tossed around.
"Feraligatr is unable to battle. Ampharos wins! Three Pokémon are unable to battle on one side. Trainer, would you like halftime?" Cory nodded. "Very well. Please retreat to your respective back walls for a halftime period." Staff members rushed out with a chair, a water bottle, and a towel; frankly I wanted a healing machine. Cory still looked unfazed at the deficit he was in until a noise came from his tunnel. A vehicle pulled into sight but remained far away from where we would be battling. He smirked after another one pulled on the other side of the tunnel.

The ambulances have arrived.
Scoreboard lights flashed about as the operator turned the backlight off for Feraligatr while the main picture went from the team matchup to a blank screen indicating halftime. So far the match was in my favor; I'm up 5-3 and a heavy hitter has been eliminated thanks to Ampharos. I'm no expert, but I expected more fight out of the Donphan unless it was the same one from Olivine, which in that case, he's an idiot for bringing to battle me of all people or Umbreon of all Pokémon. The only downside is that I lost Furret in the dumbest way possible and nearly lost Umbreon to a surprise Rock Smash/Hyper Beam combo.

A thought popped into my head: the man has some money to throw around. Obviously bribing the referees here is nearly impossible with everyone looking out to protect the integrity of the competition, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't find a way to legally get an edge. Finding an Earthquake TM in Victory Road is probably a start. Come to think of it, Hyper Beam can't be bought in Johto which means he got it from Kanto. If I remember correctly, there's a game corner in Celadon that operates like the one in Goldenrod so he probably got it there. Gah! Too much to think about right now. Just have to plan ahead for the future.

"Excuse me, sir?" An official in a blazer came over to me. "Is it against the rules to talk to your Pokémon during the break?"

She looked a little confused. "Well technically there isn't a rule forbidding it. Go ahead. Keep in mind you only have about six minutes before you have to step in again."

"Thank you." She went back to standing against the back wall. "Growlithe, get out here." He materialized looking a little more refreshed. "I know that we're in a pressure situation but there's no need to act all tough like that." He turned his hand and pouted. "Look, I'm sorry that Furret was beaten. Pokémon like that don't learn Earthquake on their own." Growlithe softened up then looked at me; I went to pet his head. "Remember what I said before the battle. Now come back; we're far from done." Across the way, Cory just looked at the night sky. Something definitely wasn't right because I find it hard to believe that he changed so quickly. What's he up to?

"Please return to your trainer areas," the official ordered while motioning with his arms as the clock hit two minutes.

I just couldn't take it anymore. "Why are there two ambulances there Cory? Do you want to tell me something?"

He kept cool. "Well you did say in your press conference that there might be a need for one. Since I'm such a nice guy, I requested another one just in case there was a need for them." Shit, his press conference was after mine. "I'll admit you were smart about your word choice when talking about our history since you probably know the consequences." I sneaked a peek again at Jasmine to see she was still a little unnerved but at least she didn't hear him.

"Hopefully they won't have to be enforced. Now get ready. The clock's about to hit zero."

"With pleasure. Persian!" The feline Pokémon looked much faster compared to the other Pokémon
he's sent out.

"Ampharos!" Our referee gave the signal to start. "Thunderpunch!"

"Screech!" Even a non-damaging move like Screech was faster than running ahead. The attack stopped Ampharos about 15 feet from its target while she tried to cover her ears. "Slash!" Persian flashed from its base position to claw at Ampharos in practically the blink of an eye.

"Big mistake! Cotton Spore!" Balls of cotton clung to Persian and it tried to scrape them off furiously. "Discharge!"

"Dodge!" Reducing the speed of the feline made it impossible to escape from the field of electricity in time. "Slash! All fours!"

"Thunderpunch!" She got off a good hit to the side but the momentum swung Persian around and it landed a critical hit with one of its hind legs.

A flag went up. "Ampharos is unable to battle. Persian is the winner!" Bold move spreading the attack between all four legs instead of the dominant front one; it paid off. I'm still up 4-3 but I don't want to make any risky moves if I don't have to.

"Espeon, let's go!" A safe bet for sure since she's at full strength. "Psybeam!" Her jewel let loose a powerful line of psychic energy that found Persian and sent it staggering.

"Faint Attack!"

"Counter with Swift!" Her stars slowed down the opposition even more before she easily dodged the attack.

Persian was panting heavily as it went to charge in again. "Get back!" A red beam of light dragged it back into its ball. "Slowbro, I choose you!" The hermit crab Pokémon stood on the field stupidly as Cory opted to save his Persian for later. That, and the effects of Cotton Spore would disappear once it was sent out again. "A little psychic showdown would be entertaining for sure. Use Psychic, Slowbro!"

It was time to see if Espeon had it in her. "Use your own Psychic!" With neither side able to grab hold of one other like two wrestlers, both of them took their energy and turned it into a ball form; their attacks cancelled each other out at midfield. "Quick Attack!"

"Withdraw!" Slowbro crouched into a ball as Espeon still managed to find a way to avoid hitting the shell. "Now counter with Water Gun!" Espeon was sent backwards.

"Return Espeon! Go Umbreon!" It'd be pointless to try to go after Slowbro when I have an obvious answer still able to battle despite it being about 50% healthy. "Dark Pulse!" Poor Slowbro couldn't get out of the way as it took a heavy hit. "Follow up with Bite!"

Cory kept his head down and smiled as Umbreon charged ahead. "You know what to do Slowbro." If taking two steps backwards is the choice of defense, then I guess you're out of options. "Our training has prepared us for this moment. Go for it!" Umbreon was ready to pounce with glowing fangs as Slowbro's arm started to light up as well.

"Change to Faint Attack Umbreon!" He didn't skip a beat or have the move randomly change on him while still going in for the attack.

"Dynamicpunch!" What!? That's twice this match I've gotten fucked over. Twice!
Both of their attacks collided as Slowbro looked like it was on its last leg while Umbreon looked confused. "Break through and use Dark Pulse Umbreon!" He responded by ramming his head repeatedly against the side wall. "No! Come on Umbreon! Dark Pulse!" This time he broke through only to land Toxic instead.

"Water Gun attack!" Umbreon was too disoriented to dodge the attack and was pushed into the wall. "Looks like your Umbreon is down for the count."

"Running your mouth as usual. Look at your Pokémon, Cory." Slowbro stumbled about before collapsing face first onto the field. "Gotta love Toxic, am I right?" He frowned as the referee declared a double knockout putting the score at 3-2 in favor of me. However, I have to send out my next Pokémon first since Umbreon was knocked out first. Persian with some damage taken and a 100% healthy mystery Pokémon versus a 100% healthy Gyarados, slightly hurt Espeon, and slightly hurt Growlithe.

I want a quick knockout. "Gyarados!" If he can just last through four or so attacks, then less pressure will be put on everyone else.

Cory shot me a scowl. "Time to play again Persian!" Well he certainly isn't going on the defensive. But it's weird; why rely on a glass cannon against basically a killing machine? Speed can't be that important to him, right? "It'd be a shame if your Gyarados were to get severely injured on, oh say… the lower tail? Can't have it swinging it around so carelessly you know." My poker face almost shattered. There was no way… no fucking way… he could've known about that. Brandi only reported on Furret's concussion last time out and any medical records should be confident and clo-oh my Arceus. That son of a bitch.

"You had to do it didn't you?" I shouted across the way; no response. "Then I guess one Pokémon's going in an ambulance and I won't let it be mine. Congrats on making me fulfill my self-fulfilling prophecy. It was only meant to intimidate you, but I guess I should've expected this."

"Gyarados versus Persian. Begin!

"Thrash!"

"Faint Attack!" Gyarados flailed around recklessly as Faint Attack acted like an offensive move/shield hybrid maneuver. That didn't stop Gyarados from hitting it hard again followed by a third time. "Use Hydro Pump!"

"Screech!" Just like Ampharos, the sudden piercing scream made Gyarados stop in its tracks. "Go at the weak point with Slash!"

He was intentionally going for the bruised vertebra area. "Protect your tail!" Confusion prevented him from understanding what I was trying to get at as claws dug into the lower portion of the tail.

"Don't let go! Thunderbolt!" My heart sank as electricity covered my giant sea snake with a four times effective move. The only saving grace was that it didn't take it from a pure electric Pokémon.

"No way," I whispered in shock. "I'm so sorry Gyarados…"

"Gyarados is unable to battle. Persian wins!" the official screamed over the roar of the crowd.

Cory smirked. "Because I'm such a nice guy, let me tell you how my Pokémon got a powerful move." He pulled out his wallet. "Fortune favors two types of people: the bold and the rich. See, I was looking to get a boost in power so I decided to hit the game corner in Goldenrod a few weeks after you beat me. Some powerful TMs were on display for pretty outrageous prices so I bought as
many coins as I could. Fortunately for me, there was a person dubbed 'the move tutor' hanging around the place before I bought too much. For a measly 4000 coins, he taught my Persian Thunderbolt since Electrode is far from fighting shape."

"So it cost 4000 coins huh? The exchange rate is 500 coins for 10000P last time I went so multiply by two then four… 80000P! It'd take an average trainer five, six weeks to make that if they were lucky enough to battle people willing to put money on the line." He still probably gambled to build up a nest egg along the way too.

"Bingo. Unfortunately for you I'm not an ordinary trainer."

"Neither am I."

"Then prove it. Anyone can make it this far in a major tournament with a little bit of luck. Also, I'm not sure if just calling your Gyarados back was a smart decision. There's an ambulance you know."

"Be careful what you wish for. Espeon!" Calling her back against Slowbro was a smart idea with this thing still running around. "By the way, the damage wasn't that bad. Psybeam!"

"Faint Attack!" Espeon's attack managed to keep Persian at bay. "Thunderbolt!"

I've had enough of this bullshit. "Psychic!" Cory's Pokémon was no match for Espeon's full psychic powers as it was lifted into the air before it could get off a Thunderbolt. "Slam it." With it being so worn down, it fainted after trying to get back up.

"Persian is unable to battle. Espeon wins!" With me up 2-1, I can't afford to celebrate just yet. His options are still Electrode, Skarmory, Nidoking, Jumpluff, and Ursaring based on his public profile; Ursaring would be the worst thing to come out on that list.

A look of nervousness came over Cory's face as he gripped his last shot of advancing to the semifinals. Nobody in the crowd could tell how truly nervous he was. "Skarmory!" Oh thank Arceus. The steel bird would be no match for Growlithe, but I don't want to solely rely on him to clean up.

"Quick Attack Espeon!"

"Agility!" Pretty sure the crowd thought I choked but they were wrong. It was simply a scouting move. Skarmory was only slightly faster than Espeon as the two ran around the field avoiding contact. "Ascend followed by Steel Wing!"

Going that fast with that move was a recipe for disaster. "Psychic to slow it down!" With the speed boost, Espeon used a lot of energy just to stop it, let alone throw it to the ground. "Psybeam!" She got off more damage despite steel resisting psychic.

"Steel Wing again!" She was too tired to control it or dodge the attack so she had no choice but to take it. Rest would be better instead of trying to wear it down just in case Growlithe were to fall.

"Come back Espeon!" Once the read beam started to travel to Espeon, time seemed to slow down.

For fuck's sake Growlithe I fed you two days ago and you're hungry again? Another flash showed Growlithe attacking Cory before Cory tossed him aside. That's it! I'm done with an undisciplined piece of shit like you! See this ball? It'll be broken by the time you're out of my sight. Don't even think about coming back unless you want six feet of dirt above you. The entire flashback was in the blink of an eye and ended as Espeon was safely in her ball; her vision was the same one she showed me in group play.
Umbreon did a good job of keeping himself under control, Gyarados probably might have lost it if he stayed out longer because of what he did to Marybeth, but Growlithe… Growlithe is a different story. Skarmory was the Pokémon that tormented him way back when so he'll probably either be too traumatized to move or fly off the handlebars.

I took a deep breath. "Growlithe!" He materialized looking ready to go and then stayed still. No positive or negative vibes, just absolute stillness. "Go with your gut buddy. Whatever you do, I'll understand." He just stayed there until our referee made the motion to start. Not a second later, her fired off a Flamethrower that missed because of the increased speed from Agility.

"Hidden Power!" Little orbs flew toward Growlithe that turned into water on impact; of course he would have the water variant. Nothing looked like it was going to slow Growlithe down through as he fired off another Flamethrower which connected.

"Payback's a bitch isn't it?" I mumbled so that Cory couldn't hear. "That shit's been building up for months, probably years and now… it's coming out all at once." My hand moved to his Luxury Ball as I kept quiet while reflecting on what Espeon showed me. "He's in the best ball money can buy, six feet under his friends after a big win or when he's feeling down, and he's always free to talk with me. Now he gets to humiliate you on the biggest stage in the world. He's been hungry in more ways than one since that day. When we're done, he's never going to be hungry again."

Desperation was written all over Cory's face. "Fury Attack!" The sharp metal beak hit Growlithe hard, yet he probably felt no pain with the adrenaline rushing through his body. He then followed it up with a Flame Wheel to force it on the ground. The coup de grace was Growlithe jumping into the air then using Flame Wheel to deliver a flaming piledriver knockout. I could've sworn I heard a crunching sound.

"Skarmory is unable to battle. Growlithe wins!" Cheering erupted at the decision and I took it all in waving to the crowd; it was short lived.

Growlithe continued to use Flamethower as I played to the crowd and when he ran out of fire, he started to cry as he used Bite to grab a leg of the steel bird. His eyes stayed shut and he was whimpering as he dragged the unconscious Skarmory over to an ambulance stretcher before returning to the field wailing uncontrollably while howling every few steps. The poor guy has nothing left to hide; he let it all out. I couldn't be more proud of him.

The referee pulled out a small notepad. "Growlithe has been disqualified! Call it back now otherwise you will forfeit the match."

Going from overjoyed to concerned, I made the move as fast as I could in order to preserve my victory. "Growlithe return! Go Espeon!" I made damn sure that the judge knew I still had another Pokémon in reserve so I could win by an official score of 1-0.

"This battle is over! The match goes to Mitch from Violet City!" Crowd noise wasn't as loud this time around as the ambulance with Skarmory drove off down Cory's tunnel. Cory himself walked off the field with his head down in a mix of defeat and anger.

Semifinals here we come.
A frenzy was happening all around me as the crowd mixed cheers with boos; cheering for the great battle that they just witnessed whereas the boos were for Growlithe dragging his abuser to a waiting ambulance. I know that him going overboard was a possibility and I probably should've avoided sending him out… but the circumstances I was under made it hard to avoid. As bad as the scene was, I laughed a little inside when Growlithe brought Skarmory over. The look on the medic's face was priceless.

The walk back to my tunnel wasn't pretty due to various flying objects being thrown in my direction. A group of people rushed to the railing screaming so many things at me that I couldn't understand a word they said. One glass bottle that whizzed just over my head convinced me to sprint to safety instead of savoring the cheering that my team deserved. With a bit of adrenaline, I jogged to the doors outside the room where my press conference would take place and waited for someone to escort me in.

"As much as I want to help keep order, you're in way over your head on this one. I can only do so much." I knew who it was.

"I'm not going to drag you into this Ashley."

"This is my job though. I still have to keep it somewhat short."

I just stared at the door. "Do what you have to do. Let me in whenever." She radioed her colleagues to let me in and I sat down at the podium. "Alrighty then, who's first?" I sarcastically asked. No surprise when everyone stood up and did whatever they could to get attention. Nobody was going for formalities this time around. "Figures," I mumbled away from the microphone. "One at a time otherwise I'm not talking." Back to being a villain I guess.

"Did you try to intentionally put your opponent's Pokémon in an ambulance? You practically asked for one before the battle."

Too easy. "No. I never told my Pokémon to keep battling the referee's decision. Growlithe did it out of anger."

"Anger from what?" the reporter responded. Now I could detail the events of his past but I doubt anyone'd believe me since I'd tell them Espeon showed me everything. Cory sure as hell won't say anything. "Circumstances out of my control."

"What exactly…"

Definitely not talking about it. "Moving on. Who's next?"

Another reporter piggybacked on the last question. "So are you going to apologize?"

Tough question… really tough question. "Based on our history, no. You guys probably already heard about what we did in Olivine by this point and let me tell you that this was a little payback." Everyone scribbled down that key phrase. "Anything about the rest of the battle?"
"What did you think about the team matchup?"

Finally! A question where I don't have to hide anything. "If I had played more strategically when using Ampharos then it would've been much easier. Ummm what else… Persian definitely showed why it was such a big threat. The only thing I didn't see coming was all of those TMs being used. Sure they caught me off guard but I still won."

"You're not very gracious, are you?"

"I'm just telling it like it is. Being gracious about it is up for people to decide. I could say worse things but I won't. One more question I guess. You in the front," I sighed in exhaustion with my palm on my forehead.

"How are you going to handle Growlithe's suspension?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it." That was probably the fastest suspension issued in the history of the Silver Conference. "Thanks guys." I almost sprinted out of the room with Ashley following me while the press tried to ask questions over each other. She somehow got in front of me once we were away from everyone else.

"Follow me." She led me back to the courtyard behind the hotel and we sat on the same bench Wes and Rui were on facing the fountain. "What's wrong with you?" she asked with genuine concern in her voice instead of annoyance. "You're a great trainer in battle and as a person but what happened today could've easily gotten your license suspended permanently."

"You wanna know what got into me huh," I whispered; she nodded. "Well it's because Growlithe was abused by Cory and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it! Do you any fucking idea what it feels like knowing that you couldn't help your Pokémon when they needed it most?" I hissed at her. "He's been living with that pain for Arceus knows how long and what he did in our battle wasn't even close to payback! He should've attacked Cory directly but he knew he was better than that. The fact that…"

Ashley was getting progressively frustrated. "Stop!" My breathing went from short and quick to deep and drawn out. "We could look into your claims. We have the resources."

My head shook. "The only reason I know this is because my Espeon showed me. Nobody would believe me even if she showed it to the entire world. All I know is that he kicked him, starved him, and had him beat up before sending him to the wild. He wasn't just on my doorstep that night… he was on death's doorstep. Besides, he'd pay someone off to blow the investigation."

She mulled over my sob story. "Not true. There's no way he'd be able to bribe an entire team of investigators with their own psychic types; their benefits are better than whatever he could offer."

"Doubt it. Ashley, all of his TMs were from Kanto. Either he went over there and bought them, gambled at the Celadon game corner to win enough coins, or had them shipped to his house except for Earthquake. Getting Thunderbolt on his Persian cost an arm and a leg for a normal person. Face it, talk is cheap. It's just like in Olivine… oh shit. No… nonononono."

"Mitch what's wrong?"

"Jasmine. She's here but what about Amphy?" It wasn't too late in the night to make a call. "I've got a bad feeling in my gut. Hold on a second." I prayed that she'd answer. "Hey Jasmine, are you still around? Hello?"

A quiet yet excited voice came from the other end. "Oh hey Mitch! What's going on?
Congratulations on winning today!

Sounds like nothing's happened yet. "Thanks for that. By the way, did you ever find someone to watch Amphy when I left Olivine?"

"Of course I did. He's working as usual. Is there something wrong?"

"You saw what happened at the end, right?"

"…Of course. It shocked me to say the least." Jasmine sounded hurt.

"I think… I think he's going to go after Amphy again."

"Why would you think that?"

"Remember what happened after I won your badge? I guess he snapped and I think he'll do it again." Silence was speaking volumes until I went all in. "Did any one of his threats specifically include going back to Olivine for any reason or include Amphy?"

"Y-y-yes," she sobbed.

"Can you tell me exactly what would happen?"

"No," Jasmine replied just above a whisper. "The things he would do to us shouldn't even be thought about, let alone said."

Fuck. "Alright… I'll figure something out. I promise." More silence. "Do you trust me?"

A sniffle came from the other end. "Absolutely." She started to cry. "I was worried when you had to face him but I knew you'd win." More sobbing over the phone. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," I reassured her. "All that matters is that you stay safe with Amphy. Thank you for trusting me. You still have that number I gave you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Do not hesitate to call it. Don't hesitate to call me either. If you need to find me, go to the Silver Hotel and ask the clerk for my room. I'd like to assume that a gym leader has authority here."

"Well I'm staying there too with all the other gym leaders. I'll ask the front desk to give you that information when you get back." Probably has a penthouse suite or something. All of the gym leaders really don't have a reason to leave except for watching the later rounds live so they're probably well compensated.

"Okay… thank you." My fingers rubbed my eyes as I was getting tired. "I'm so sorry for dragging you into this."

A very long pause followed to the point where I almost hung up on her. "You don't have to do everything by yourself… a hero always has help." *click* She's really into this idea that I'm some kind of knight in shining armor from some fairy tale for taking care of her and Amphy; I'm no hero. I'm not even sure I should've called her since I don't think Cory would've done anything.

Ashley had heard my side of the conversation yet didn't have anything else to say to me as she wished me goodnight. Knowing her, she'll probably look into my claims on her own if nobody else in the league want to go with her. A little note she left behind told me that Growlithe was formally suspended for my next battle. The option to appeal was blacked out due to the rules about the on-
field official having the final say and a disqualification mid-battle is an automatic suspension I guess. For what it was worth, Growlithe should've done more but he let it all out for now. Johto is a very cruel place.

The walk back to the healing room felt so much longer with all of this lingering over my head. For all I know, nothing could happen and I just scared her. Then again, Cory holds all the cards. He could bluff threats for the rest of his life or actually do something. Dammit! How could I let this happen? Seeing Nurse Joy at the healing machine was a welcoming sight.

"Can I get my team healed please?"

"Of course! Just hand them over and I'll do the rest. By the way, the brackets are up so you can go over the computer and take a look." She fiddled with the machine while I loaded everything up. It had been an hour or so since our battle under the moonlight had ended but they were fast with the highlights. The most popular clip was Growlithe's rampage and the comment section was an absolute shitstorm; I'd be amazed if it wasn't disabled by tomorrow morning. Clicking on the bracket tab couldn't happen fast enough. A very simple page appeared before me with all the information I needed to know for the battles that would happen two days from now.

**Quarterfinals**

- **Quarterfinal 1**: Sara vs. Sydney, Sara wins 2-0

- **Quarterfinal 2**: Allison vs. Damien, Allison wins 5-0

- **Quarterfinal 3**: Christina vs. Kyle, Kyle wins 3-0

- **Quarterfinal 4**: Mitch vs. Cory, Mitch wins 1-0

**Semifinals**

- **Semifinal 1**: Allison vs. Kyle, Field 1 7:00pm

- **Semifinal 2**: Mitch vs. Sara, Field 1 9:00pm

**Championship**

- **TBD vs. TBD**

My initial reaction was to calmly walk over to the garbage can and proceed to violently throw up. A rematch from the gala… in the *semifinals* of all places. Secretly I had wished that she would've been gone by this point but Arceus isn't that powerful. Espeon will ask who we're facing and how we're going to go about winning. She's gotten much stronger in body and mind throughout our journey but this… this could actually break her. The image of her lying on the Blackthorn Gym floor while getting verbally assaulted kept replaying in my head and caused me to vomit every single time. I scrambled to get my emotions in check but hate, anger, and guilt were the ones that gripped me the most.

"Excuse me," I heard from the lobby. "Your Pokémon are all set. Are you okay in there?"

I did my best to look presentable or at least sound okay. "Coming!" Nurse Joy handed me back the tray of balls once I got to the desk. "Appreciate it very much. Have a good one." Her smile put me in a better mood but it changed when I got to my room. The image flashed again and I sprinted to the garbage a second time and stayed by its side for about 20 minutes. By the time I had nothing
left in my stomach, I stumbled into bed and passed out from mental exhaustion or dehydration.

Nightmares kept me from getting a peaceful sleep early on since all I could think about was Espeon's past. Whether it'd be because of me or Sara, all I saw was her in pain. By the middle of the night, I woke up drenched in a cold sweat which forced me take a shower and try something different.

"Espeon come out." I threw her ball on the bed in hopes of making me feel better about myself. Her breathing was steady as she slept soundly next to me. A soothing voice entered my head again as all of the internal pain I was fighting just disappeared.

You are such a caring trainer. Do not worry about the battle. Rest for now and regain your strength.

Having an off day allowed me so sleep in late… so late that it was early afternoon by the time my feet hit the hotel floor. Making a trip to Doctor Harrison's exam room felt like a mandatory thing to do since Gyarados took a heavy hit in our last battle. I expected her to be welcoming; she looked pale when I was brought back to her office. X-rays of various Pokémon were on her computer screen.

"Doc, I need another scan for Gyarados." No response as thumping feet approached. "What's wro…" The same burly man from last time burst his way into the room.

"Kid, you need to leave. The doctor and I need to have a conversation." She looked sick to her stomach when he turned around again.

There were no signs of him having any Pokémon to battle me. "No. You get out. "Growlithe!" He snarled aggressively knowing something was off. "According to half the world, I'm a monster."

The man took a step back. "Listen to me. I'll do anything to make sure my Pokémon are healthy. Killing another person to protect my Pokémon's well-being might as well be second nature. Now get out of my sight!" Only a flinch from my Growlithe sent him out of the room fuming; that man was ready to fight my entire team with his bare hands.

Doctor Harrison breathed a deep sigh of relief. "T-t-t-thank you so much." We waited in silence for five minutes to make sure the man had left. "Follow me. Hurry!" She sprinted to the exam room and signaled me to get Gyarados underneath the x-ray machine. Results were calibrated to a computer screen next to the machine. "Look at this." A light ball was away from the rest of the white. "Oh thank Arceus."

"Can you please tell me what's wrong?!"

"…I need you to go back to my office." We came back to the screen with Gyarados' full x-ray. "See this blob? It's a bone fragment from the affected vertebra. We're lucky that it's only a bone chip and not a fully broken one."

My heart sunk. "Didn't you say that the torso was the part of the body I should be worried about?"

"Last time I evaluated him, the spine wasn't a concern. He must have gotten hit harder than normal." Persian actually did something besides throw off a surprise Thunderbolt? "We're going to need surgery now."

"Hold up. I'm not just throwing him on an operating table without a reason as to why."

She sighed. "A bone chip could easily scrape against the rest of the skeleton and cause immense pain. While we're in there, I'll see what can be done about the spinal cord."
I stared right into her eyes. "I'm not sure about this."

"Didn't you just say that you'd do anything for your Pokémon?"

"I did. But can I trust someone who lied to me? Your medical license should be revoked!"

She looked down at the floor. "I was going to lose it either way." I gave her a confused look. "Someone threatened me if I didn't give false medical diagnoses to the seven other quarterfinalists. He said that he had connections to get my license taken away if I didn't help him so that you would fail."

"Cory," I mumbled. "So that guy was some kind of enforcer?"

A nod. "Not only that, he tried to bribe me but I refused. Today was the day where he was going to 'check up on me'." Her eyes started to water. "Dammit! What kind of doctor am I!? Seven other trainers' Pokémon might have suffered because of me. I need to make some calls after the surgery. Either way I lose my license. All that effort in school… wasted."

I pulled out my phone. "Not exactly." I pulled up Ashley's number. "Write this down so that it'll be your first call. She'll think of a plan. Also, I beat him; he'd be an idiot to stay here with all of this tension. That's why mister enforcer came today; just trying to deliver one last blow before he's out of here. You've got nothing to worry about anymore. Now it's time to right some wrongs and sort it out the rest later."

Her pen scribbled furiously on a notepad. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou," she whispered.

"I'm still pissed though. You were risking so many lives for your license."

Both hands covered her eyes. "It wasn't just my license on the line."

No way… no way he'd force… it was Olivine all over again. "I am so sorry. I had no idea that you yourself were in danger. Take all the time you need before the operation and making calls."

"I'll call a team of specialists to perform the operation. They should be here soon since at least two are on call all the time. Assuming all goes well, your Gyarados will be able to battle in the semifinals."

My hand hovered over Gyarados' ball. "Well buddy, it's been a long time coming. I'll wait outside."

Surgery lasted roughly two hours as the team patched up Gyarados from the inside. Post-op instructions were pretty straightforward: keep him in the ball as long as possible. Complications could occur when battling after the rest period but Gyarados could care less; he's willing to put it all on the line. I had fallen asleep in the lobby and woke up to my phone vibrating. Carly had texted me.

*If you didn't check the news, you should. Either T.V. or internet and search Silver Conference Umbreon.* I ran over to the computer lab and punched he phrase in the search bar. Dozens of pages showed up regarding a sudden press conference. A video uploaded a few hours ago started to play on the official website and Sara was at the podium already doing her pre battle press conference instead of waiting for the day of the battle.

"Before I get to questions, I want to make one thing clear. My opponent tomorrow is Mitch and I believe that his Umbreon should be disqualified from the tournament. He claims he has official paperwork, but he still has an advantage with six moves to choose from. On top of that, it's a miracle that it hasn't been euthanized yet since the only way Pokémon are able to use more than
four moves are through experiments. As we've learned from Team Rocket, any experimented Pokémon can't be rehabilitated. All attempts in the past have failed. Mitch, if you're watching this, keep your Umbreon out of our battle if you what's good for it. I'll take questions now." I couldn't click the 'x' button fast enough. It's a miracle that I made it past 'Umbreon should be disqualified'.

*Just saw it. I'm making moves now.*

Carly responded in seconds. *You know we'll help.*

*Thanks for that. I also got someone else backing me up too.* I scrolled down to Professor Elm. *I need your help. It's about Umbreon.*

*I did see that. I'll arrive at the Indigo Plateau before your battle tomorrow night to clear things up.* I figured this would come out eventually. With that taken care of, I hurried to my room to deliver the news to the team.

"Alright guys the time has come. Tomorrow we face… Sara." Everyone's face turned serious; Espeon told them all for sure. "There has been some pressure to keep Umbreon here out of the battle and it's too early to tell if I should leave him behind." Umbreon sulked. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it buddy. As for Gyarados, he's just had surgery and the doctor said he could battle but I really don't want to take that risk unless I absolutely have to. Growlithe is suspended and there's nothing I can do about it." He too sulked. "It was 100% worth it and I'm glad you did what you did. At worst, we're looking to battle with three Pokémon down so I'm going to come up with a new strategy."

Espeon stepped forward with her head down then looked up with fire in her eyes. "Mitch… if you don't lead with me then I'm off this team. That was unexpected of her calling the shots. *You WILL NOT substitute me at all. I want to mow over as many of her Pokémon as I can before I go down. Do I make myself clear?" She's never been this aggressive or even showed signs of acting like this.

"Yes ma'am."

"*Good. Now let's eat. We're all hungry and we want to celebrate!*" During dinner, we stuffed our faces in celebration to make up for the lack of one last night. I let everyone do as they please while I slowly fell asleep.
Chapter 49- Semifinals vs Sara Part I

Despite the distractions surrounding me and my team, there was a battle scheduled for 9:00pm on center stage in front of the entire world. The storyline wasn't just about battling Sara; she had to add more complex layers. Fortunately for me, the Elite Four declined to comment on anything except the actual battle. Karen was the most intrigued about how I would fare since she was a big fan of trainers using their favorites in battle instead of pure strength. But that doesn't matter as much due to the fact that I have only six Pokémon which means I'm *forced* to use what I have; still appreciated the support despite it being neutral at best. Buzzing from my phone woke me up and made me lose my train of thought around 9:00am.

*It's Elm. I've done what I needed to do to keep Umbreon alive... for lack of a better word. The research I've done into this is very well studied and peer reviewed. I'll issue a public statement around lunchtime. Sorry if I woke you up.* That's good that he came through for me. Now I needed another favor; I ran around trying to find Wes' room and knocked on the door in the hopes that he was there.

"Who is it?"

"It's Mitch. Is Rui in there?"

He opened the door just a sliver. "She's in the shower but you can come in. Don't worry about her changing; she usually does it in the bathroom anyway. The Orre region makes you appreciate the steam from a hot shower at night or a cooler feeling during the day."

"A desert huh? Wonder how many Pokémon are there."

"Not many." He looked down at the floor. "The fact that I have this many Pokémon is a miracle. I'm not proud of what I did to get them either but then I met you. You taught me that I shouldn't be ashamed about how I make their lives better."

"Well there are some things I'm still not proud of either but thanks." Rui came out of the bathroom looking refreshed and I wasted no time getting straight to the point. "Can you please massage my Pokémon again? I have a big battle tonight and want them to be less stressed. I'd do it myself... except I don't know what I'm doing," I said sheepishly.

She was happy as ever. "Sure! Who's up first?"

I thought about it and realized that Gyarados shouldn't get one right away, Growlithe won't be battling, and the odds of me using Umbreon are 50/50 at best, Ampharo... yeah, I should do Umbreon first. He's been the most traumatized after Sara called for him to be euthanized.

"Umbreon's up first."

Umbreon materialized stretching his back. "Watch me Mitch. Umbreon and Espeon's spots are very similar and they feel great afterwards." Rui had him sit down so he looked like a loaf of bread before gently applying pressure in the middle of his back. She then worked her way to the tail, then by the hind legs, followed by the front legs, and finished with a little more pressure on the neck.
"Doesn't that hurt him Rui?"

Umbreon melted into the floor as he was purring. "Hehe, nope! They have scruff that their mothers grab when they are young Eevees so that she can move them. It looks like she'll be biting the kits, but it actually calms them down." Umbreon lay motionless while holding a big smile as Rui massaged his neck until she stopped; he stood back up looking relieved.

"Cool! I'll do Espeon then." She too yawned as I told her to sit like a loaf of bread. Everything was the same as I moved about with Rui telling me to move my hands back or forward whenever I was getting away from a sweet spot. When I got to the neck, I asked Rui to guide my hands before I started so that I didn't have to guess; she set me up in the right spot.

After a few deep rubs, her eyes snapped open and she swiped at my right forearm, leaving three deep claw marks before using her psychic powers to twist the same arm behind my back. Umbreon stood conflicted on if to attack or wait it out while Wes went to grab a ball.

"Don't do it!" I screamed with all the pain I was feeling. Her eyes remained blue as she looked emotionless, if not angry while in a battle stance. I felt a vision being transferred to me.

"You stupid ball of fur!" It was dark but I could make out: dirt, a white line, water in the background, and a menacing pair of eyes. "Why did you decide to evolve now of all times?" Oh no… oh nonono, it was what Linda told me about only this time it was in much greater detail. Espeon replayed the entire situation until she was recalled. The experience felt like hours but in reality, the vision whizzed through my head in a matter of seconds. I tried to keep the wailing to a minimum as to not rile her up anymore until she calmed down; she looked like she had no recollection of her attack on me. A few more centimeters and the ligaments and tendons in my elbow would've been ripped to shreds or a few centimeters deeper with the scratch and she would've cut a vein.

Wes sprinted down to the front desk to grab a first aid kit and Rui did her best to keep me out of shock. Espeon looked around in confusion until she saw the blood running down my arm to the carpet. She looked at me ready to cry as I slowly moved my damaged arm with Rui's help. Inch by inch she made her way to me and even thought about jumping back until I looked at her.

"Come here baby," I tried to coo. Cautiously, she made her way over and started to lick my wound tenderly; I pet her with my good arm. "Compared to what you went through, this is just a scratch."

"W-w-what have I done!? I'm sorry! Let me clean you up! Please don't get rid of me! Please don't-"

"Shhh. Don't say anything," I whispered in her ear. Wes returned with a large roll of bandages plus a nurse as both of them went to work on cleaning my arm. I winced in pain as they used a wet towel to clean up the excess blood and hold a dry one with pressure to slow the bleeding. Once the wounds started to clot, I told the nurse to leave despite her protests to cover it up. Rui convinced me to put on some antibacterial cream as an alternative. Unfortunately, nobody else would be getting a massage.

"Mitch, you should really cover that. Doesn't it hurt?" Wes asked with more concern than what I expected. "What about Espeon? Don't you have a battle later tonight?"

Espeon had cried herself to sleep during the whole ordeal. "Her wounds run much deeper than these. They'll never be completely healed, but the battle tonight will be a huge hurdle to clear. I'll be fine after some aspirin."
"What happened?"

Her entire past is best kept secret. "She wasn't treated like a princess," I smirked remembering what Wes told me earlier in the tournament. "That changed once I found her."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Listen to her. She wanted to be the first one sent out and she doesn't want to be substituted." Wes took a step back. "She's cried so many times since I've had her but one thing is always the same: I never gave her shit for it and she came out stronger each time. Other people probably would've given up or gotten tired of it. I guarantee she'll cry after the battle is over too and I'll be there to remind her how much she is loved. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go prepare. Your VIP tickets are at the front desk." I left for my room carrying Espeon. "Sorry about the blood. Return Umbreon."

She stirred in her sleep but never woke up as I called room service to see if they had a laptop; they left it outside my door. I went to the official tournament page to scout Sara's team to see the rest of her team was threatening.

**Name: Sara**

**Age: 21**

**Hometown: Cianwood City (Johto)**

**Badges won: 8**

**Registered Pokémon: Piloswine, Pidgeot, Vaporeon, Heracross, Weezing, Magneton, Tentacruel, Espeon, Jolteon.**

How did she manage to get an Espeon of her own!? The act she kept up must've been worthy of a movie contract. Heracross is a threat to half my team while Jolteon is just fast as hell. Knowing how Sara is, she'll probably bring Piloswine to intimidate Espeon just like the gala and she'll probably attack the scar on her stomach. Vaporeon is the one evolution that she wanted in the first place so no surprise there. Everyone else is kinda meh to be honest; nothing I can't handle. Espeon stirred even more and ended up waking up by yawning.

"What happened?" She went to lick my arm again but I could predict the pain and slowly pulled it back.

"I had no idea that grabbing your neck like that would upset you like that. I remember doing that in Cianwood against Chuck but maybe it worked because I grabbed you slowly and also had my other arm around your stomach for support."

"Sorry…"

"Don't worry about it. Twice you told me to relax and sleep easy in the past few days here. Now it's your turn to do the same."

She looked confused while her head tilted. "But I didn't say anything like that. At all."

"Could've sworn you talked to me after I puked my brains out and when I had a mental breakdown early on in the tournament."

"I was sound asleep. Anyway, what are you going to do? The battle's in a few hours."
"Simply listen to you. I'll go with you until you drop; it's what you wanted."

"Thank you so much," she sighed. "I've been wanting this despite how I've been acting."

"It's alright. Nerves make people do things that they wouldn't normally do."

"That explains why you can't just ask that girl out; her Ampharos said that she was kind of lonely. Olivine has a beautiful beach and the ocean which is perfect for watching sunsets together. It'd be good if you got that suit and tie from the gala and talked to her after this is over," Espeon teased.

"Is that so?" Espeon kept a devilish smile. "You're ruthless, Espeon," I teased back. "Get some rest. I'm going downstairs to get my pre-battle stuff ready."

I left the room with my game plan in my head. The receptionist recoiled at my wound but I managed to tell her that I wanted a press conference and no introduction music. I entrusted her with my three remaining VIP tickets after I texted Professor Elm, Carly and Davis; if they want them, then they can come get them.

A replay of the professor's press conference played on the giant lobby television as news outlets tried to decipher his data on why Umbreon should be allowed to live. His terminology definitely confused me so it'd be best to avoid his research as a defense in the press conference. Sara already had her presser which meant she couldn't respond to anything I said until after the battle or on the field at the earliest. By the time I got back to the room, Espeon had drawn up the comforter and was sleeping peacefully on her side. I slowly laid down next to her and set an alarm to wake up for dinner.

You'd think all the pressure we're facing would break us; you'd be wrong.

My pre battle routine hadn't changed at all since I woke up, showered, made everyone eat up, healed, and headed over to the press conference. The moon was full tonight which would be perfect for Umbreon if I were to call him out. Ashely was already outside the door this time waiting for me.

"You ready?"

"Yup. No threats this time, just some trash talking," Ashley sighed. "What I say is the truth otherwise I wouldn't say it." A stare with her arms folded. "Okay okay, most of what I say is true. The rest is me showing my confidence. I just want to make a statement."

"Riiight. Look, just keep it simple this time?"

"I'll do my best," I shrugged while hiding the wound Espeon accidently gave me underneath my jacket.

A packed room awaited me as Ashley took the podium to deliver her cadence about the protocols. Once she opened it up, it was fair game. A familiar face was picked first.

"Brandi Carlson, WJTV. Mitch, is it true that you battled Sara at the trainer's gala last week?"

Dammit; I didn't want this. "It is true but I had my reasons which I'd rather not go into. In case she didn't tell you, we have a score to settle."

"Did you call her a harpy?" Brandi followed up; Sara must've told the media that.

Most people would've been sweating but my image is already established and being the better
"You aren't going to get me anywhere. "I did it because that was the nicest thing I could've called her. Rumor has it that you could call someone something with every letter in the alphabet and 'H' is for harpy. Just like 'A' is for asshole, 'B' is for bitch, 'C' is for cu…"

"Oooookay next question," Ashley intervened. I'd gladly pay the fine for finishing what 'C' is for. "You in the checkered shirt."

"Kelly Reynolds, Kanto National Radio. With Growlithe suspended for the battle, what will you do if she uses Magneton or Piloswine?"

"Well I trust my team to adapt. All of my Pokémon know what they can and cannot do."

"What about Umbreon?"

Murmuring echoed throughout the room. Sara had been very adamant that I keep him away. "Professor Elm came here earlier today and explained all he needed to. Ashley here has given me documents to show that Umbreon is able to legally compete. Sara can complain all she wants, but Umbreon is on call. One more question."

"Harold Jackson, Silver Conference Online. Sara mentioned you would 6-0 her and she said, and I quote, 'I'll give him a chance to change his prediction'. Your response?"

"I will 6-0 her. It'll be the first sweep in the history of the Silver Conference, Indigo Plateau, and every other major tournament in the world." I had done some research and there have been a few 5-0 wins, but never an absolute victory. "It will be the greatest ass-kicking the world has ever seen and it will be delivered from a 21-year-old to another. Get your popcorn ready."

Leaving the podium never felt so good as I made my way to the tunnel to wait patiently. From my little hiding spot, I could see all my VIP guests sitting comfortably in the lower area by midfield. Wes and Rui looked a little tense while Carly and Davis were all smiles. Professor Elm was near the last row; probably not wanting to be a distraction to the rest of the spectators. There was added field level seating where corporate sponsors or their representatives sat. As the announcer droned on with the advertisements, I saw the ranch gang of Nick, Laura, and Marybeth. Their Growlithe was there as well albeit looking timid compared to last time I saw it.

"Aaaaaand now LLLLLadies and gentlemennn. She has come all the way from Cianwood City to here in the semifinals. Give it up for Saraaaaaa!" Cheers erupted from the crowd as she walked out wearing a sharp athletic jacket and new hiking pants. Her entrance music sounded like a general walking into battle with the snare drums being the main focus followed by trumpets. The showmanship was at an all-time high. I called out Espeon for a last-minute talk.

"Okay Espeon, we're almost up. Remember: revenge without using your head will only get you hurt. You've been waiting for this for months. Now's the time to show your strength."

"No more nerves for me Mitch. I'd like to walk out with you, but I'd rather you catch her off-guard." Espeon was called back as I waited for my cue.

"On the other side, a man who's made it this far with only six Pokémon. Please welcome Miiiiiiitch!" A mix of cheers and boos rained down from the 50,000 or so people as I walked out with no music at all. Before I stepped in my box, I ran over to Marybeth.

"Hey! How's it going?"

"Good! We've been wantin' to see ya battle!"
"Can you do me a favor and watch my Growlithe for me?"

"Don't you need Growlithe for the battle?" Nick smiled knowing he was suspended. "Grandpa said I shouldn't talk to anyone here."

Nick jumped in. "It's okay Marybeth; you know Mitch. Go on, take it" he encouraged her with a smile. Growlithe was let out and he looked around.

"Listen buddy," I sternly said. "You're suspended but that doesn't mean you can't watch from outside your ball. Enjoy the battle with the little girl okay?" He remembered the family and obediently sat at Marybeth's feet. "Good boy!" I ruffled his fur before taking my place in the box.

Sara immediately scanned for my belt. "So you brought it didn't you?"

I nodded. "I did. But it doesn't matter since I won't have to use him."

She smiled with her arms folded. "Cute." She continued to try to get into my head. "You should take off your jacket. The warm night air is making you sweat like crazy," she said sarcastically.

"If you insist." I tossed it behind me to reveal my slightly bloodied short sleeve shirt as well as the claw marks.

Sara was monotonous and unfazed. "What the hell happened to you?"

My fingers traced my scars. "Nothing you would understand." I relished the fact I looked and sounded like a blue-collar trainer while she was like some kind of pompous starlet. The referee's cadence was short and the crowd was getting into it.

"Go Heracross!"

"I'm going to let the Pokémon you abandoned beat you into submission," I could hear through the ball. "Espeon, I choose you!" I was in the zone for sure. Not even Arceus could stop me from battling.

Sara just stared at me. "Well well well. Looks like the runt's still alive after our little fight at the gala. I'm going to enjoy going all out this time around. There's no crowd of people to worry about and nobody to back you up either."

Our referee gave us the rules before throwing up the flags.

"Use Psychic!" Heracross had no clue what happened as it started to levitate before being slammed to the ground repeatedly for massive damage.

"Megahorn!" It charged dead ahead at me full speed.

"Psybeam!" The problem for Heracross was that my Psybeam's power was amplified by the speed it was coming at me; the fact that it staggered to its feet surprised me. A second Megahorn was easily dodged by me. "Use Quick Attack to finish it off Espeon!" It stood no chance as I was merely a blur in its eyes. The impact sent it to the ground and just like that I took round one.

The referee raised the flag. "Heracross is unable to battle. Espeon is the winner!" One down, five to go.

"Heracross return!" She was pissed to say the least. "Pidgeot get out here!" Seeing Pidgeot brought back some memories when I first joined the team. However, her entire team was indifferent about
my presence so I didn't care about beating it in battle. "Wing Attack!"

"You know what to do Espeon!" Hold it with Psychic!" It was a little harder to do because it was much faster but I still held in place before slamming it to the ground. "Remember your training from when I was out cold! Try that!" My powers were no match for it as I flung it up in the air then nailed it with a Psybeam for even more damage.

"Dammit Pidgeot, pull yourself together!" Agility into Quick Attack!" Pidgeot was moving too fast for me to grab hold of it and I took a decent hit. "Again!"

"Mitch, I got this," I sent to him. Sara hadn't changed too much from when she had me. Her stubbornness and failure to adapt almost got me killed. It was no different as I fired a Psybeam straight ahead to hit it head on. Swift was the move that brought the judge over once the stars disappeared.

"Pidgeot is unable to battle. Espeon wins!" Some ooohs and ahhhs were scattered throughout the crowd as two of her Pokémon were down. Sara looked just as nervous as when she fought Clair but that look turned to an evil grin. Two down, four to go.

Her hand hovered over one ball but shifted to another. "Piloswine!" This. This is the one hurdle that stood in my way. Here it is standing right in front of me. "Fury Attack!" Piloswine had every intention to aim for the scar so I fired off a Psybeam to send it backwards.

Mitch immediately took notice at the tactic. "She's not scared anymore. You'd better have something else up your sleeve because she won't that area get touched, especially by you or your Pokémon."

"Take Down!" Again, she was trying to break me but I was having none of it. This time I opted to use Psychic to slam it against a panel of the side wall. "Blizzard!"

"It's no use" Mitch said while shaking his head. "Jump and use Swift!" My sharp stars nailed Piloswine but it still was moving around. "Quick Attack!" I sprinted in to hit it as it just missed my wound with one last-ditch effort; Mitch was internally kicking himself for allowing that to happen.

"Mist!" A weak attempt to stall for time and to get Piloswine on its feet again.

"Psybeam!" Before the field was shrouded, I knocked out the Pokémon that nearly killed me the second time around. Oh how sweet it was.

"Piloswine is unable to battle! Espeon is the winner!" Three down, three to go.

"Mitch, she has to be messing with us. Her battling is only focused on trying to severely injure me instead of winning. Keep an eye out for me; that was too close last round."

"This is what I wanted you to avoid doing Espeon. Right now she's down 6-3 because of revenge. Keep a cool head and we'll be fine," he communicated back through his mind. A thumbs up reassured me.

Our referee stepped onto the field. "With three Pokémon unable to battle, we will have the opportunity for a halftime period." He turned to Sara. "Would you like a break?"

"No." Her response was so fast that the referee barely finished the sentence.

He then turned to Mitch. "Would you like a break?"
He thought about it much harder than Sara. "No." The maneuver had me nervous but Mitch gave me a nod of confidence to reassure me again.

Whatever she brings out, I'll be ready for it.
A quick look at the scoreboard gave everyone in the stadium a layout of what was going on in the battle. On one side, it was my face with a lit-up background along with five other black circles. On the other side, the faces of Heracross, Pidgeot, and Piloswine were all there with a lack of color. For the visually impaired, a traditional score was displayed along with a timer for a break. Now that timer didn't batter because Sara of all people declined to take the break. Mitch skipping the break threw me for a loop since he'd have to adapt on the fly instead of going over a detailed strategy. Up 6-3, he kept his guard up while Sara didn't look as phased as I thought.

"You blew it Mitch," she smirked. "You took the bait since you wanted to keep up the momentum. I saw how you talked to your Pokémon at the break in your last battle and now… now I'm not going to give you that opportunity. My Pokémon are well-seasoned so I don't need a break." She threw up two fingers. "Either lose momentum by planning or pray to Arceus that you'll be able to adapt as the battle goes on. How does it feel to be between a rock and a hard place?"

Mitch didn't seem surprised at her explanation. "It's not like getting momentum was hard. Your dumb ass tried to hurt Espeon instead of just battling. Weaker moves over stronger ones, failure to notice obvious situations where you were at a disadvantage, aiming for one spot all the time, and just piss-poor technique overall. By the way, if your Pokémon were well seasoned, then you would've beaten Espeon by now," he shot back with his arms crossed. "Actually I take that back. Your Pokémon are probably well seasoned. You… not so much; should've taken the halftime break." Now she was starting to crack just a little bit.

"I hope you still don't plan to 6-0 me, especially when I saved my best three Pokémon for last."

"Talk is cheap. Show me that you deserve to be here; I felt awful that I eliminated some of my friends just to get to this point."

"You're one to talk; didn't you get to the bracket round by the skin on your teeth?" She reached for the ball that she thought about sending out before changing it to Piloswine. "Vaporeon!" The bubble jet Pokémon emerged arching its back confidently. By this point in the battle, I was still going strong. One Quick Attack from Pidgeot wasn't enough to tire me out or throw me off of my game anytime soon. After remembering that I was supposed to become one, I actually snarled at it.

"Pryce said you tried to get one before Clair and Espeon here is snarling. Snarling of all things! She's never done that in my care," Mitch noted. "Knowing you and what I've heard, this was what Ruby was supposed to be but I guess she had other plans." Sara's screaming echoed through my mind.

"I was going to evolve you with that damn water stone and teach you ice beam if I lost! this battle was supposed to be a test for me, not you… not you… not you…!" It reverberated so much that I had to physically shake my head to get her out. Not exactly a mirror match, but it's me versus the thing I almost became. And this thing opposite me is smiling without a care in the world; fuck you Vaporeon.

"Espeon versus Vaporeon. Begin!"
"Start things off with an Aurora Beam, Vaporeon!"

"Counter with Psybeam!" Our attacks collided in midair causing smoke to cover a small portion of the battlefield; I knew Mitch was going for that. "Quick Attack!" Not too many Pokémon are faster than me so I should get in a big hit; Sara was too confident.

"Acid Armor!" Vaporeon's body turned clear for a split second as I hit it only to find out it wasn't as squishy as I thought. "Use your own Quick Attack!" I took a small hit since it couldn't get momentum; a mistake for sure.

Mitch knew it too. "Psybeam!" A close range Psybeam had it seeing stars and the side wall... multiple times.

"Snap out of confusion and use Hydro Pump!" Somehow it fired off the attack only to miss so bad that I didn't even have to move. "Again! Take your time!" Vaporeon snapped out of it to send the blast of water my way."

"Psychic!" Compared to Kingdra, this Hydro Pump was nothing. I easily dispersed the water aside and followed it up with a ball of energy to hit the water type. Sara was getting frustrated again.

"Oh, so you couldn't do that the first time for me Espeon?" My confidence was whittling more with each memory; my body started to slouch and my ears started to droop.

"Don't listen Ruby," Mitch mentally relayed to me. "Remember, she's not in control of the battle so she's trying to break you down. Tell you what... I'm going to keep calling you Ruby for the rest of the battle okay?"

I turned back to him. "Why?"

His mouth stayed shut but his internal voice grew louder. "Because who else calls you that? Umbreon. Shade. Your mate." I fixed my posture. "Sara only knows you as 'Espeon' but I know you as 'Espeon' and 'Ruby'. I'm still going to keep calling you Ruby for the rest of the battle okay?"

"A lot. So help me Arceus if you switch me out."

This aggression was what I've had deep down my entire life. From the runt of the litter to my family abandoning me to almost being killed in a forsaken forest, I couldn't afford to get angry. Running, hiding, and relying on others were the only things I could do just to live another day. Even with Mitch, I couldn't use my full power because I was so damn weak. I learned one of the most powerful moves in existence and now I finally have the chance to let it all out.

"Use Psybeam!"

"Quick Attack to dodge Vaporeon!" It easily jumped out of the way. "Acid Armor into Quick Attack!" The blue on its body turned so clear that it was practically invisible. A hit came from the side soon after which sent me to the ground for only a second. "Aurora Beam!" I still couldn't find it as the rainbow-colored beam hit me head on. "Hydro Pump!" I was getting aggrivated that I couldn't find it so I waited until after the water started to flow.

"Do it Ruby." Psychic held the Vaporeon in the air while its attack missed me. Veins on my neck felt like they were going to pop at any minute while I threw it against the side wall creating an indent.

"Hydro Pump again!" It found the strength to fire an accurate one despite being in an awkward position.
"Psybeam!" My attack pushed back the flowing water since I had more force behind my attack and smoke covered the area. By the time the dust settled, Vaporeon was a solid four rows underneath the stands; you could see the girders supporting the stands while the sponsors' area spectators at field level looked into the mess. A flag went up immediately.

Our referee had to move some rubble in order to find my opponent. "Vaporeon is unable to battle. Espeon is the winner!" The rush is amazing. All I feel is that I just shattered a mirror of what I could've been a few months ago; a water type under her care that may not have seen the light of day after Clair. Four down, two to go. Mitch was looking a little nervous after I spent much more energy this round to beat the Pokémon passed out hung up on a girder.

"I'm fine. Really."

He nodded in support then turned to Sara. "You ever play pinball before?"

"Yeah, what's that got to do with anything?"

Mitch pointed to the scoreboard. "Then you should know what going full tilt is, considering you're doing it now; trying so hard to just do one thing, but failing to actually play the game normally. Someone trying to play that way shouldn't get rewarded." She finally recalled the unconscious water type. "I just can't believe that you'd actually try to hurt my Pokémon." The referee tuned in a little bit more to the conversation sensing that the exchange wasn't just simple trash talking.

Sara still wasn't going to back down. "Not really. Since you refuse to switch out Espeon, I'm banking my victory on my last two Pokémon. They've been training with me to hit hard and dodge attacks late in a match ever since I got here." What utter bullshit.

"Please call out your next Pokémon miss otherwise you will forfeit," the referee scolded.

"Hmph. Fine." She looked at me. "Alright you worthless Pokémon, you'll enjoy this. I promise," she slowly let out while flashing an evil grin. "I choose Espeon!" This time it was a true mirror match. Espeon versus Espeon with a lot of psychic energy in the air. "You wanna talk about getting inside your head? See how you do against my Espeon."

Something was wrong. Maybe not wrong, but off. I sniffed a little harder to make sure I wasn't wrong; it was true. You could cut the tension with the singer of a newborn Weedle. "Mitch, I..."

"He can't hear you. I broke your link," the voice in my head interrupted. "It's been a long time... daughter."

"Mother!" So it was true. "How did you do that!?" I tried to keep my voice steady as I was getting nervous.

"Your link with your trainer isn't strong enough to keep me from breaking it."

"That's a lie!" No! I refuse to accept that response. "You've been an Espeon longer than I have so your powers are stronger than mine!"

She looked angry that I figured it out right away. "Fine, you caught me. But don't think I'll let you reconnect so easily."

"We'll see. My bond with Mitch is stronger... stronger than the one you had with me when I was a kit!" My mother recoiled at that only to take a firm stance a second later.

"Sara told me that you might try to pull something like this." Her eyes flashed blue. "Now it's only
"you and me talking."

"Did you...?"

"Yes. Sara can't communicate with me either. I shut her out. Don't worry though, she doesn't know our relationship. I've hid a lot from her."

I tried to find the resolve to keep going as the situation sunk in; I'm torn between listening to what my mother might have to say and battling. "Well as far as I'm concerned, you weren't much of a battler; I think I can hold my own against you without any orders." The referee raised the flags to signal the start of the round.

Her demeanor changed instantly. "Just walk in a circle like we're trying to feel each other out, otherwise we'll both be eliminated." I didn't buy it and picked her up with Psychic before tossing her aside. "Please... I don't want to fight you. You're my daughter! I love you very much."

I picked her up again and pinned her to the ground; I stood over her. "Sure, you loved me so much to the point of leaving me to fend for myself! What kind of fucked up version of love is that!?!" Mitch's voice tried to get to me but I was still blocked out mentally and unable to hear his actual voice in my rage.

"It wasn't my idea. Your father sensed more humans were coming by our home each day and he tried to get everyone to a safer place."

"Oh really? Care to explain why I was left behind?" I unsheathed my claws.

My mother started to tear up. "That wasn't my decision." I relaxed my psychic grip. "Look at my other side." I slowly walked over to see a scar the size of a Poké Ball. "Your father thought it would be best to leave you behind... so I fought him the night before to take you with us."

Rage continued to build up. "Even though you lost, you still couldn't bring me along? Your powers should've allowed you to carry me along with all of my siblings."

She turned away in disgust then looked me dead in the eyes. "Listen to me! No matter what I did, your father got his way. The battle over you took so much out of me that he had to carry everyone on his back when we ran away. I could barely keep up. Your father was always a good tactician." My stance went from aggressive to passive instantly which allowed her to sit up. "Not a day goes by where I regret that decision. Not a day goes by where I wished I just disobeyed him. Every time I closed my eyes, I had nightmares about the night we ran away. Once I knew you were here, I could finally be at peace."

"So you figured out where I was huh?"

A nod. "Your trainer was someone that I haven't felt before; such a caring man. When I sensed he was stressed out or nervous, I offered him words of encouragement before he went to sleep." She looked past me. "His mind is unique during dreams in the sense that almost everything was positive. On the other hand, his nightmares were horrible. He's dreamed about losing every single one of you in the worst ways imaginable. Your master fears losing you and Umbreon the most because he feels one big mistake with either of you will be the last mistake." I tried to reconnect the link after she was done talking only for her to push me backwards despite my feet digging into the dirt. "What did I tell you before?"

"Well, it was worth a try. Besides, the entire team already knows he cares about us so much."

"That may be true, but your powers are still not fully controlled. Sometimes you replay events of
the past without even knowing it which causes some of his nightmares. I was the one who told him to regain his strength after he vomited to the point of dehydration last night while you didn't help him at all. Hell, you carved his arm up pretty good just before this battle. You might've made your last mistake even though he's the one worried about messing up."

"Mitch made it very clear that he loves me no matter what... so do me a favor. I want you to stop talking and start battling. " Psybeam was my move choice to add some more space in between us while getting more damage in. This time I took the opportunity to try and reconnect with Mitch; both of our eyes glowed. It felt like we were butting heads in his mind until I overpowered my mother. "I knew weakening you would let me regain control."

"Impressive, but that won't last long. " I felt her trying to force me out so I went at her again.

"Ruby I'm here," Mitch got in. "Ruby I'm here. Ruby I'm here..." he repeated over and over as my mother was losing the battle. A simple short phrase kept him in the conversation; the unexpected cutoff earlier in the battle probably kept him unable to break through. This time he had no intention of staying out.

"I guess this is it," my mother sighed; she sat down on all fours. "Sara ordered me to try and break you down so you wouldn't be able to battle. Guess she didn't account for how strong you really are emotionally." She looked at Mitch while Sara was screaming for her to do something. "And as for you young man... I'm sorry for locking you out. Regardless of what I was ordered to do, I was never going to harm her. I used it as a test to see if my initial thoughts about you being loyal to her were true. Hurting my own daughter would be too much for me to handle. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking care of her all this time."

Mitch smiled. "An old tradition goes as follows: if you want to spend a lot of time with a girl, you'll eventually have to meet her parents or guardians for their approval."

She smiled back. "Is that so? Well then, I approve you as a worthy trainer. Take care of my daughter for me."

"Would you consider coming with me after this?"

My mother's head perked up then looked down. "Unfortunately it might not be that easy. One, I am owned by someone else with no intention of giving me up. Two, I'm not sure if I can do that after what I did on that night."

"Sure it'll be complicated, but things may work out in the long run if all the pieces fall into place. In the meantime, I promise to take care of her."

A final stretch was performed. "Soon the referee will give you the round because I won't move. I'll give you a parting gift: your father is Sara's last Pokémon. Let me tell you he's not what he used to be when you were growing up. Ever since we were caught, he's become emotionless on the battlefield. Do not try and talk to him like you did with me otherwise you'll lose in a heartbeat. If you're worn down, retreat. Your father will do anything to win and to him, you're just another obstacle in the road."

"Espeon is refusing to battle. The winner is Mitch's Espeon!" the referee said while pointing to me.

Sara was furious. "Are you kidding me!? Another Espeon screwing me over!? Get back in the damn ball you worthless piece of shit." One last sentence was uttered before the red beam took my mother back to the ball.
I love you… my precious daughter." Five down, one to go.

By this point in time, I was a mess on the inside. I had finally gotten a chance to get back at Sara by fighting one of the fastest Pokémon on her team in Pidgeot, fight the one that severely injured me in Piloswine, fight the one that could easily slaughter me with a Megahorn in Heracross, fight the one I was supposed to become in Vaporeon, fight my mother, and now I'll have to fight my father.

"Mitch I'm nervous now. I haven't seen my father battle at all. He says he used to battle a lot back before he was let go but that's not why I'm nervous."

"Okay Ruby just take a deep breath for a second then tell me what's wrong. We have some time." He hadn't called me Ruby in a while but it felt so refreshing to hear.

"I never told her I'm sorry for saying you raised me better than she did. That was a little harsh and I may never see her again."

"It's okay Ruby. I know she still loves you; a mother's love is stronger than words like that. Do you want to be switched out?"

"No." A much calmer response from me knowing I had to stay focused. "Just curious, what were you doing when you were locked out?"

"Fighting to get back to you of course. But even then I knew you could battle on your own. Hey, what do you think about going on your own? Maybe you know something about your father that I don't."

Jolteon by nature are very fast yet I felt confident to go with my gut over commands. Knowing my final opponent made it that much easier to prepare. "Let me battle on my own for a bit but call out something if you have an idea." Mitch gave me a thumbs up for support.

"Okay little Espeon," Sara hissed. "Now you're going to get it. This Pokémon is a machine on the field and it was the hardest thing to catch. You can forget about the 6-0 victory. Get out here Jolteon!" There he was: my father. Perfectly toned legs, a clean coat filled to the brim with electricity, and a killer's look in his eyes. I hadn't tried to talk to any of her other Pokémon and I'll take my mother's advice by not talking to him at all.

"Jolteon versus Espeon. Begin!"

"Use Pin Missile!"

"Ruby, use Swift!" Sharp pins few in my direction as my stars from Swift cancelled out the attack.

"Again Jolteon!" I countered with another Swift only to realize that the number of pins outnumbered the number of stars; I took a decent hit from the super-effective attack. "Sand-Attack!" Dust came flying in my direction which forced me to turn away.

"Not a good trick," I mumbled to myself. It tried to come at me low with a Double Kick; trying to take out my knees? Classy. Psybeam was the perfect response as it hit him square in the face.

"Pin Missile!" Too many pins few out for me to counter so I braced for impact. "Follow up with Thunder!" Bolts of electricity rained down from the sky as it aimed upward.

"Psychic to redirect it!" One bolt struck me before I redirected the attack only for him to easily dodge. I followed up with Quick Attack to get in close. "Fire a Swift!" From such a close range, all of my stars nailed Jolteon.
Sara's face was red as could be. "Pin Missile! We're going to abuse the hell out of this!" My counter was Psybeam since there were much less pins flying at me. Mitch looked like he took my mother's advice too seriously and started to reach for my ball; a stern look made him think twice.

"Oh man, you're going to love this." I let loose a Psychic and threw my father up in the air before slamming him into the ground. Then again. Then a third time.

"Pin Missile to break its control!" Grip from the psychic field weakened in a matter of seconds due to the bug type move being fired in random directions. "Sand-Attack! Make it blind!" Our field was getting torn to shreds as clumps of sand flew went straight for my eyes. The best defense was to close my eyes and turn away. The relentless onslaught of sand turned to kicks as Double Kick nailed me in the side.

"Get out of there with Quick Attack Ruby!" At the risk of running into the side wall, I bolted away from the beating.

"Thunder!" Father opted to fire the attack straight at me this time to which I deflected it to the side with Psychic; I was running out of gas. "Double Kick! Go for the scar!"

"I won't let you touch me!" Adrenaline made me grab Jolteon with ease and toss him into a solid piece of the side wall. "Try that again and I'll send you deeper underneath the stands." I dragged him out just to show him where I sent Vaporeon a few minutes ago. "A new hole right next to this one would be a nice touch don't you think?" I released him from my grip when he started to squirm.

"Jolteon, use Thunder! Let it all out!" Electricity started to crackle from its fur.

Mitch saw a chance. "Psybeam!" Knocking my father out wouldn't be possible with how weak the move hit him. Luckily, confusion overtook him and the attack started firing all over the place; an all-out attack meant that I was going to get hit. I braced for impact but it hit me harder than expected.

"Ruby!" Both my front legs buckled so I took a knee on one of them while I did my best to reset the other. "Come back! You're at your limit."

"No! I got him where I want him!" Jolteon stumbled in front of Sara and slightly to her right. Patiently I wanted for him to be on only one foot. "Now!" A second adrenaline rush gave me the energy to bolt across the field with Quick Attack and slam into him so hard that he just whizzed past Sara into the back wall; he ended up indented about a foot deep into the wall.

Six down, zero to go. Game. Set. Match

"Jolteon is unable to battle. Espeon is the winner! The match goes to Mitch from Violet City!"

An enormous roar erupted from the crowd. Cheering, whistling, clapping, and any possible noise made by 50,000 people stunned me. All these people were impressed with what I just did; they were cheering for me of all Pokémon. I can't believe I took down all six of Sara's Pokémon by myself. By myself! Even the public address announcer was into it.

"Six up, six down! A clean sweep by Mitch's Espeon is the first 6-0 sweep in major tournament history! Indigo League immortality! Silver Conference immortality! Pokémon immortality!"

Sara looked utterly stunned as the last circle on the scoreboard with my father's picture dimmed and the animation for victory played on loop. I just sat there and soaked it in with a smile so big that my cheeks started to hurt. Soon I turned to Mitch and he looked at me with a smile and tired eyes; I
could see a tear or two running down his cheek. Seeing him made me sprint over and jump into his arms and lay my neck on his shoulder. I went into a full-blown cry.

"Oh my Arceus I did it Mitch. I finally did it." He held me in front of him.

"Oh Ruby… I'm so proud of you" was all he could get out before he started to sob too. I tried to wipe his tears but my legs were too sore to move.

"I did it. I can't believe I actually did it."

"Wanna know the best part?" he whispered as he put my neck on his shoulder and supported my hind legs. "You did it in front of the entire world."

Now I really was crying. "I'm glad I did it in front of you the most!" Adrenaline left my body so fast that I passed out as he held me in his arms.

"Rest up… my scrappy little fighter."
Chapter 51- Revelations

Beating Sara was what I wanted to do this entire tournament if the rest of the field couldn't. It was a bonus that I straight up humiliated her in front of the entire world. It was a bonus that I 6-0ed her. The biggest bonus was that Ruby delivered the ass kicking in spite of all that's happened to her. Even if I had to call her back or if she was knocked unconscious late in the fight, Ruby couldn't be upset at what she did; I wouldn't allow her to be upset. Through all the mind games and trash talk leading up to this point, Ruby rose above it all to deliver a record setting performance. Now she's cradled in my arms passed out with a smile on her face.

Sara on the other hand, was still shocked as she looked at Jolteon was pinned into the wall still unconscious. Her face was red as the realization of her defeat set in. Everything I assumed was right; she was so hell bent on injuring Ruby that she failed to actually battle. The best part was that I didn't have to call as many commands as her near the end since Ruby wanted to test herself. Sara reluctantly recalled Jolteon and walked off glaring at me; I did the same still holding Ruby. Another graphic flashed on the scoreboard indicating the finals matchup as I made my way into the tunnel: Allison vs Mitch, Field 1 7:00pm. Ashley waited for me to get to the double doors of the press conference room.

"Congrats on your victory Mitch! And a 6-0 to boot!"

I gently stroked Ruby's back. "Not my victory… her victory. I was lucky enough to be along for the ride."

"Geez, don't you ever feel happy when you win?"

"To be honest, I used to take my wins without seeing the flaws. Falkner, Bugsy, and Whitney were cakewalks; Morty pushed me a little bit but I still was way too happy, Chuck was a no-doubt-abouter for sure. Pryce humbled me for the better though."

Ashley thought about it. "Well Pryce is the oldest of the gym leaders so I could see him offering that type of advice. Did you know that he was a semifinalist here a long time ago?"

"Wouldn't surprise me one bit. Now I've got a question for you: can I keep my Espeon outside the ball for the presser?"

"Why? Just curious."

Again, I stroked her back gently. "She's so comfortable right now. Believe me when I say that an explosion wouldn't be able to wake her up." Ashley was still on the fence. "How could you say no to this face?" I turned around to show the smile on my partner's face in her unconscious state.

"Okay fine. Not like it's that big of a deal. Let's get in there." Flashbulbs practically blinded me as I carefully took a seat where about eight microphones were located all in a bundle; Ruby didn't even stir in her sleep. Ashley did her same old cadence before opening it up to questions; a pudgy man in the middle was the first to go.

"Good battle and all, but what in Arceus' name happened to your arm!? Did you get attacked during
the battle?"

Ah yes, the painful reminder never to grab at her neck. "Nothing happened during the battle and it was an accident. You every try touching a Pokémon in a place you shouldn't? At least it wasn't a Slugma," I chuckled. The whole room laughed with me; looks like I got out of that one easily. "Right now she's pretty comfortable so I let her say out. Next one." "What made you predict a 6-0 victory?"

No way was I going to tell everyone our history up to this point so I told a half-truth. "Confidence. There comes a point where you feel unstoppable as a trainer and your Pokémon respond to that."

"So what if you didn't 6-0 your opponent?"

"A win is a win no matter how ugly it is. Even if I won in a controversial fashion, I still won. Nobody would be able to take that away from me. Sara could say that I didn't sweep all she wants but all I have to do is point at the scoreboard or the record books. A flawless victory is just icing on the cake." Ashley pointed to another person but I remembered one more thing. "She also can't complain about Umbreon because I didn't use him. I know hindsight is 20/20 but she shouldn't have made a big deal about it in the first place."

"Now that you've made it to the finals, what's your plan against the defending champion Allison? She had a convincing 4-0 win as you probably saw on the scoreboard."

My hope is that they ask her that same question considering I arguably had the better battle. "Film study I guess haha! Luckily I get a few days to figure something out."

"The tournament is almost over and you're just now focusing on Allison? She's been the clear favorite to win since day one."

"Remember what I said earlier in the tournament? Survive and advance. Let me break it down for you again: only focus on the opponent in front of you and don't play the 'what if' game with other battles. I could honestly care less if she's the favorite. Now I can focus on her 100% knowing she's my opponent. Thank you all and I'll see you guys before the finals." Slowly, I stood up while carefully rearranging Ruby. Ashley and I started to walk back to the hotel.

She looked like she had a lot on her mind. "Hey Mitch, I got a call the other day from someone by the name of Doctor Harrison. She wanted me to look into, well, something I'd rather not say. Do you know anything about that?"

A nod. "Considering I'm the one who told her to call you, yes. Sorry to just toss you into this too but you're the only league official I can go to in a pinch. Trust me, the doctor was equally unsure on what to do."

"Well I'm not that high up in the organization to take care of it." My head hung in defeat. "But someone else can. She's a league staff member right?" Another nod. "Tier 1-C for sure then. I'll have to put that in."

That made no sense. "Tier 1-C?"

She pulled out her badge. "Each official is assigned a tier or rank, as we sometimes call them, when they pass the entrance exam. We go from 1A all the way to 5. Someone working in 1A is assigned cases like Pokémon abuse, crimes involving Pokémon, threats to prominent executives and basically anything serious. Anything in 1B is based on the gym leaders whether it'd be threats to them, using someone else's Pokémon in battles, making counterfeit badges, selling badges and stuff
like that. 1C is threats to a league official outside of the executive board or gym leaders and cases regarding Pokémon Centers and marts; all doctors here should be Pokémon League certified so her case will be thoroughly investigated."

"Rank is pretty important huh?"

"Yup. Only the best officials get up to 1A but they can do any case they want. However, someone at a rank 5 can't do a rank 4 case and so on."

"So what's yours?"

"Me? I'm rank 4. Basically I check in on the gym leaders from time to time or do paperwork if there's not enough rank 5 officials to do it. The whole Olivine case was a borderline 3-4 but they trusted me to get the job done and I haven't heard anything bad after I reported back. Just missed a promotion though," she laughed. "Eventually I'll get to rank 3 then hopefully continue to work my way up."

My interest was piqued. "Then who's handling my case with Umbreon even though I told you about it?"

Her face turned serious. "That's classified. I don't even know but I've asked to be kept in the loop." A lightbulb went off in her head. "A rank 1A official should be dropping off information to you soon. It may not be the end of it, but you'll have something to go off of."

Cory was long gone for me to do anything about Growlithe and I felt that going after Sara at this point in time would not be a smart move considering I have less than 48 hours before my finals match against the reigning champion Allsion. If I had known all of this sooner, then my experience here would be completely different. "Again… sorry about bothering you when there's a lot more people to go to."

"Don't worry about it; at least you're doing the right thing. Your close group of friends are really nice too. It's weird that you became friends with everyone here of all places." We arrived outside the hotel as Espeon started to stir in the warm night air; time to heal up and get her in a climate controlled environment via the Luxury Ball. "I guess I'll see you before the press conference."

"Guess so. Thanks again… really."

"Try to get some sleep Mitch. You've got your work cut out for you. Not trying to scare you or anything, but I've had to moderate some of her opponents' pressers and they were still in shock. Allison is the real deal." She left to Arceus knows where as I walked into the near empty lobby. I say near empty because only one girl was sitting by the healing machine but out of the nurse's earshot.

"You have some nerve walking in here with Espeon outside of its ball."

Ruby was stirring a little more. "Get out of my sight Sara." She scowled at me. "Taking out your frustration on me because you had a shitty press conference? I'd bet my entire life savings that all you felt was embarrassment."

"Shut it you pathetic excuse for a trainer," Sara hissed. "Before I leave the Indigo Plateau, I want to tell you I did a little team rearranging. I can't wait for our rematch in the future," she said with a grin.

"There won't be a rematch. You're not worth it. Hell, you're not even worth the cloths you're wearing."
She stood up to leave. "I hope you get slaughtered. Better yet, I hope Espeon goes down and stays down if you know what I mean. Same goes for Umbreon."

If I wasn't carrying Ruby then I'd probably fight her. Every time she opens her mouth about Ruby the thought of 'yup, I'm about to get my first assault charge' crosses my mind. "She'll be fine. The question is what should I do with you? I have all the information I need to do whatever I choose to do. Keep that in mind as you continue on your journey. I don't want to see your face for a long time. Got that?" Sara went out the front door with no further problems.

"Mrrggghh," Ruby grunted as she was waking up. "Okay I think I want to go back in my ball now. I'm really sore," she pleaded quietly. All of her adrenaline faded so the pain was soaking in.

I kissed the top of her head. "As you wish." The nurse on duty let me recall her before placing her ball on the machine for the instant heal. Clocks on the lobby wall read 10:30 so my best bet was to go to bed before doing my homework on Allison. The elevator ride up to my room felt so much longer as my eyes became heavy. Outside my door I swore I heard voices as I inserted the card key.

"Surprise!" Four voices screamed at me as I took a step into the room; I easily jumped backwards into the door.

"Okay I think I want to go back in my ball now. I'm really sore," she pleaded quietly. All of her adrenaline faded so the pain was soaking in.

"Oh shit! It's a party now," I screamed back. Wes, Rui, Carly, and Davis all hugged me one by one followed by all of us sitting down on the beds and chairs. Wes pulled out some drinks. "How'd you guys get in?"

Carly spoke up. "Oh you know… we found your friend and asked for a favor."

"Ashley?"

"You know we were all close and thought you needed to celebrate this big win. Come on! Just cut loose for an hour! We're probably going to bed after this is done."

Just a bit of energy snuck into me. "Fair enough. Now pass me a drink!"

For the next hour we ended up sharing stories of the tournament. Most of it was our own battles while Wes had a lot more on other battles he saw considering he was the only one of us to be eliminated in the group stage. He kept reassuring me that he wasn't mad about getting kicked out on a tiebreaker and told everyone how surprised he was at how well he did; Wes definitely looked like a seasoned competitor when I battled him. By the time everyone was ready to go back to their rooms, they all thanked me for the things I did to help them.

Wes stood up first then patted my back. "I'll be there for the finals come hell or high water."

Then Rui. "You can come back to our room sometime tomorrow for your Pokémon to be massaged and I'll be there with Wes."

Then Carly. "If there's anything I can do for you before the battle, just ask." She smiled. "Kick some ass Mitch!"

Davis was the last one. "All of Kanto is pushing for you. All of Kanto. Ever since you comforted Carly on live television and the press sent out a story on how you kept her in, they've been pulling for you. If you were to ever visit, you'd get the star treatment. If you battle like you did against me, then you should be fine." Another hug was the last thing everyone did before leaving me all alone. I don't know how I managed to do it... but I made friends at a top level competition without having to stab anyone in the back. Reflection time was cut short by my phone ringing.
"Hello Mitch, this is the front desk. Could you come down to the front desk? Alone? The league requires your presence," the clerk said quietly.

It was nearly midnight so who the hell wanted to speak with me? "Uh yeah. I can do that." I changed into a spare shirt and loose plaid pajama bottoms with flip flops as my shoes since I just wanted to go to bed after whatever this was. Not a soul was heard as I made my way to the front desk; felt kinda eerie if you ask me. I rang the bell seeing as the clerk wasn't around. "Hello? Anyone there?"

A woman came in from a side door wearing a business formal attire with the Silver Conference logo on the right side of the blazer. "Are you Mitch?"

"Yes. Someone said…"

"Identification please," she interrupted before I could finish; I pulled out my ID badge. "Very well. Right this way. She took me through the door she came from and we both were face to face with an elevator plus two men in the same type of attire.

"Identification. Both of you." The woman surprisingly wasn't annoyed as she pulled out her card while I did the same. Although this time she had another piece of paper with a stamp of the official seal on it. By this point I felt really out of place in my pajamas yet they didn't seem to care. "Checks out. What floor will you be going to?"

"But I wasn't told…"

"P9," the woman quickly intervened.

"Understood." One of the men followed us in and pressed the corresponding button on the panel; we were on P9 after a lot of gear turning. The man wished us a nice evening as he rode the elevator back down to the bottom.

"Ummm, if I may ask… what exactly happened?"

She just stared at me. "The elevator we took is only accessible to those associated to the Pokémon League. You have business with a tier 1A agent so you were granted clearance."

"What's P9 then?"

"Penthouse suites on floor nine. Every gym leader in the world is welcome to stay on this floor in addition to other floors with a 'P' in front of it." The Silver Hotel was living up to its name for sure with the luxury and privacy; there's probably no way to access these rooms with the regular elevators. "Follow me please."

We walked down the hallway until we reached a conference room fit for about a dozen people. Two more bodyguards stood in front of the door; as if some random stranger was going to find this room in the first place.

"Identification," the female bodyguard droned. I had a little trouble pulling it out and the struggle to get it out made her reach for a ball.

"Here," I sheepishly whispered. "Please don't hurt me." The convenience of my escort's lanyard on top of the document eased the male bodyguard and they both let us pass into the room.

"This is where I leave you now Mitch," she said after she placed a few papers down on the table. "I'm a tier 1B agent so I have no right to remain in the room. I was only tasked with getting you
"Wait!" She turned back around. "Thanks, and hopefully you'll get a promotion." A small smile formed on her face as she left me to sit at the end of the table. No clock was in the conference room so my perception of time was a little warped. Passing the time by doodling on the whiteboard was the only logical thing to do until I heard people talking outside. Damn! I forgot to ask why the hell I was called here anyway.

"He's inside sir," the female guard crisply stated; a 180 compared to addressing me. A man that stood about 6'1" with a cape and red hair entered. Oh no fucking way…

He pulled up a chair to sit next to me. "Hello Mitch. My name is Lance."

"Nice to meet you," I replied in a firm tone even though I was nervous.

"I apologize for calling you here so late in the night and after your impressive victory. Let's get down to why you're here." Lance spread out his papers across the table. "Your Umbreon has gotten a lot of attention recently. I'm glad that the media didn't discover all of the details in Mahogany Town that night."

My heart sunk; I don't think I told anyone the entire truth about Umbreon. Maybe Davis before I battled him, but he wouldn't have access to Lance. "How did you…"

A smile. "Nurse Joy in Mahogany town told you the story right?" I tried to remember what she said after I brought the eon duo in there for the first time.

"Drawing a blank Lance." Didn't mean I tried to remember what she said. He showed me photos. "Another trainer and I were planning a raid on the underground base to destroy the machine causing Magikarp to prematurely evolve at the Lake of Rage. We also found out that they had another section dedicated to Pokémon experimentation so that was our second target but your Umbreon did a lot of the work for us in the experiment department. Security cameras caught it running away but nobody in the media was sure what Pokémon it was."

"So what's that got to do with any of this?"

"Who do you think took the case?"

"Hold on! You're the tier 1A agent Ashley was talking about!" I leaned back in my chair and exhaled deeply. "Let me get this straight. Lance… the champion of the Johto's Elite Four took a case about my Umbreon?"

His face turned serious. "Not your Umbreon. Someone else's." One more paper was in front of me. "I did some digging and found out that it was to be sold to someone. Unfortunately, it was under a pseudonym because we couldn't find the name in any database." More paper. "Here's a list of every Pokémon that entered the facility just before the raid. Team Rocket kept it simple with their filing system in Mahogany Town." Green highlighter marks took my eyes to the 'U' section.

**Pokémon: Status**

**UM-01: Deceased**

**UM-02: Deceased**

**UM-03: In progress**
My hands ran through my hair; the information hit me hard as UM stood for Umbreon. "The other two before him..."

"Correct. We never recovered the bodies and we have reason to believe that Team Rocket cremated them since the search team didn't notice anything unusual from the base all the way to the Lake of Rage. That's not all." Lance pulled out the 'M' section.

**Pokémon: Status**

**MA-01**: Released but not evolved; shows overly aggressive traits however. Will recapture to see if there is more testing needed or if offspring has traits.

**MA-02**: Evolved but escaped into the Lake of Rage a few months ago. Recapture plan is in motion.

**MA-03**: Deceased

**MA-04**: Deceased

**MA-05**: Deceased

**MA-06**: Sold

**MA-07**: In progress

**MA-08**: In progress

"Does this concern me? I don't see a connection."

Lance leaned back. "Over the course of my investigation, I've interviewed a lot of people. Doctor Harrison here told me that you brought in a Gyarados for x-rays? That true?" I nodded; Lance sifted through more papers. "Their evolution machine's main side effect was increased aggression. Just think about it for a second: you ever flail when you're upset? What about when you were younger?"

"Rarely to be honest with you. I've seen kids get tired out from it though."

"Well a Magikarp's body isn't supposed to move that much for an extended period of time. All that thrashing can lead to some spinal problems in the future; guess Team Rocket perfected the process to make a stronger Pokémon and sold one before we raided the base."

"Still don't see where this is goi..." That can't be true. "You're saying..."

"Just saw a possible link. Obviously three of them were unaccounted for until I captured the one in the Lake of Rage. It has a long road ahead of it so I don't carry it on me." Deep down I felt like vomiting all over again.

"I need a moment."

"Of course. Just get me when you're ready." Lance left all of the evidence he gathered in the table for me to look at. Considering the track record I have with my team, I'm willing to bet that Magikarp I caught outside Violet City was the one they released. Then there's Umbreon. Nurse Joy mentioned that you needed a fair amount of money to purchase a Pokémon from a ranch outside Goldenrod. Tom was his original trainer yet he showed no displeasure for him one bit; now I see why he's so indebted to him! Tom saved him without realizing it before I came along that night.

Lance probably talked to everyone I've ever met so there's really no need to ask about what
Professor Elm had to say or anyone else for that matter. Remaining papers on the table were just duplicates of photos or the cropped list of experimented Pokémon. Bedtime couldn't come soon enough as I made the call to pack it in for the night. "Hey Lance," I called loud enough so he could hear through the door.

He entered the room with a softer expression. "Yes?"

"Thanks for everything you've done. Don't worry about the timing; I finally have some closure even though the info's not all there. All I can do is trust my team when we face Allison."

"Before you go Mitch… I talked with Professor Elm about the repercussions of the experiments. He told me that the kindness and stability you provide make Umbreon's life so much easier. Plus the fact that he has a mate makes it easy on him too. You might've created a blueprint for rehabilitating Pokémon taken by Team Rocket."

"We shall see. I'm exhausted so I'm going to bed for the night."

"Last thing before you go." He pulled out a note. "Don't know what this is but it's got your name on it. We'll keep in touch. Good luck in your battle." He left with the two guards while I opened the note.

*Congrats on winning your battle! Stop by my room at P9-6 to celebrate after you're done with Lance. It won't be too long, I promise.*

-Jasmine

I know she wanted to meet up, but it was almost 2:30 in the morning after I spotted a clock. First… "Umbreon." He came out half asleep despite the species being active at night. I picked him up and held him tightly while cradling him. "I love you so much Umbreon; more than what I show on the outside," I cooed in his ear. "Nothing bad will happen to you as long as you're with me. Nothing. I won't let it."

Umbreon looked at me funny. "Bree?"

"Get some sleep. We've got a lot of prepping to do tomorrow." Obviously it would make no sense to call out a huge sea snake in the middle of a hotel hallway so he'll get his tomorrow.

Jasmine's room was pretty easy to find. "Hello? Jasmine? You in there?" Knocking so late in the night felt uncomfortable; it reverberated throughout the hallway.

Deadbolt lock also echoing as it turned told me she was in there. "Oh hey Mitch! Come one in," she whispered. Penthouse was definitely the right word. A huge bed faced the large window looking out directly at the stadium while the lights of Kanto were further beyond the horizon. Shades of white and cream dominated the color scheme throughout the room with darker colors accenting the place in certain spots. She had set up a coffee table with a bucket of champagne on ice plus a few snacks. "Pour yourself a glass! You deserve it." Jasmine was wearing a tank top and pajama pants but didn't look like she tried to sleep at all. Did she stay up all this time just to talk to me? This was starting to feel like a date more so than a celebration but I kept my mouth shut as I sipped the grape flavored champagne; much stronger than what I had back in my room with my friends.

I raised my glass then took a big swig. "Cheers." Both of us drank the first glass in no time.

"Mitch, I… I wanted to say thank you for all you've done for me in the past few weeks."
More thanks for me? "Um okay." I was too tired to think of something clever to say. "Can I snag some water?"

"Should be some in the fridge." Chugging it made the most sense before sitting at the table because why not?

She pointed to the bed. "Get comfortable. Relax." Okay, I wasn't that tired to understand what was going on yet I went along with it. "Ashley told me that you put too much pressure on yourself all the time; it's okay to decompress now. You have the time." Cartoon devil on the shoulder -stay in the room- versus cartoon angel on the shoulder -leave- played out in my mind with the devil winning. There was something about her that made me forget about my problems.

"Fine fine. "I refilled my glass before sitting on the bed; she followed suit. "It's funny that you mention me needing to relax," I started as the mix of fatigue and champagne set in. "Lance and I talked while I was wearing this. Haha! Who does that!?!"

She smiled. "Not a lot of people would." Her eyes shifted to my arm. "Oh my! Are you okay? Did you get hurt during the battle?"

"Nah. Just an accident. You ever try touching a Pokémon where they don't want to be touched?" She pondered my question. "Compared to what they went through, this is nothing." A few more sips from each of us as I tried to change the topic. "So how's Amphy?"

"Good. He's not sick anymore plus the league sent someone to help with the lighthouse." Her eyes looked down. "I'm glad you gave me that number to call."

"Ashley help you out there too?"

"Indirectly. Olivine still has the lighthouse but I have Amphy here in his ball after you called." Cory wasn't looking all there mentally after I beat him so it was a smart move of her to keep him by her side.

"That's smart coming from a smart person." Jasmine blushed. "Who else has a Steelix that knows Sandstorm and Rock Throw to deal with fire types? Nobody. That's who." We kept up the small talk for about another 45 minutes. All of the stuff she laid out was gone and I just couldn't stay awake anymore. "Jasmine… I gotta go back to my room and get some sleep. It was nice of you to invite me over."

The moment I shifted to get up was the moment she grabbed my arm. "Remember how I said I owed you for helping me in Olivine? This is me paying you back." A kiss came out of nowhere and she followed it up by pushing me on my back. "Tonight you're sleeping here. Just relax and let me take care of everything." Up to this point I was so drained, so tired, so worried about what Lance had told me. Jasmine's voice and presence was so soothing that I was getting lulled to sleep without the stress.

She closed the curtain before getting next to me in bed. Her arm draped over me and pulled me in closer to her under the covers as rain started to fall outside. Olivine flashbacks ran through my head in a split second except now she was the one doing all of the comforting this time around. One more kiss on the forehead was a nice bonus.

"Other people care about you but you never let them have a chance to show it because you're so busy caring about others' well-being. Tonight that changed. Please, for me, relax and sleep easy," she said softly. Outside the wind was howling and it was getting cold but it was so comfortable in that large bed.
To date, that was the best night of sleep in my life. The only downside is that Ruby is probably going to rub this in my face tomorrow.

I'll take that trade any day of the week.
Jasmine and I slept peacefully while the rain pitter-pattered against the window the entire night. It didn't come down too hard on its own; just hard enough to make a little noise. The wind on the other hand, was brutal. The room itself was a little cool considering the outside conditions but the warmth of the bed easily made up for the temperature difference. Overall it was very cozy. I vividly remembered the night in Olivine after the gym battle where she was bruised up, exhausted, voice no louder than a whisper after screaming her lungs out and she still took me in when she could've been alone. Before I passed out, I found it funny that it was a complete 180 from last time.

Clouds still covered the sky when I woke up around 9:00am which allowed my eyes to adjust to the light. Jasmine was wide awake holding me while staring down with a soft smile on her face. I took a few more seconds to get more awake as she gently rubbed my head. My attempt to get up was immediately met with her pushing down on my shoulder with her other hand.

"No. You stay there." She continued to stroke my head. "Remember what I said last night? I'll take care of everything."

"So do you know what I want? I was planning to do a lot today in preparation for tomorrow," I playfully asked.

"You tell me what needs to be done and I can make it happen," she shot back immediately.

"I didn't want to hold you up if you had something to do. Besides, I thought gym leaders were supposed to be impartial when it comes to challengers. Isn't all of this an advantage? No other competitor has this opportunity."

Her eyes looked away from me. "Only when they're going for badges; we're still just people deep down. The only difference is that we make our living by battling." She shifted so she was sitting up. "Don't worry about an advantage. Almost everything here is fair game if you know what I mean."

It took me a minute to put it together. "So how many other gym leaders did the same thing this whole tournament? And why now of all times?"

"All of them at one point or another," she said nonchalantly. "If they were married, their spouses were invited. Others did more with their guests while others did less. Again… we're still human. As for the timing, I thought now would be the right time to pull you away from the craziness. I thought about doing this last round but I couldn't bring myself to do it." I wondered if what happened to me might've happened to any of my pervious competitors. Getting to this part of the hotel was impossible unless you had clearance so I highly doubt a majority of the field even saw the elevator behind the front desk. "After all this is over, would you like to… um…"

"Celebrate?"

"Ummm…" she still hummed with a nervous look on her face.

"Meet up?"
"Well…"

"Go out to eat somewhere? I don't know."

"Yes!" she quickly replied. "Go out!" Her face turned red in a heartbeat. "To dinner," she added quietly. "There's a good place by the lighthouse that I go to escape the daily grind every so often." Just to dinner? Riiiiight.

"Why though? I'm curious. I'm not exactly the most ideal guy out there. My gear isn't the nicest and I look like a mess half the time. Look at my arm for Arceus' sake! Plus, I'm a blue-collar trainer that's had to claw my way here. I mean come on; I'm practically harboring a fugitive Pokémon that half the world wants dead. Not to generalize, but most gym leaders seem like they'd be interested in someone who's, well, not me." The silence was a sure sign I blew it until her eyes met mine.

"Because you're a genuinely nice guy who's also honest." Red flag alert; I know nice guys always finish last but I'll hear her out. "You do the right thing, you care about your Pokémon or other people a lot more than yourself, and the big thing is that you've respected every single opponent this tournament if they showed you an ounce of it." Jasmine got more comfortable on the bed. "We as gym leaders of Johto watch those press conferences together or at least hear about them. We watch battles that appeal to us. Believe me when I say that we were rooting for you in all of them. The fact that you consoled one opponent after her Typhlosion was helpless made us speechless. Do you know what percentage of people would've paraded around the field after winning like that? 100% but you made it 99.9%.

There was no way she was faking this or trying to downplay this by how passionate she was getting. "But according to half the world, I'm a monster. You saw Cory's Skarmory after what my Growlithe did to it. You definitely heard what my Umbreon did to his Donphan when we first battled. My Espeon sent two other Eeveelutions a few feet into the side wall. You're more kind-hearted than me that's for sure."

"There are some things that I'm willing to overlook." I knew she had a little of that attitude in her; nobody can be that nice all the time. "That's another reason why I like you: the ability to protect others when they need it even though you might get hurt or worse." Flashbacks from when I first found the two Eeveelutions replayed in my head on top of what Ruby had shown me earlier in my journey; a yawn escaped me and my eyes started to get heavy again.

"Did you just say you like me?" Her face was well past red. "So you've been keeping up with me all this time huh?" A nod. "Well to be honest, I've been kind of the same way thinking about you. I just was too afraid to talk to you after that night with the chance something could happen."

Jasmine laid back down and placed her head on my chest while pulling up the comforter. "You're only proving my point," she playfully replied back. "Always caring about others. Now relax a little more. I think you woke up too early after your nightmare."

It was my turn to hold her. "Nightmare?"

"You kept mumbling 'Umbreon' and 'Espeon' all night. Something about having them taken? I didn't understand."

"If I explain it, then I'm not going to be relaxed."

She pulled her head up before kissing me again. "Sorry. Just get some sleep; it's still early. Don't worry about a thing. Nobody is going to bother you as you get ready. Trust me like I trusted you
since that night." Dammit she's just too good with her words. We both laid there as sleep overtook us a second time and kept its hold on us for about another three hours.

Waking up before Jasmine allowed me to do my morning routine except change. My phone had a few massages from everyone that was in my room last night wishing me good luck and only offering their help if I needed it. To match their respect of my privacy, I told them that their VIP tickets would still be at the front desk. Just a little under 36 hours before the finals of the Silver Conference were to take place and I was going to use as much of it to prepare without burning out. Jasmine woke up after I was done replying to everyone.

"Now that you're awake, make a list for me on what you need to do," she said while holding a piece of paper and a pen. I wrote down as much as I could think of.

- Heal my Pokémon
- Go to my room and get my stuff
- Study film on Allison
- Research Allison's profile
- Eat I guess?
- Let my Pokémon run around & play

"All for now?"

"Yup. Unless I think of more, this is it. Let me heal my Pokémon in the lobby before anything else."

"Just go get your stuff then come back here. Unless you want to talk to the media, you should avoid hanging around the ground floor."

Well it wouldn't be surprising if members of the media were waiting around the hotel or even staying in the hotel to catch some trainer for a quick interview. "Alright Jasmine I see your point about why you did all of this; the privacy is amazing! I'll go to my room then come back, but my Pokémon stay by me at all times. End of discussion." She didn't argue but did give me a gold key card with the room number that I would have to show to the clerk in order to get back up here.

The burly man guarding the elevator took me down to the lobby after I told him I needed to go back to the normal portion of the hotel. The lobby itself wasn't crowded, but there were a few news crews shooting video for their shows as the final draw was getting closer. Luckily I managed to slip by into an elevator to go back up to my room and grab all of my things before heading back to Jasmine's room. She was nice enough to leave it open for me so I could just walk back in. A nurse stood in the middle of the room while Jasmine was out on the balcony making a call.

"Hello Mitch! Are you the one trainer that Jasmine was talking about?"

So it was the one from the lobby; must've come up here when I was gathering my things. "Yeeees?" The hell was this?

Nurse Joy fiddled with a box that was behind her. "A portable machine is a little hard to get out of the box… ah ha! Here we go! I'll need your Pokémon." I handed over all six balls despite the fact that Espeon was the only Pokémon to battle last time. Beeping signified that everyone was all set to go. "Anything else for me or one of our resident doctors?"
Gyarados still is probably fine after the rest he got while Furret showed no signs of second impact syndrome. Ampahros' hand is probably healed by this point. "Nope. Although tell doctor Harrison that I said hi." Nurse Joy smiled on the way out while Jasmine came back in.

"Just some stuff about the gym back home; stupid trainers still trying to challenge me even though it says we're closed."

"Guess you took care of that. Now is there a lap…" she immediately pointed to a laptop on the desk. "What about the cord to the tele…" she gently tugged the cord indicating that it was hooked up to the flat screen. "Wowwwwww. And that's why I knew I could trust you."

A smile came over her face. "Don't forget these!" Discs containing all of Allison's battles were labeled by the round.

"If you have the one last thing I'm thinking of, then you've got a dinner date for sure."

"Oh? You mean the room service menu? Yeah, it's in the drawer next to the bed. Snacks for when you're a little hungry? Kitchen table." I raised my finger and tried to talk but nothing came out; she laughed. "Anyway, what did I tell you before?" she asked rhetorically.

"What's the name of the place you go to in Olivine?"

"I'll tell you later. For the record, I already had most of those things; came standard with the suite. The nurse was the only favor I had to call in. Now I'm going to be out for Arceus knows how long because of media obligations but I'd recommend staying here. Food's free since it'd be going to this room and I told the front desk you're here. Don't lose that card either. Bye now!" She left the room with a wink. My attention turned to the laptop and the official Silver Conference page after I changed into shorts. The front page featured Allison plus myself so her bio was easy to find.

**Name: Allison**

**Age:** 23

**Hometown:** New Bark Town

**Badges won:** 0 (Automatically qualified by winning last year's tournament)

**Registered Pokémon:** Crobat, Gyarados, Ursaring, Houndoom, Misdreavus, Dugtrio, Raichu, Exeggutor, Scizor.

As far as this team goes, it's probably the most balanced team in the tournament; almost a full counter-team to what I have but the good news is that she's only allowed six just like me. Bad news? She knows all too well who I'll be using.

For the next three or so hours, I studied all of her battles. Due to her status as reigning champion, she didn't have to go through the four preliminary battles like I did so I was out four useful battles worth of information. Round-robin match one was won 3-0 with Scizor doing all of the work with Metal Claw, Agility, and Slash; it took only one hit from a lucky Rock Slide in the victory. Match two was won 2-0 with Scizor falling to a Marowak while her Ursaring knocked out a Mantine and finally her Gyarados taking out Granbull. Allison's third match was a Scizor sweep; luckily the second battle of group play allowed me to see what her Ursaring and Gyarados can do. Unfortunately, Gyarados' only revealed attack was Hydro Pump while Ursaring's only known move was Slash.
Her round of 64 battle was yet another Scizor sweep while her round of 32 battle was all Gyarados' Hydro Pump and Thrash when a Blastoise was sent out against it. The round of 16 was a little closer with a 1-0 win but she still didn't reveal any new Pokémon or any new moves. The pattern continued through the quarters and semis. Scizor is either her ace or the measuring stick against trainers. If it's the measuring stick, her opponents were awful; she used it against Lance at the end of their battle though. Her team when she faced Lance was different. But why would she bring her B team against Lance? No registered Pokémon made an appearance in that battle either except for Scizor. My brain was too fried; cue the food break.

The menu had almost every comfort food imaginable on top of full course meals. Nothing had a price attached at the end of each description but I kept the order fairly modest with a plate of chicken parm plus garlic bread. A waiter rolled it up 20 minutes later then I proceeded to down it with no effort. After more film study, press conference watching, replaying older battles, it was 5:30pm. I laid back down only to be drawn to my phone as a text came through.

_We know you've been busy and we didn't want to bother you. But now we'd thought we'd say hi and good luck! Love mom & dad._

My parents? I haven't heard from my parents in months. It's not their fault though; they're working the daily 9-5 or the more awkward 4-midnight grind depending on the Sprout Tower maintenance shift that needs to be filled and I haven't really done anything on my end to talk to them.

_Love you too. Did either of you get work off to watch?_

_Well I'm working the morning and your father's working until the battle starts. We wanted to come but it just couldn't work out._

Quietly I sighed. I won all of my badges without a phone call beforehand so it's not like I'm emotionally traumatized but still… _It's going to be crazy so be sure to watch until the very end. You never know what'll happen._

_You know it! We've been watching all of your other battles too. Before we leave you alone, there's a big surprise when you come home! Maybe more than one if you win the prize money. Love you honey!_ Regardless of how late in the tournament it was, the text gave me a little more confidence heading into tomorrow. Wait… prize money!? A quick sound of metal moving was followed by the door opening.

"Mitch, I'm back!" Jasmine cheerfully said as she walked in. "So how was your little study session?"

"Good I guess. Hey Jasmine, do you know how much prize money I'll get if I win?"

The sudden question made her feel uneasy. "Check your forms from when you first got here." Ah yes… the things I didn't look at because I was too tired the first time around. The thing Davis pulled out in front of me in the aftermath of the gala incident.

"Here it is: the winner of the Silver Conference will receive a payment of 500,000P after taxes have been taken out." My jaw dropped; that amount could last me the rest of my life plus help out my parents if I play my cards right.

"Is everything okay Mitch?"

"I'm just going to be blunt here: would you really want to see me again if I lost tomorrow?"

"Of course I would! What are you saying?"
"Again, I'm going to be blunt: that prize money is enough to change a family's life for years so imagine what it could do to me. After what happened last night I was thinking that… well….

She got defensive. "Why would you think something like that!?"

I raised my voice "You know that the phrase 'you never know what you have until it's gone' exists, right?" She had a scared look on her face yet she nodded. "Well I've always hated that phrase! I knew damn well that everything I had could be lost at the snap of a finger!" I stopped long enough to calm down. "Sorry. I grew up knowing that my parents lived paycheck to paycheck until recently and now that money is on the line too, I'll just feel even more pressure when I go out there tomorrow."

"Listen to me Mitch." She made her way next to the desk and sat down in a spare chair. "Pokémon League employees like me get paid decent money and almost any repairs on the gym are covered by the league. I'm not out for the money; I never was." Stress was creeping its way back in the longer I thought about the text. "Look, let's order some dinner and watch something other than battles okay?" She found the menu. "Order as much as you want; I know whatever you had wasn't enough. Call out your Pokémon too."

Both of us had ordered two main dishes on top of three smaller appetizers while our Pokémon had bags of food to choose from. Jasmine tipped the hotel employee about 100P to his delight after everything was set up in the kitchen. Once I poured everyone their first bowl, we all ate silently.

"Did you do anything with her last night Mitch?" Silence broken.

"Not now Ruby. I've got a lot on my plate." Espeon held a big grin. "Oh you know what I mean. Besides, you can probably find out for yourself." I let my mind become an open book to her surprise and her smile somehow grew bigger.

"Do it Mitch. Take the date! We all have someone so you should too!"

"After this is all done, I'll think about it. Now eat up. We've got a big day tomorrow." I let Espeon lower everyone into the courtyard to get some exercise as the sun was setting. Jasmine was using the laptop so I turned on the television and found some playoff baseball.

"For those of you just tuning in, you're in for a treat. The Fighting Electabuzz host the Slamming Starmies in a game seven winner take all for the pennant. It was not so long ago when star pitcher Corey Demario won the championship for the Electabuzz on a spectacular performance of eight innings…" the announcer droned on while the graphics set up the scenario.

"Baseball?"

"Yup. It's a good change of pace for me. Besides, it's game seven." I changed back into my pajamas while I watched a pitcher's duel until the 7th inning where the Electabuzz squeaked a run on a two-out double. The Starmies tied it in the top of the 9th with a solo home run forcing extra innings and reminding me to call everyone back. A quick look at the clock told me it was just past midnight and Jasmine finally closed her laptop.

"Paperwork is probably the most annoying thing in the world," she yawned. "At least I don't have to do it when I get back to the gym. How's the game?"

"Extras. Guess nobody wants to win," I joked. She hopped into bed next to me. "Know what? I've felt like Rapunzel minus the long hair and prince err… princess in my case, trying to rescue me. Just a person locked away… biding their time until the moment comes." I twiddled my thumbs.
"Well… you did save me from myself. I'd probably be freaking out despite the core group of friends I made here."

"We all need a little extra help sometimes; it's nothing to be ashamed of." How dumb was I to assume that money would cause a huge rift between us? "I'm fading fast but I might not be here when you wake up tomorrow; more media stuff. Just remember to trust your team when you go out there tomorrow."

"Could you put in for a Pokémon masseuse tomorrow? Recently I figured out massages can help them in ways I never thought possible. I'm going back to my room because I have a friend that can help me too."

"Yeah! I'll make a call. Just write down your room number and I'll take care of it." I wrote it on a piece of paper. "Okay then." Jasmine succumbed to sleep around an hour later as the game shifted to 12th inning.

"Bases loaded, two outs, bottom of the 12th... the Electabuzz blew a chance to win it in the 9th by leaving the bases loaded. Up to bat is the rookie, Carson. He's batting .250 this series but only .167 with runners in scoring position. Johnson has 1.12 ERA in the playoffs in 35 appearances. He is on to force a 13th inning. First pitch from Johnson is a fastball for strike one."

"Strike two on a nasty curveball by Johnson. It was a close call down and in but he gets the call..." All of Kanto is rooting for me, all of Violet City is rooting for me, Jasmine is rooting for me, my friends are rooting for me. Gah! The pressure is making me sick to my stomach no matter what Jasmine tells me; she's only covering up how I feel.

"And the pitch... down and away for ball one. Tried to get Carson to swing at the fastball again..." Taking things as they come instead of looking at the big picture might be the way to go.

"Everyone knows the slider is coming but can he hit it? Score's 1-1, bottom of the 12th. Here comes the 1-2... *tick.* High fly ball, deep right field... this ball is OUTTA HERE! A grand slam by Carson gives the Electabuzz the title! The rookie sensation delivers in the clutch..."

Maybe... just maybe... I'll be okay.

Waking up to a note wishing me good luck was arguably the best wake-up present on my entire journey. A masseuse was set to come by my room sometime between 2 and 3 in the afternoon while I was given permission to take anything from the room that might help me. After grabbing some leftover Pokémon food on top of my things, I headed for the elevator. Both guards helped me hold my stuff while it went to the lobby. It threw me for a loop that they helped me carry it to my room until I saw some ropes being set up. Not one question came out of their mouths so I tipped them for their work.

Texting Rui was the next thing to do since I wanted to give her time to prepare. At the risk of running into the media, I wanted to walk around outside to get rid of the cabin fever. Flashbulbs greeted me when I came back in the lobby along with the same security guards that escorted me to my room.

"Where are you trying to go?" one of them asked.

"To the courtyard."

"Let's take the back route." All of us avoided the media as we went out the side door to the
peaceful courtyard. No guards were present after they left me in peace, but there were plenty of newly added signs forbidding any photography. Massive bushes made it hard for someone to get a decent shot without making some noise. Footsteps came up from behind me.

"Hey stranger!" It was Allison. "Just relaxing before the championship! So I get to face you later tonight?"

"Guess so. Congrats on making it this far!"

"I did some film study so I think I'm ready for your team," she said half-jokingly, half-serious. Her attitude immediately changed when her face lost the smile. "Looks like I'll win 6-0, 5-0 if you get lucky."

Trash talking… got to love it. "At least I don't rely on one Pokémon to win." She grinned at my response. "Normal trainers would be nervous about the lack of film to go off of, but I saw right through it. You've battled in a way that limits knowledge of your strategy to your opponents. Don't worry though, I'm not scared of the unknown."

Allison scowled. "Okay, you figured me out. Big deal. That doesn't mean too much in the long run. I can still dismantle your team in front of the world." She took a step closer to me. "If by some miracle you do win the battle, I still win the war."

Nervousness almost made it into my voice but I kept it monotonous. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Tell me Mitch: are you a gambling man?"

"Only with an occasional poker or blackjack game," I answered honestly. "Maybe slots if I'm feeling lucky at the Goldenrod Game Corner."

A small stub was pulled out from her pocket. "I've been the favorite to win since I walked on the field to face Lance. My odds to win as of a few hours ago were 1:3, or 75% according to the Goldenrod Game Corner; the place I made my bet. You on the other hand, were a 3:1 underdog or had a 25% chance to win in that same timeframe. Odds may change depending on how much more money is being thrown around and there are several other factors in our battle to bet on. But did you know there was a time where you were a 10:1 underdog entering the quarterfinals?"

"Get to the point."

"Rude! Anyway, I placed a bet of 20,000P on myself to win when my odds were 3:2 so I could at least make a little money on my victory. Since my odds were always so that I'd lose money after that point in time, I did the next best thing."

My heart sunk. "You can't be serious…"

Allison flashed an evil grin. "Yup. I bet on you to win the whole thing when your odds were 10:1 meaning I win 10 times my wager. Don't feel alone though; I bet on everyone else in the field before the first battle of the quarterfinals took place. However, my wager on you was the highest."

"How much?" I asked angrily.

"An even 100,000P." I actually gagged.

"So you're that desperate for money huh?"
"Not quite. I've won a lot of battles in the underground scene so this is just an opportunity to put my money management skills to the test. The first rule of betting is simple: if it moves then you can bet on it. Not all of my hard-earned P is in you winning. Odds of me using Scizor as my first Pokémon are 2:1 and I put 50P on that. Odds of you leading at halftime are 6:1 and I put 100P on that. Get the picture yet Mitch? I win no matter what the outcome of our battle is."

"Why are you telling me this?" She didn't answer yet I could tell the goal was to get inside my head. "You can have your money. I'll have the title." She walked past me to probably go back to her room but stopped after one step past me so she didn't have the chance to look at me.

"Before we meet on the battlefield, I wanted to say thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Thanks for taking care of UM-03 and MA-01 for me all this time."
Chapter 53- Finals vs Allison

Allison walked away confidently as I just stared at her in disbelief. As far as I'm concerned, only Team Rocket scientists previously knew those two terms. Lance and I only know them now because he somehow obtained the papers explaining everything before showing it to me. Nurse Joy in Mahogany Town mentioned a place where Pokémon could be sold outside of Goldenrod City but not a lot of trainers have so much money lying around in a nest egg that they can flat out buy a Pokémon.

Then again, the underground scene must've provided her with all the money she needed to buy those two which in turn explains how she could bet on me. Figuring this out can wait since I have a battle in roughly seven hours. I have to hide the fact that I know all this because I can't get too distracted. But first…

Hey Rui, can you stop by my room around 2? It's the massage thing I told you about earlier I reminded her via text.

Sure! See you then. I found a bench to sit on to take in a few hours of peace here at the Indigo Plateau. Over a two-week span, I've learned so much more than in my other years of existence. Medical jargon that the doctor threw at me will probably be researched when I'm done with this. Win or lose, I want to keep my Pokémon as healthy as possible after what's happened to them in my travels. Eventually I made my way to my room with Rui standing outside.

"Everyone ready this time around?"

"Hope so," I mumbled remembering that Ruby got spooked. "Espeon should go last this time."

"Maybe it's for the best." Another woman got off the elevator carrying two tables to meet us in front of my door.

"Hello. I assume you're the Mitch that Jasmine was talking about? Let's go on in." She set up the tables in the middle of the room then looked at Rui. "Are you with him?"

Rui threw up her hands. "I'm just here to give his Pokémon massages too. I had no idea someone else was coming."

"Ah… I see. Well if he trusts you to handle his Pokémon then so be it. Now I've done some extra research on your team and Gyarados might be a little tougher to work on."

"It's fine," I replied with a blank expression; probably best to leave his tail alone.

"Call out your first two so we can get started." Growlithe and Furret were picked first since they had a tough time against Cory. "Your friend can massage Furret since I don't want to be liable if she gets a burn." Both hopped onto the table before the two ladies went to work.

Growlithe's facial expressions changed every so often as the popping sounds echoed throughout the room. One minute he looked so content while the next one he looked like he was in pain. Eventually he melted into the table while softly humming in pleasure. Rui had an easier time with
Furret since its body was essentially a hot dog with limbs which meant less moving around to find tough areas. After both of them were nearly done receiving the massage, they nuzzled each other.

"Oh how cute!" Rui squealed. "How long has this been happening?"

"Not too long actually. They started doing this halfway through my journey out of the blue. You also looked confident when you were working; how do you know where to massage?"

Rui kept her smile. "Whenever Wes caught a Shadow Pokémon that he didn't think he'd use in battle, he would send it to my grandpa in my hometown of Agate Village. The mart there sold colognes that you could rub Pokémon with to help them relax so my grandpa worked with Shadow Pokémon. After Cipher was defeated, both of us went back to Agate to help and Furret was one of the Shadow Pokémon I worked on."

"Did you work on an Ampharos or Gyarados?"

She shook her head. "Unfortunately there was only a Flaaffy." Our masseuse was finally finished with Growlithe.

"That must've been his first massage considering all of the pops I heard; you should do this a little more often if you want to keep their stress down." Sure… because I can just call a masseuse any time I want. Bitch. "So who's next?"

"Ampharos." She was called out while I moved the two from the tables to the bed where they curled up and dozed off. Staying true to her nature, she poked at the padding on the table to test how soft it was. "You know I get nervous whenever you do that outside of a battle, right?"

Ampharos just smiled as she maneuvered her way onto the table. I let the professional take care of her as I noticed a sheet of paper on the nightstand. The date on it was from yesterday when I was in Jasmine's room for most of the day. Oops.

Dear Mitch,

Congratulations on getting this far! A few reminders about tomorrow: your match is scheduled for tomorrow at 7:00pm sharp on field one with the roof open. Your press conference before the battle is mandatory and is set for 6:00pm and will end no later than 6:30pm. Also, you are required to attend a meet & greet dinner with our sponsors at 5:00pm inside the stadium's primary luxury suite. Allison will also be on the same schedule as you so both of you will have the same circumstances leading up to the battle. Best of luck tomorrow.

- The Pokémon League

Stupid obligations. "I have to bounce at 4:45 but I don't want to rush anything."

"That's fine," the masseuse answered as if she was in a trance. She continued to work on the electric type until Ampharos was purring with her eyes closed. "I can work on Gyarados outside. Will it sit still for me? They're notorious for being anxious."

I eyed Ampharos. "Oh I think he'll be fine. Come on out buddy!" Gyarados emerged looking very refreshed. "You my friend… are going to get a massage!" He looked confused as I turned to the specialist. "Nothing below the C-52 area if possible. Just let Ampharos talk him into it first; you'll know when to start." All three of them made their way outside to the balcony while I eyed the empty tables. "Let's try this again." Espeon and Umbreon came out looking eagerly at the tables.

"Lie down you two cuties!" Rui exclaimed. This time it was much easier to work on them and neither of them attacked us when we gently dug into their necks. They too nuzzled each other after
we were done. "You ever think that it will be more than nuzzling down the road? Especially with those two?"

Little Eevees running around? Huh… "I'll leave it up to them. When she's done out there, I have to get ready for tonight."

Rui gave me a soft hug as soon as the professional walked in and packed up her tables. "We'll be screaming from the sidelines no matter what." Both of them left around 3:15 so I had some time to get organized before the whirlwind of events was set to unfold. I just let the soft snoring of my six Pokémon echo while I prepared their dinner. Sleep well guys. Only 90 minutes before I drag you out of here for the last time.

"Make sure you eat before you go out there. You need to stay focused". I turned to see Espeon's mouth forming a small smile.

Please have chicken parm as the main course.

Being a trainer on a journey with only a backpack of essentials and tent, my wardrobe has always been limited. Unlike the gala, there's probably no rental suit so my best bet was to put on the cleanest short sleeve shirt I had underneath Jasmine's jacket. A little sweat in a potentially crowded room was a small price to pay for concealing the claw marks on my arm to those who didn't watch my presser. Guards were waiting for me inside the lobby entrance along with the hordes of people outside looking for a photo or autograph; I did feel a little bit guilty giving all of them the cold shoulder on my way to the stadium.

The primary luxury suite was nothing like the one we were all in when we got to see Allison take on Lance. Memorabilia from past tournaments lined almost every square inch on each side but the highlight was on the middle of the back wall. A special plaque showed the winners of every single Silver Conference tournament since humans paid homage to the power of Ho-Oh's sacred flames. As expected, Allison's name was the last one on there before a blank space occupied the next spot. No trainer has ever won consecutive championships at the Silver Conference. Mr. Goodshow made his way to the podium to kick off the festivities for about 75 sponsor representatives.

"Hello and thank you all for coming to this sponsor dinner. Without you, the Pokémon League would not be as great as it could be. All of your goods and services provide trainers of all skill levels the chance to make it this far. That being said, the two finalists are in our midst with their fighting spirit behind them. Mitch! Raise your hand for everyone to see." I did at the cost of feeling uncomfortable. "And now where is Miss Allison?" Her hand went up on the other side of the room. "Splendid! If you bump into them in the next hour, give them your support. Now let's eat!"

Catering groups brought out their food and placed their dishes on the long line of tables along the back wall starting with salads and soups before moving on to main dishes then ending with desserts. Letting everyone else get in line seemed like a reasonable thing to do since I wasn't hungry. Instead, I sat in a padded seat facing the eternal flame wondering how to approach the battle. Six feet thumped behind me 45 minutes later followed by a voice.

"You should get somthin' to eat mister!" Only a certain group of people I know speak like that.

"Hey Nick! How's it going?" Nick, Laura, and Marybeth sat in the same row as me in their most formal attire. Nick wore a long sleeve plaid shirt with a Miltank bolo and black work pants while his wife wore a white dress and white sun hat. Marybeth had the same style as her grandmother except her color was a pastel yellow.

"Fine! Farm's bein' takin' care of while we're here."
"I didn't know you guys had *that* much of an impact since you were struggling with getting a milk
stand in the Olivine market."

"We were a little short around that time," Laura answered. "You helped us sell a lot more after the
market was over though haha! Now they tell everyone about us before battles here too."

"Uh huh! And now the nice people invited us here and are help on the farm too," Marybeth added.
"Come on Mitch, get some food. Pleeeeeease? It's really good!" Oh how I wish I was a child again.

"What should I get?" I playfully asked.

"Everything!"

I smiled. "I'll try to!" Small children are funny not because they try to be, but because they're just
honest and innocent. It sucks that everyone grows out of that stage at some point.

Luckily for me, I could take two plates down the line. Salad for the appetizer, steak and mashed
potatoes for my main dish, cookies for the dessert, water to drink, but no chicken parm. However, I
took some chicken fingers and pasta sauce from earlier in the line along with grated cheese to
make my own "poor man's" version. All four of us just talked about life while we ate until
Marybeth had to go to the bathroom and couldn't find it so Laura excused herself too. A few other
sponsors walked by to wish me luck, but it felt like they were forced into it by their PR
departments. Don't really have a problem with it either since I didn't even want to be here. As it got
closer to 5:45, Nick offered me some advice.

"Son… trust your gut out there. You didn't get here on just luck alone." He's right. None of my
badges were handed to me. None of my wins here were handed to me. "Marybeth wanted you to
have this." He pulled out the Growlithe doll I got her after their Growlithe was sent to the hospital
in Olivine. "She thinks it'd make a nice good luck charm since you got it for her. She'd sleep with it
every night that our Growlithe was in the hospital."

I stared at it analyzing how worn out it was; discolored in a few spots from the tear stains. "I'll have
it next to me the whole time." The guards that helped bring me over here told me that I had to get
to my press conference. "Tell Marybeth that she was right; the food was delicious."

More people were hollering for me as I was escorted to the side entrance. By this time, the gates
had opened and people were just starting to file in. A Ponyta had made its way through the
commotion and came up to me. The agents had their hands at the ready to call out their Pokémon
until I told them to ease up as it sniffed around my belt before releasing Umbreon from its ball.
Umbreon looked excited to see it.

"Hold on… you're that one from Mount Silver aren't you?" Ponyta nodded. "Well I don't know
what you want, but I can't take you into battle with me." It shook its head as if I guessed its motives
wrong. "I think I have an idea on why you're here." I pulled out my phone to make a call. "Hey
Carly. Carly! Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear. We're in the VIP line right now. Something wrong?"

"Not wrong. A Ponyta came up to me and I want you watch it while I battle."

"Is it wild!? What if doesn't obey me?"

Umbreon gave me a look mixed of pleading and seriousness after he overheard her. "It won't. Can
you do me this one favor? You're the fire type expert."
"Of course! I did say that I'd be here to help. Where do you want me to pick it up?"

"Side entrance in five minutes if you can. I have to be," *click*. She hung up on me then appeared about 30 seconds later breathing heavily. "You didn't have to push it that much. Anyway, I'll tell you the story about this thing later. Guys, thanks for your help getting me here. Now I want you to make sure my friend doesn't get bothered with too many questions about this Ponyta when she's in the VIP area. Is that okay or am I asking too much? Be honest."

"That's not unreasonable for us to do," one of them relayed back to me.

"Prefect! I have to go in there now. Return now Umbreon!" His smile was beaming as he went back into the ball; guess his friend showed up to watch.

Ashley took me through the double doors to a room filled to the brim with media personnel yet again. I asked her if I could give an opening statement; she said it was okay if I didn't walk out immediately afterward. I stood at the podium and the room went silent.

"Before we start, I just want to open with a statement. My Pokémon and I got here by putting our blood, sweat, tears, heart, mind, and soul into our battles. Every fight was with 100% effort, win or lose. We did so much work for this one moment and now everyone's banged up because of it… they don't care though. I know that they'll risk nothing short of their life for me and they know that I'll risk everything for them. First question."

A clear, 70-degree Fahrenheit night with a waxing gibbous moon were the first two things I noticed as I waited in the tunnel. I then looked up in the stands to see where my friends were and then I looked for Jasmine. Mild gusts of wind occasionally made their way across the field but it'd have no serious impact on the battle. Both our trainers' boxes were painted different colors sporting different patterns and advertisements for more fanfare. The PA announcer ran through the mandatory list of things to say before introducing us; I couldn't hold back a smile as he mentioned the Moomoo Milk farm.

"Llllllladies and Gentlemen! Tonight we have the finals of the Silver Conference! This trainer hails from Violet City. He's gotten this far on only six registered Pokémon. Every single battle by this trainer has been a grind-it-out type of battle except his last match where he recorded the first 6-0 in Pokémon League history. In the blue corner… Mitch!" The crowd got to its feet as cheers came from all 50,000 people; I knew that having intro music was a dumb idea. I snuck a peek to the VIP box area and my friends were there screaming in support with the Ponyta.

"Mitch! Mitch! Mitch! Mitch," the crowd yelled in sync as I took my place in the blue box. Adrenaline made me start hopping in place as the lights dimmed and an instrumental CD track played softly.

"This trainer has won every single match here in convincing fashion. Not a single trainer has found a way to gain an edge for any given length of time. The reigning champion of the Silver Conference, the star from New Bark Town. Ladies and gentlemen, in the red corner… Allison!" Trumpets rose to a crescendo as an electronic keyboard melody followed on the CD. She walked out with her head held high waving to the audience as the referee ordered us to the center. "Now the referee will go over the rules."

Our referee moved to midfield and had an earpiece microphone. "Congratulations to you two for getting here. This will be a full Pokémon battle with both sides being able to substitute freely. A halftime period will be granted when one trainer has knocked out three of the other's Pokémon. The battle is over when all six of one trainer's Pokémon are deemed unable to battle. A few more notes:
no running onto the field until the battle is over, halftime is 15 minutes long, and all my decisions are final. In the event of a tie, the match will be rescheduled 24 hours from the end time of this match. Any questions?"

I took off my jacket and tossed it aside; a few gasps were uttered at the sight of the claw marks. The Growlithe doll would be placed by my right foot once I got back to my box just like I said I’d do. "No sir."

"Nope." Cheering nearly drowned out the referee's instructions.

"Then let's get going." Allison extended her hand and put on a fake smile. I could easily walk away knowing how terrible of a person she is while feeling no shame. On the other hand, it is a respectful gesture and it'd be better for me to keep my promise to Jasmine by shaking it since Allison is showing an ounce of sportsmanship; Allison looked surprised when I shook it before returning to our boxes.

"Allison in the red corner, toss out your first Pokémon." It was odd that she'd be the first one to start since the reigning champion should have the advantage.

"I choose Scizor!" No surprise since it was the measuring stick she used.

"I choose Growlithe!" He was a little intimidated at the noise but shook it off to stand tall. "Looks like the stage is set."

"Scizor versus Growlithe. Begin!"

"Scizor, return!" I knew she wasn't that stupid. "Gyarados!"

She wants to play the type advantage game huh? "Growlithe get back! Ampharos!"

Allison pulled out its ball. "Come back! Go Ursaring!" The referee hadn't even gotten a chance to announce the previous matchup but he raised the flags. "Slash!" Ursaring sprinted straight ahead with its right claw glowing.

"Counter with Thunder Wave!" Weak bolts of electricity surrounded it but it still swung its arm around to land a powerful hit. "Discharge!" Ursaring was too close to jump out of the field of electricity that Ampharos let out.

"Slash!" It didn't seem to feel any pain as it charged again.

"Discharge!" Again, it took a heavy hit. "Charge in with Thunderpunch!" Ampharos threw a nasty uppercut that sent Ursaring staggering.

"Slash attack!" It went down to one knee from the paralysis. "Quick, rest it off!" It lied on its stomach to recover all the damage.

"Don't let up! Wail on it!" She charged in to punch it as much as she could before it woke up.

"Got you now! Wake up and use Thrash!" Ursaring threw its body into Ampharos and returned the favor by punching her wildly.

"Zap it off you!" She let out another Discharge which sent it back.

"Rest again!" It ran around the field aimlessly before slamming into the side wall from the confusion it suffered.
The referee ran over to its side to check but it was clear from my point of view. "Ursaring is unable to battle. Ampharos wins!" Allison didn't seem too worried about losing one of the heaviest hitters in Johto.

"That was good Mitch. Both of us got something out of that round but I think I ended up with the better result if you know what I mean." There's no way she bet on the entire sequence happening, did she? If she did, then she's assuming I'll be smart about how I battle which means I'll be dumb. No! If I make poor decisions, then I'll lose and she gets another shot at the Elite Four and the prize money. Fuck it, I'm going for the win.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night. Ampharos come back. Espeon!"

"Gyarados!"

"Shit! I can't use Ampharos now; she needs to rest. Are you okay to go?"

Ruby looked back at me. "I'm fine. The machine did its job."

"Okay Gyarados, Hyper Beam!" The large blast came in faster than I thought.

"Jump and use Psybeam!" Her timing of the jump made it so the beam missed but she was still off balance when Psybeam was fired; the attack grazed it. "Psychic!" Picking it up wasn't going to work so she fired a ball of energy instead for a solid hit.

"Hyper Beam again! Sweep away!" Gyarados fired the move while moving its head side to side. Ruby tried to dodge but couldn't escape the blast. When the smoke cleared, she was unconscious.

"Espeon is unable to battle. Gyarados wins!"

"Are you okay Ruby!? Ruby!?"

She opened her eyes and began to crawl back to me. ". . . I... failed... just... like... Cianwood," she panted.

It still made me upset that Sara messed her thinking up this bad. "No you didn't! I knew how to handle Chuck after you went down and now I know how to handle this Gyarados. Take a good rest."

"Wait!" she scooted over faster before falling asleep at my feet. "Now you can call me back."

I gently pet her head then called her back "Well deserved." Our referee looked impatient with how long I was taking, but I already had a plan. "I'll fight fire with fire." My own Gyarados let out a series of grunts while looking back at me as if it was trying to tell me something. Was hers stronger than mine? But he's never intimidated, not even in the face of electric types.

"So you're relying on your imperfect MA-01 to take down my perfected MA-06?" That bitch! Now I know she wasn't kidding about getting Pokémon from Team Rocket.

"Yours still isn't perfect. Trust me."

"Is that so? Thrash attack!"

No way was I going to let that get too close without a defense. "Hydro Pump!" The wall of water kept it at bay as Allison's beast couldn't break through. "Again!" Unfortunately the attack failed to hit its target and my own Gyarados eventually got slammed.
"Keep thrashing!" I bided my time until just the right moment.

"Ice Fang! Bite that tail with as much force as you can!" Ice fang was a move that I rarely used considering it was weaker than the other three, but it threw Allison for a loop when it bit down hard into the opposing Gyarados' tail once it got near its face.

"Get it off with Hyper Beam!" The move failed to hit my Pokémon by veering off into the sky in its panicked state.

"Let go then finish it with your own!"

"Dodge!" Allison's Gyarados tried to move but its tail had gone limp. The lack of mobility made my attack land and sent her Gyarados toppling to the ground with a loud thud and dust kicking up.

"Allison's Gyarados is unable to battle. Mitch's Gyarados wins!"

"...but how?"

I shook my head. "Imperfect… just like mine. The only difference is that I knew its weak point." I waved over to the referee and told him to get a medic. "By the way, it may never battle at 100% again. It's currently paralyzed from the bite point down." An ambulance rushed onto the field and the official ordered her to call back Gyarados so the transport would be easier.

"So this is how it's going to be?" Allison mumbled. "Okay… I'll play along in your game." She's mentally stronger than Sara so intentionally hurting my Pokémon while still focusing on winning is a deadly combination.

"I hope that was money well spent. This isn't a game either. If you hadn't opened your mouth to get inside my head, none of this would've happened. Gyarados, return." She's going to go for the tail next time I use him so keeping him safe for as long as possible would be best. "Come on out Growlithe!"

Her hand slowly moved to her next choice once her Gyarados was taken away. "Raichu!" Both flags went up. "Double Team!" Copies of the mouse Pokémon appeared all over the field.

"Keep calm buddy! Sweeping Flamethrower!" Growlithe’s head moved to hit the real one but Allison was a step ahead.

"Slam!" Poor Growlithe didn't see it coming from behind and got smacked with its tail. "Now use Agility!"

"Flame Wheel! Wait for it to come to you!"

"Don't stop!" Growlithe's Flame Wheel acted as a shield while Raichu kept running around until it got tired.

"Now ram into it!" He charged ahead to nail it in the stomach. "Flamethrower!"

"Thunderbolt!" Both attacks collided at midfield. "Agility into Slam!"

"Take Down!" Raichu's added speed made its attack hit harder and Growlithe was tossed to the ground in front of Allison with his eyes closed.

"Growlithe is unable to battle. Raichu wins!" He opened his eyes and staggered the length of the field before rubbing my leg; I returned the favor by petting him everywhere.
Finding the strength to walk back to me twice... and I think everyone else left is going to follow suit. "Very good, boy! You set us up for success. Get some rest now." I turned to the tear-stained toy as a reminder to keep pushing. Raichu is a threat with its speed now that Ruby can't battle; gotta take a risk here on Raichu's abysmal defense. "Gyarados!" It stared down the electric mouse while growling. "It's been awhile since I had you against an electric type but I need every ounce of your power. Up for the challenge?" He nodded while still eyeing his target.

"I knew you'd crack eventually Mitch," Allison jeered. "Pressure getting to you?" She's right for a change; we're almost to halftime and it's 4-4 but she's only revealed Scizor as an alternate option.

"Not at all." That was a lie. "My plan's pretty solid here." That wasn't a lie.

"Raichu versus Gyarados. Begin!"

Allison pointed to the clear night sky. "Thunderbolt! Fry it to a crisp!" Gyarados and I knew what was coming; he gave me a nod sensing my plan. I was hesitant to let him take the hit, but Gyarados' quirk is going to come in handy.

"Hyper Beam! Cover the field!" After taking the hit to get his adrenaline pumping, the Hyper Beams fired couldn't be dodged and Raichu stood no chance to fight after Growlithe weakened it. Gyarados roared as the rush left his body and he fell with his head facing me and was twitching.

"Raichu and Gyarados are unable to battle. The round is a draw!" The crowd roared in appreciation as the scoreboard started a timer to signal the break.

"Watch out for the tail Raichu!" It had gotten up and slammed its tail into Gyarados' while it was twitching. The plan to send out Gyarados on Raichu was twofold: knock it out with a powerful Hyper Beam and a little poke from a Raichu's tail isn't going to shatter its spine unlike Scizor's claws. Nice try bitch; he lives to fight another day. Arguing with the referee wasn't going to do me any good so I just walked back to my corner to plan how I was going to win.

As it stands, we're tied at 3-3 with one extra Pokémon revealed. Allison has a healthy Scizor plus two mystery Pokémon while I have a weakened Ampharos plus a healthy Umbreon and healthy Furret. Lying in wait potentially are: Misdreavus, Houndoom, Dugtrio, Exeggutor, Crobat. Based on only the mystery Pokémon, Umbreon is my best chance since it can take a few hits and poison everyone except Crobat. Furret struggles with Misdreavus yet handles everyone else just fine. Ampharos is a nuisance to all except Dugtrio which works in my favor if I can paralyze something.

"Let's get going," the referee yelled over. I snuck a peek at my friends to see if they were enjoying the battle; they looked like they were enjoying. Another scan saw Nick nodding while every gym leader remained emotionless. Only Lance was absent from what I guessed was the executive suite. "Blue corner, send out your Pokémon."

"Ampharos!" Something's going to get paralyzed.

"Sorry to bust your bubble, but it's not going to be doing anything. Dugtrio!" Wanting to avoid being interrupted like last time, the referee signaled for the battle immediately. "Slash!"

"Dodge and use Cotton Spore!" It moved across the field to hit Ampharos as she sent the sent the cotton balls to Dugtrio; she's done her job. "Come back!"

"Oh no you don't. Pursuit!" Dugtrio rammed into her so hard that she moved out of the red laser's line. "Fissure," she coldly ordered. Our field had split in two as Ampharos fell between the four-foot-deep crack before being sent back to the surface covered in rubble. She only made it halfway
to me before she couldn't move anymore.

Talk about responding after Allison made a statement of her own. "It's okay girl; just stop there. I don't want you to hurt yourself anymore!"

"Ampharos is unable to battle. Dugtrio wins!"

"Return Ampharos." I stared at Allison. "Pursuit? Really?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Got it from breeding with a Raticate. Nothing wrong with that." I'll give her that one. "I'm going to enjoy sending your Pokémon into more fissures." Again with the trash talking. She should've placed a bet on how much of that she'd be doing.

"Furret!" Her speed is better than Umbreon's so it's my best shot to keep up with a slower Dugtrio.

"Furret versus Dugtrio. Begin!"

"Underground now Dugtrio!"

"You too Furret!" Bits of the field popped up as the two were trying to find each other deep underground.

Allison flashed an evil smile. "Fissure!"

"Furret, up to the surface and use Quick Attack to jump!" It was a long shot but Furret's speed combined with the soft ground made it easy to come back to the top, find a place to set her feet, and jump as high as she could to avoid the deadly move.

"Slash when it comes down!" It popped up and waited patiently for her to land.

"Iron Tail!" Her tail lit up despite her awkward position and she put enough power to where Dugtrio had to shake the cobwebs off. "Dig away girl!" She looked confused but went for it anyway.

"Follow that damn Furret then Slash away!" Allison was getting more intense; she's sounding like she wants to only injure my Pokémon and losing focus. More divots formed as the two chased each other until Furret popped out.

"Go back in the hole and use Return!" With all the carving they did underground, she had more room to maneuver and loose dirt soon came out of all the holes. "Quick Attack to send it up for the judge for me please." Dugtrio's heads popped out of the hole with eyes closed.

"Dugtrio is unable to battle. Furret wins!" Allison blew it big time with her Dugtrio. She should've switched it out to get its speed back but I'll take it. Gotta love it when people forget how to battle. Luckily for me, I made the decision to win instead of trying to circumvent her betting choices very early in this battle.

"Oh my… it's been a long time since I've been pushed into a corner. I still have two my Pokémon that have been with me the longest. Let me introduce you to Houndoom!" The ref signaled the start of the round as I showed no signs of subbing out Furret. "Crunch!"

No way was I going to let that thing bite down to her bones. "Iron Tail! Break its teeth!" Her tail swung and missed as it ducked on the initial hit; it bit her still glowing tail and she definitely felt it. "Take it for a ride!" Furret was still in pain but immediately used Quick Attack to get it off.
"Use Flamethrower!" Flames engulfed her and she sustained a burn.

"Hurry and go underground!" Hopefully the lack of oxygen smothered it.

Allison was getting impatient. "Smog! Get it to the surface!" Smoking it out of the hole was something that I had no defense for and she popped out immediately. "Charge in with Faint Attack!" Furret was sent in front of me.

Furret could still be good against Scizor since she still has some speed. "Okay Furret… if you've got anything left, use Return. If not, I'll call you back." She snapped up and ran full steam to nail it in the chest.

"That's it! I'm sick of this annoying… thing! Flamethrower!" The force of the attack sent her to my feet unconscious.

"Furret is unable to battle. Houndoom wins!" Just like everyone else, she tried to crawl back even closer to me despite being at my feet when she woke up.

"Get some rest girl. You did more than enough this battle. It's up to Umbreon now." My hand reached for his ball knowing he has so much pressure on him. He was hesitant to come with me knowing he'd lost his previous master in a brutal fashion. He went from wary of me to trusting me. He went from a volatile laboratory environment to a caring one. Most importantly, he went from having nobody to having a full-blown support system where he is accepted and loved. Now it's time for his favorite thing to do: battle.

Mitch's championship battle was nothing short of intense. I had never seen as much skill, finesse, mind games, and quick thinking in a battle. I'm not in Mitch's head so I don't know why he saved me for last. Gyarados has always been the one to finish his battles long before I stumbled into his campsite on that night. My eyes scanned the surrounding area and two things caught my attention.

The first was the giant scoreboard showing I was up against a Houndoom and Scizor of all things. Nobody on our side was in reserve either; I had to do this on my own. Everyone else had done something to put Mitch in a spot to win except me. Now it's my turn to contribute.

The second thing was Mitch's friends in a luxury box. All of them held a nervous look except for the old farmer; he kept a straight face. Red flames came out from behind a girl and the rest of the body followed; a Ponyta. But why was it out of its ball? I'm sure we locked eyes and she winked. Wait… Emily!? How in Arceus' name did she make it here!? Whatever, no time for that. I'm staring down a snarling Houndoom on a mess of a battlefield and the referee just gave the signal to battle.

"Go for Faint Attack Houndoom!" So Mitch's opponent wants a contest of the hardest hitting Faint Attack? She'll get one.

"Toxic!" No Mitch! What the hell!? Well, I trust him so firing the purple blobs at it would make it easier to wear down once they hit. "Charge with your own Faint Attack!" Finally! I ran in only to have my teeth glow and land a weak Bite attack; this cannot be happening. Not now of all times.

"Flamethrower!"

"Get behind it!" I maneuvered around so that I was standing in front of Mitch's opponent.

"Damn Rockets… they did say the experiment could mess it up, but I didn't know to what extent," she mumbled under her breath. Nobody… and I mean nobody mentioned anything of the sort
whenever I was battling. Did this person have something to do with me? "Crunch!"

"Quick Attack!" I got lucky this time as I rammed into Houndoom's side. "Faint Attack!" A bit of satisfaction came over me as I leveled it again. It remained on the ground longer that I thought due to poison taking its toll.

"Smog!" The poisonous cloud set my lungs on fire so I ran away to escape further harm. Once I got out, I felt fine and saw Houndoom collapse from my poison.

"Houndoom is unable to battle. Umbreon wins!" Only one Pokémon on each side; I've been waiting for this moment since I was a kit. Mitch's opponent held her last hope in her hand.

"Now that the freak is out here looking a little weak. It's time I put it in its place."

Mitch did not take that very well by the look on his face. "In case you haven't been keeping up, I've been playing to win since the beginning. I'm not scared about your little wager anymore. Now call out your damn Scizor so we can figure out who's going to be immortalized and who's going to go home a loser. It's 1-1 and I'm not playing for a tie."

"Be careful what you wish for. Go Scizor!" The dual type threat emerged without a scratch on it. I wish she had kept it out so Mitch could've landed a hit on it. At least I'll be the one to get that shiny coat dirty.

"Scizor versus Umbreon. Begin!"

"Agility!"

"Keep up with Quick Attack!" It flashed across the uneven battlefield while I tried to hit it or at least keep up with it; damn thing was too fast. "Double Team into Metal Claw!" Multiples of Scizor moved about until one came at me.

"Dark Pulse!" Between the speed it was moving at and the force of my attack, I did some serious damage. "Faint Attack!" Only two steps into my charge, I used Toxic instead. Purple blobs covered it but it just shook the ooze off.

"Scizor can't get poisoned which means you can't stall forever. Now use Metal Claw!"

"Counter with Bite!" Nothing happened as I took its full force hit which made me stumble around. My rings soon started to glow and I felt nearly all my pain go away. If this was a full moon, then we'd be talking but I'll take what I can get.

"Moonlight!? Scizor, use Metal Claw! Keep the pressure on so it doesn't heal!" A barrage of attacks came head on as it was wildly swinging.

"Dark Pulse! Get it away!" My maw had no Dark Pulse to fire and I sprinted ahead with an off balance Quick Attack to chip away at its health.

"Pursuit!" The weak dark type move didn't hurt me too much. "Metal Claw!"

"Grab it with Bite!" Roulette wheel luck had me grabbing one of its claws while the other one struck me a few times. "Quick! Slam it down!" With as much force as I could gather, I flung it to the ground.

"Stand up and use Agility followed by Pursuit! You're better than this freak of a Pokémon!" I guess she doesn't know what happened to the last living thing to call me a freak in the middle of a battle;
not like Pinsir's alive to tell her anyway.

"Alright Umbreon, wait it out then go for Dark Pulse," Mitch ordered calmly. This time it tried coming from the side but I was prepared. Unfortunately, my body betrayed me by firing off a Toxic instead.

"Double Team followed by Metal Claw!" No time was wasted as it split into only three and all of them came at me too fast for me to counter.

"Dark Pulse" Mitch quietly ordered. The attack actually came out and forced Scizor to dodge and position itself in front of its master. I took the opportunity to get in front of Mitch.

The girl looked beyond frustrated. "I've think I've had enough of this. Agility into Metal Claw!" I could hope for Moonlight or Mitch better think of a counter since I don't think I can grab a claw at that level of speed.

"Umbreon," he said sternly. "You've worked so hard to stay alive in the face of death. You've worked so hard protecting your mate. You've worked so hard on dealing with all the adversity thrown your way plus getting comfortable on this team. Now I'm going to give you two options: Moonlight or Faint Attack. Pick Moonlight and I'll keep finding a way to win. Pick Faint Attack and I know you'll hit Scizor harder than any other Pokémon you've ever hit before. No matter what you do, we'll find a way to win." With Scizor charging, I crouched down and sprinted ahead with Faint Attack. Just like the hundreds of times before this one, I slightly moved my head so I'd lead with the shoulder.

We made contact at midfield for a split second before I sent the Scizor flying backwards skidding across the ground. I got down on all fours while heavily panting not knowing if I'll be able to stand after the massive hit I took. In the few seconds it took for the ref to assess the situation after the dust cleared, I struggled to get to my feet and stumbled back down. Through all the screaming and gasps in the crowd, I looked around to see Mitch keeping calm before I turned to see Emily pleading with her eyes for me to get up. A second attempt was short lived as I felt too much pain.

"Come on Umbreon!" Mitch screamed now that the attack had successfully landed. "You've worked so hard to get to this point! You're almost at the top Umbreon!" It hit me; Tom's final words just before I was taken away from him. I will always be stronger than my opponent. On the third try, I succeeded in standing up. I howled in a mix of pain and adrenaline for the longest eight seconds of my life to remain standing as the referee made the decision.

"Scizor is unable to battle. Umbreon is the winner! This match goes to Mitch from Violet City!" The crowd erupted as the scoreboard had Mitch's picture in the middle followed by our pictures underneath in the order we came out.

Tom... Quilava... Mitch... I did it. No... we all did it.

We're Silver Conference champions.
Chapter 54- Gloria & Aftermath

There comes a point where you must accept the fact that hard work and preparation can all go down the drain because you need to risk something. As Umbreon chose to attack instead of heal, I realized how dumb I was to throw Gyarados away to a Raichu when I maybe could've toughed it out by choosing Umbreon. Espeon didn't need to stay in against her Gyarados, Ampharos should've been called back immediately against Dugtrio, I almost let Furret get sucked into its fissure too, and then putting all the pressure on Umbreon to finish. Although he didn't seem to mind, it hurt me that I put him in a tough spot when I first called on him.

Seeing him in action against Scizor changed my mind though. He's so locked in when battling that he doesn't look like he feels the pressure of the situation; all he wants to do is win. No trying to dodge any more than what I say, no second guessing, and he's not afraid to go head-first despite the chance of a wrong attack. If he had gone for Moonlight, then we would've probably lost in the long run. Allison had zero reason to make her Scizor any faster down the line after it used Agility three times and Umbreon has been hitting his hardest with Faint Attack every time. The collision was the most cringeworthy thing I've seen; even surpassing what I saw in Olivine. At those speeds, it was amazing that he didn't shatter any bones or flat out die.

"Come on Umbreon! You've worked so hard to get to this point! You're almost at the top Umbreon!"

I've never screamed so hard in my life as I tried to rally him to stand and finish what Tom started. He rose and howled for what seemed like an eternity only stopping just before the referee announced that he had won. The scoreboard made my picture bigger and flashed my team below the winning banner; we did it. We won the whole fucking thing. I sprinted to Umbreon jumping and swinging my fist, screaming in pure joy at the effort everyone gave today. He collapsed into my arms as I kneeled next to him.

"You did it Umbreon!" I practically squealed with my voice being worn out. I did my best to hold him but everywhere I touched made him wince or moan. "We'll have plenty of time for hugging later. Get some rest now." He snuck in a smile as the beam brought him back safely. Allison had turned to walk to her tunnel with a smirk as the crowd's roar reverberated around the stadium and into the night sky. Every second felt like an hour when no signs of it stopping anytime soon.

All my friends in the press box were jumping for joy while the gym leaders in the executive suite kept a poker face… except for Jasmine. Her hand covered her mouth while a few tears of joy fell from her eyes. She opened the door for a few more leaders to at least nod in approval. The referee was replaced with Mr. Goodshow holding the trophy.

The old trophy was a gold stand resembling a twisting tree trunk with a Poké ball on top until it was replaced by a thinner stand with a set of wings protruding out from the center about halfway up the stand; the ball remained on the top. One artist's representation of Ho-Oh's wing and the other one of Lugia's was used since nobody had seen them in at least 150 years. I had to believe that someone saw them but kept it to themselves.

"Congratulations Mitch," the chairman opened with after he was handed a microphone. "You
overcame all the obstacles in your way to get to this point. The fighting spirit you've shown and the bond you shared with your Pokémon has earned you and your team a place in Silver Conference history, Johto history, and Pokémon history for generations to come. On behalf of the Pokémon League... I hereby present you with this trophy as proof of your victory here tonight. Congratulations on becoming the Silver Conference Champion!" Cheering continued to come from the crowd while I held it up.

"Now as the winner of the Silver Conference, you have earned the right to challenge the Elite Four by the beginning of next year's tournament. Enjoy your win tonight; you've earned it!" The walk back to my tunnel was so satisfying as I held onto the trophy all the way to the press conference doors.

Ashley held a big grin. "Congrats Mitch! I don't know how you did it, but you did it!"

"Me neither" I joked back. "But I really do need to talk to you after this. It's something I'd rather not address in there but I could do it. Also, get a nurse with a portable healing machine. I'm not going in there until my team feels better than they are now."

She was uneasy. "Okay. I'll take care of this and I'll help after too." Most of the press conferences I had were met with rooms full of people. This room would be a 4:1 ratio where it'd be four people for one chair; not even the air conditioner could bring down the room temperature enough. Ashley did her thing before I got bombarded with questions.

"Jason Smith, Kanto National Radio. Odds makers had you as a huge underdog to win... so how'd you do it?" I internally cringed knowing that the payout for Allison would be enormous but I couldn't show it.

"I went with my gut, took risks, and adjusted on the fly as I needed to. Don't be fooled though; I made a few dumb decisions that made the battle that much harder. Also... massages. Everybody got massages except me. Maybe I should get one." Brandi caught my eye so I called on her instead of Ashley.

"Brandi Carlson, WJTV. Mitch, a lot of people say you don't look like a champion or don't have the aura of a champion. Your response?"

Stupid gossip. "Does the underdog ever truly look like a champion? Look at me: not really wearing anything fancy, no entrance music, and one of my arms has massive claw marks. Hell, my other arm looked like Swiss cheese before I got here after I had a run-in with a Skarmory colony. If anything, I embrace the fact I look like this. My Pokémon have put their blood, sweat, tears, heart, mind, and soul into this so I should do the same."

"What about the aura part?"

"I'll pick on Lance a little bit because he's a guy you'd think would have an aura. I'd argue that that's a disadvantage because the pressure stays on him to win every battle. But on any given day, he can be beat; the same goes for myself. Me not having an aura is fine... that just makes it easier to hustle everybody for a little extra cash." I got a few laughs out of that. "Next question."

The onslaught lasted another hour as the press asked me everything: how I wound up only bringing six Pokémon, who I gave my VIP tickets to, how much prep time I put in for my battles, how I handled the brutality of the final match, my favorite food, and so on. It took every ounce of willpower to avoid calling out Allison on her gambling or the fact that she was supposed to get Umbreon and Gyarados before I ruined her plan. Had I done that, I would've thrown away any
I respect I might've earned throughout this tournament. Ashley wrapped up the presser and helped break down the room while I remained at the podium wondering how to approach the prospect of going after the one trainer that was tied with Cory and Sara in terms of how much I hated them.

"I'll be done in about 30 minutes Mitch. You just wait for me in the stadium bleachers."

"Where do you want me to wait?"

"Follow the side stairs upward and you should end up near the sacred flame," she explained while making little hand gestures. I made the decision not to call everyone out quite yet and just soak it in by myself. From the opening battle where Lance outmaneuvered Allison to win 1-0 to my preliminary rounds on the worst fields here to my team picking me up after I had a mental breakdown to beating Wes, yet getting dismantled by a Shuckle of all things on worldwide television, only to scrape my way into the bracket round.

It only got more chaotic from there. Jason was a sore loser trying to send out Nidoking after the battle was over, I had two of my partners suffer injuries worse than the average Pokémon could deal with, I somehow kept Carly in the event despite her Typhlosion frying a Raticate, beat Davis to my dismay, beat Carly to my dismay, found out more about Cory before beating him, slaughtering Sara much to my delight, and finally beating Allison. The empty stadium still had the lights on and the flame burning but Ashley made her way next to me.

"So what's up?"

"It's about Allison." Her face defaulted to a confused look. "I'll tell you since Lance told me and I doubt they kept you too much in the loop with my case. Two of my Pokémon were experimented on by Team Rocket and they were supposed to be purchased under a pseudonym. Allison told me before our battle that she was the buyer." Ashley took down notes on her pad. "She also bet on every trainer in the quarterfinals to win."

"So what did she say about the bets?"

"The last eight trainers had certain odds but she dumped a lot of money…"

"For her to win the whole thing? Wouldn't she have lost a lot because you beat her and the fact that everyone else lost?"

"No, because she bet the most on me to win."

"Why you? She was clearly the favorite." It came to my attention that Ashley wasn't old enough to gamble so she had no idea why that makes sense.

"You good at math?"

"Depends."

"Okay, so you understand odds?" She nodded slightly. "Somewhere along the way I was favored at 10:1 to win the tournament but Allison has never been better than 3:2."

Her eyes widened. "How much did she bet on you?"

"A whopping 100,000P."

"That's insane! She'll get... add the zero… 1,000,000P!?"
"Bingo. Allison will also get even more money because of other side bets. I can't prove it even though she showed me a stub. Maybe she was trying to psych me out with a fake one, I don't know. She mentioned that the bet was made at the Goldenrod Game Corner if that helps."

"Unfortunately I can only pass this on to someone with a higher rank. Even though it's buried in our bylaws when you get your trainer's license, it's still against league policy for you to place bets on yourself or others if you are participating in league sanctioned tournaments. Let's just say it gets complicated when you factor in other things but for now it looks like Allison's in trouble."

"That's all I needed to know." We both sat in silence staring at the sacred flame for a few minutes then at the slightly repaired battlefield before Ashley was getting ready to leave.

"Before I go, I'll give you this. The chairman trusted me of all people with this so I was a little nervous getting it as soon as you won." A small piece of rectangular paper was presented in my hand; it was the check for 500,000P. "I've heard all kinds of stories on what happens to the prize money. Which end of the spectrum will you be on Mitch?" All that money. Mine to do whatever I please. "The stadium lights are automatically going to go off at midnight which is about an hour from now. You're welcome to stay longer; don't hurt yourself on the way out if the lights are off. Last thing: the sooner you set a date to challenge the Elite Four, the more they'll like you. Although they're ready at the drop of a hat, some time to prepare would be nice. See ya!" A text came through shortly after she left.

Yoooooooooo! That was insane and the presser was nice! Victory party? We're hanging out in the cafeteria getting food if you want to stop by Davis sent.

I'll give you guys a notice. I just need some time alone.

Absolutely! Take your time.

The warmth of the sacred flame plus Jasmine's jacket comforted me as the temperature had dropped a fair amount from the start of the battle. The clear sky allowed for the stars to be visible for anyone still up at the Indigo Plateau.

"Well… I guess it's time. Alright everybody, come on out!" They all materialized looking healthy despite a quick healing. "If you guys didn't see or hear by now, we won the whole thing!" They still cried out in joy whether they knew of the win or not.

"Let me start off by saying each of you paved the way for a win regardless of when you were called out. Not a single attack was wasted the entire battle. Every miss we had created new weaknesses for Allison and we exploited the hell out of them. Who gives a damn if Dugtrio can hide underground? Who cares that Ursaring is one of the strongest physical attacking Pokémon in Johto? You guys didn't... which is why we won. I didn't get caught up in the drama about how great our opponent was supposed to be or how strong her Pokémon were because I knew you all had it in you!" More cheering. "Now I'm going to let everyone relax out here for a few minutes before I talk about what's next. Don't you dare poke that bowl of fire Ampharos; it's one of the hottest flames in existence."

The six of them paired off like I thought they would by moving a few rows down away from the flame. Umbreon looked a little more exhausted than the others and was slower moving around but Espeon helped him move about. Only he stared at the field without emotion. It had been a long time coming for him so it'd be best to let him soak it in when he's not in pain. I just threw my hands behind my head and laid back in my seat closing my eyes.

"So it is finally over?" The voice echoed in my head after about five minutes; it wasn't Espeon.
scared flame grew in size but not in temperature as a shadow emerged from the night sky in a glorious light and roosted on top of the bowl.

"Ho-Oh..." I whispered in complete awe. As it went to stretch its rainbow-colored wings, Umbreon sprung in front of me lighting his rings in a battle stance with Espeon following behind since they were the closest. "Wait you guys!"

It angled its winds at the three of us as if it was ready to attack. "So this is the greeting I receive after returning here, is it?" The remaining four managed to make their way in front of me with Gyarados slightly ahead of everyone else. Crackling of the fire made the only sound as both sides stood on edge. It retracted its wings slowly until it was perfectly perched with a puffed-out chest.

"Back up you guys." They did so as I took a step forward. Before I could apologize, it started to talk to all of us.

"I have flown across the skies for centuries and have not seen Pokémon so loyal to their master that they would face me on their own free will despite my power." I couldn't bring myself to speak; it could've burned all of us to a crisp if it chose to do so. History portrays Ho-Oh as a Pokémon who will rarely attack, but it still must defend itself somehow. "I have been watching over this entire tournament from the skies above this year just as I have done for the past few centuries and figured now was the right time to reveal myself to you... Mitch."

"Why?" I battled with so many conflicting emotions just to make the word come out as neutral yet firm.

"Humanity waits for my return, but unfortunately that time is not now. However, I will show myself to individuals who I deem worthy. You have had my eye for quite some time; my three loyal servants have reported your work as well. How you took in the Umbreon and Espeon, how you cared for your partners after nearly freezing to death, how you protected them against others with disregard for your own life; I've heard and seen it all since that day. Your actions tonight proved what we have been thinking all this time. If you had left this area, then I would have found you myself in the near future."

"They reported all that... and I didn't know?"

"Yes. They lurk in the shadows and just like me, only reveal themselves to those they deem worthy. Their standards are different than mine, but they still wait for the moment all of us can live with humans in peace."

"Do you watch over Ecruteak more often than other places? They pay more homage to you than anywhere I've visited in my travels. They eagerly await your return." It thought hard about my question.

"Every time I fly over the Burned Tower, I remember the war that took place. I remember how the land was reduced to nothing. I restored the land not for the humans, but for the Pokémon so that they may live in peace. The eternal flame I left behind here will go out when I command it to but in the meantime, it will serve as a reminder of the past. Humans dedicating a tournament to me to show the bonds they had with their Pokémon was a noble idea. Not many trainers have been worthy of my presence since the first ever tournament though. I was genuinely surprised that they did not tear down the tower that went up in flames and made the surrounding area a graveyard."

"So you know Morty?"

"Morty is a man of great character and one of the few humans I highly respect. His position of a
gym leader is not one I agree with but when the time is right, I will show myself to him as a reward for all he has done for the city's Pokémon."

"If you know about the graveyard, then do you know…"

"I do." It turned to Umbreon. "Your friend Quilava is doing fine. He has never stopped watching over you and he says you are stronger than he could ever be. I do have the power to revive him. However… what I have seen is that you prefer both of them being revived. I do not have the power to raise humans from the ashes nor do I interact with them in death. Arceus has told me that your first master is more than happy for you and owes his new life to Mitch for keeping you safe." Umbreon immediately lost it so I scooped him up to pet him.

I fought back tears of my own. "See buddy? Isn't… that… wonderful? They still remember you… just like you remember them."

"Your condition may seem overwhelming to deal with at first glance. Mitch's guidance from the moment he cared for you has kept you on the right path. As for the rest of you, you have shown me that there is hope for a future where all Pokémon and all humans can work together in harmony." I listened as I continued to console Umbreon.

"The loyalty you show to your master while maintaining your happiness rivals that of my servants’ loyalty to me. Truly that is something to be commended for. I offer this before I bid you farewell: you all will know when I am around in the future. In the meantime, I shall not allow the scared flame to be extinguished like it normally is after every tournament if you continue to stay here and press onward against the strongest trainers in Johto. The road ahead will be filled with obstacles. It will be up to all of you to see if you can rise above them. Farewell."

Ho-Oh flapped its massive wings and proceeded to fly away in the night sky leaving a trail of sparkling light before ascending too high to see. The flame had gone back to its normal size while a small feather ended up on a seat very close to the bowl so I picked it up.

"Everyone… what do we want to do? I have the option to challenge the Elite Four. Are all of you up for it? I'm not going to challenge them if you're all not healthy enough to do it." I could tell everyone was thinking it over. Eventually Espeon stepped forward.

"There's no guarantee that we'll be any healthier than we are now. We're also on a roll and the six of us think we should rest a little before we battle them. We want this chance Mitch."

Health… a simple word yet not always simple to gauge. "I know you guys want to keep going, but I need to think it over. The Elite Four are no joke. They won't toy with their opponents; they'll end every battle as fast as they can. I hope you can understand what I'm feeling." Five of them nodded while Umbreon had cried himself to sleep. I sat back down and let everyone enjoy the silence or petting for a few more minutes before I called them all back.

I'll be there in 15. Hope you guys saved some food for me. I'm starving lol I texted Davis. As soon as I got up to leave, the lights turned off leaving the fire to dimly light the path back to the exit. I took one step and the flame grew slightly bigger to fully light the pathway back to the door.

"Thanks Ho-Oh," I said while looking at the sky. "You too Tom."
Chapter 55- Delivering the News

Ho-Oh's flame allowed me to find the exit the stadium just a few minutes after midnight without falling. The air turned still and the temperature had dropped a decent amount as I made my way to the hotel yet it remained warm. Nobody had seen Ho-Oh in 150 years; well, at least not in Johto anyway. I still tried to wrap my head around it appearing to me for something that literally any given trainer can do. Any Pokémon can be lost and have the guts to waltz up to a trainer to be caught. Why was I different? Was it because I'd be willing to kill any person or Pokémon that would harm them? Couldn't be; Ho-Oh is all about peace. It did mention how happy everyone was with me. Again, how is that different than the average trainer? Maybe it's a combination of Umbreon's past, the fact that Ho-Oh can revive dead Pokémon, and what I've done since then. Yeah, that makes sense… for now.

You'd think there would be stragglers hanging around the gate or walkway back, but it was so late that nobody was there. The time between the end of my presser and me showing my face outside the stadium was probably too long for anyone to stick around. Not the best way to start my life as Johto's champion by keeping fans waiting. Maybe I should hold ask Ashley how to handle public relations because I don't think she'll follow me around. Upon arrival, the lobby was completely empty and I made my way over to the side healing machine.

"Hello! Congratulations on winning the Silver Conference," the nurse said while staring at my trophy. "I'll take your Pokémon if you want." I handed her the six balls and they flashed while the machine hummed away. "You're all set! The standard machines do a better job of healing than the portable ones so they'll be as good as new. Is there anything else I can do for you tonight?"

"Actually, yes. Could you leave a note for doctor Harrison? I want an appointment sometime tomorrow or the next day. I want a full physical on every Pokémon. She has my number."

"A… full… physical," she mumbled while scribbling it down. "I will forward that to her. Anything else?"

"Nope."

"Have a good night. Oh! Your friends are waiting in the cafeteria." I thanked her before walking out to the cafeteria.

The core four of Wes, Rui, Carly, and Davis were sitting at a circular table with covered catering pans and drinks on a longer table while the rolls and condiments were at the front of the line. A flat screen television had been brought in and hooked up; a battle channel was on and it was replaying an earlier battle from the tournament. I made it four steps before Davis saw me first.

"Hey guys. The champ is here," he nonchalantly exclaimed. Davis walked up to me and stopped before giving me a bear hug. "You son of a bitch," he joked while shaking his head. "And he gets a kick-ass trophy!" Carly jumped in next.

"I can't believe we know a famous person! And he gave me another member to add to my team."

"What are you talking about?" I asked with a puzzled look on my face.
"Remember that Ponyta you told me to watch? Well… it kinda wanted to go with me. Sorry," she sheeepishly explained. "Thanks for the guards by the way. Nobody really questioned me, but it was nice to have some support if things went south."

"Let me guess; you showed it to everyone else on your team."

"Just Rapidash. I figured making my way through the crowd on it would be an easier way to keep an eye on Ponyta. And I could also battle if anyone had a problem. Guess they ended up talking while we were walking and Ponyta started rubbing itself all over me when I hopped off. How could I say no?"

Well I didn't necessarily need Ponyta with me, but it would've been nice to have. "I think it'd be better off with you. The only reason it came to me in the first place was that I gave it food around Mount Silver." Never told them the truth about why I was out that way in the first place or why I gave it food; never will. "So where did you guys get the food?"

"No clue. We just got a note saying that the four of us were to meet in here… then one kid brought in the catering carts came in and dropped off all of this."

"Interesting… let's eat! Thanks for waiting on me."

The four of us ran up to snag our food as we eyed the selection. Hot grilled chicken with spices and lemon, wraps, hamburgers, hot dogs, baked ziti, cold chef salad with dressing, chicken parmesan, and a miniature cake pre-cut into six slices. Hell yes! Chicken parm, the dish of champions. The drinks were water and soda which is the standard when it comes to catering. As much as I'm okay with those, I could go for a tall glass of milk or apple juice.

"Alright guys… listen up," Wes said as he stood on his chair while holding a bag. "This man has done it all on the field. However, he's done a lot off it too." He looked me straight in the eye. "Mitch, you've been a nice guy to hang around in general but most importantly… you've been nice to all of us. You kept Carly in, stood by Davis, and helped Rui and myself enjoy this vacation. So…" he pulled out a six pack of bottled beer. Out of the bag "We'll drink to that!"

I stood up to respond. "Well then I'll drink to you guys. Carly and Davis saved my ass at least twice. Rui helped me give the best massages to my Pokémon. And Wes… Wes, you're probably one of the hardest trainers that I've ever gone against. If it was a full six on six battle, I'd probably lose. I had a little good luck charm too." I pulled out the Growlithe doll. "Now give us a beer!" He handed out one to everyone.

"Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

For the next two hours, everyone talked about their experience in the suite watching me go toe to toe against the reigning champion. I explained how I made my decisions in the middle of the battle, much to their delight. We watched replays of older battles and had mixed emotions knowing that some of those top tier trainers were eliminated before any of us got a shot at them. Then of course we laughed at battles that were over in less than three total attacks. With most of the food gone and the clock hovering around 2:30 in the morning, we decided to pack it in.

"So Mitch… are you going to challenge the Johto Elite Four?" Carly asked while stranding up to leave.

"I have to think about it. Everyone's not as healthy as I'd like to think and I'm seeing a doctor
tomorrow. They all want to, but I don't know if I can bring myself to do it."

"Well you have a year to think about it. Besides, we'll drop everything to come back to support you if you tell us. We still owe you."

"No you don't; we're even now. Go get some sleep." My two Kanto friends left after saying goodbye leaving Wes and Rui still finishing a bottle of water so I walked back over and sat down. "When are you guys going back to Orre? Or are you staying in Azalea Town?"

"We're staying in Johto," Rui answered. "Azalea Town was where Wes started on his own, but I think it would be best if we travelled around the region. Wes still needs to purify a few more shadow Pokémon and instead of guessing how much work he has left, I can be right next to him before he sends the ball over to Orre."

"That's good! Is it going to take a long time or will you be done soon?"

Wes leaned over. "It's hard to tell. I used to have an item that would instantly purify shadow Pokémon but I only found three of them. One was given to me, one was hiding in an underground city, and the third one was on top of Mount Battle. I'd rather not say what they were used on, but they were Pokémon that are practically invisible to humans and were fast Pokémon." I think I knew which three he was talking about yet I didn't want to push the issue.

"What's Mount Battle?"

He grinned. "You'd love it! It's you against 100 trainers from bottom to top."

"You won 100 matches in a row!?!"

Wes looked down. "Well I found the item before challenging the 100th trainer. I couldn't get past his team of Starmie, Crobat, Rhydon, and Machamp. I would've switched my team up a little bit if I knew it ahead of time. Everybody was healed physically, but the mental toll of winning battles 90-99 was too much for me in the end. I want to try again though." I tried to digest what he said. This man won 99 battles in a row; now I look like a bitch for struggling through this tournament. Why the hell did I of all people have to eliminate him from the Silver Conference? He went into a daze while staring at my pocket. "What the hell is that?" I looked down and saw Ho-Oh's feather sticking out.

"This? A bird's feather," I replied like I didn't want to give away my encounter. To my surprise, he pulled out his own rainbow colored feather from his jacket. Then Rui pulled out her own. All the lightheartedness turned to seriousness.

"I knew you were something special Mitch, but I had no idea…"

"How did you two meet it?" Rui started to rub her chin.

"Wes was battling the leader of the criminal organization known as Cipher on top of this large tower. After Wes defeated him, Ho-Oh flew over the tower and destroyed his getaway helicopter. It didn't stay for too long, but it stared at both of us before flying away and dropping a few feathers. Maybe if we purify all the Pokémon Cipher changed, it will come back to Orre."

"I don't doubt it." The three of us sat in silence for a little bit before I checked the clock. "I really need to get to bed guys. I'll do you a favor and get in touch with you guys on what I decide to do with the Elite Four. Here's my number."

Rui wrote it down and we parted ways, leaving me alone to glance over at the television. The
marathon of battling was ending and as soon as the camera showed the commentators with the graphic of Allison versus myself, I turned it off. A young worker looking about 17 years old came in to clean up the spread in a white button down and black dress pants; he looked exhausted pushing a cart.

"Was everything good sir?" He sounded like he had no clue who I was and was probably too tired to ask about the trophy sitting in front of him.

"Yes! Thanks for setting this up."

"Just doing my job. I wish the rest of the staff all didn't take the day off to watch the finals and go out afterward, even if we only had this one catering. Luckily the food was prepped; all I had to do was throw it in the ovens and bring it out. It's been a long 12 hours and I haven't heard about the battle since I've been in the kitchen all this time doing everyone else's work except to wheel out all the stuff and there's nobody left besides you right now; at least your friends understood why I couldn't stay. Our radio's been broken for a week and nobody's gotten a replacement yet and my phone gets no reception in the kitchen. Just my luck on the biggest day of the year." He looked away from me. "Sorry about that rambling. It's been a frustrating day. At least my boss said I don't have to clean the pans tonight." Before he got too engulfed in cleaning up, I walked next to him.

"Got a pen and paper?"

"Let me go to the cart and get it," he grumbled while pulling out a pad and pen. "Here you go."

"What's your name?"

"Martin." That was all I needed.

To Martin: keep grinding man. The more work you put in now, the greater the rewards will be in the future. I've learned that lesson in my travels early on and it's one of the biggest things that stuck with me. -Mitch

"Take this." Martin looked it over then blankly stared at me.

"Thanks I guess?"

"Do you know who I am?" Slowly but surely, I could see him put the pieces together.

"I-I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. You are Mitch! Then that trophy over there…"

I smiled. "Yup! Sorry for spoiling the result." I turned on the flat screen and a commercial was playing. "Not sure how far they're in, but here's the replay of the championship. I'd love to watch it with you but I'm about to go up to bed." I grabbed my trophy and left the cafeteria but quietly came back to leave a 500P tip on the end of the table as Martin intently watched the battle with newfound energy. I think I've turned my reputation around a little bit.

Unlocking the door to my room was probably the fifth most satisfying sound in the past week. Number four and three were Espeon slamming Sara's Vaporeon and Jolteon respectively into the side wall. Number two was the roar of the crowd while number one was Umbreon's Faint Attack hitting a Scizor at practically full speed. As for the best feeling, the hot shower combined with body wash is further down the line. Just because I put antibacterial ointment on my arm, does not mean it's immune to the pain from touch; still can't believe Espeon dug that far into me. After changing into athletic shorts and a clean shirt it was now about 3:30 which meant my crazy day had ended.
"Umbreon get out here." He materialized half-asleep. "You... are sleeping with me tonight. Espeon gets a lot of cuddling but now it's your turn. I'd do it more with everyone else, but they're happier in their balls. Maybe you might've changed their minds though since you've been outside a ball for most of your life. Now get comfy; you've earned it." We shifted around until he curled up on his side and his head rested on my chest. I hugged him and he purred nonstop. "I love you Umbreon. You and everyone else on the team are the best thing that's happened to me." His rings got lighter just a bit before they dimmed. A small lick on my face was the last thing I felt before I drifted to sleep.

I had a peaceful sleep going until Mitch decided to call me out. I was a little upset until I saw how exhausted he was and the trophy we won; the thing in full sunlight would sparkle enough to blind me. Badges are nice, but that trophy was easily 10 times better.

Mitch patted the bed after insisting I sleep next to him. The last time I slept in a bed with him was all the way back in Ecruteak city so I was alright with it. Getting comfy was annoying but eventually I settled in with him gently hugging me; purring soon followed. How could I hide how I really feel after his hug and warmth? It just occurred to me that I've never been even close to loving him like everybody else on the team so I gave him a lick. Not even Tom got a lick from me. When he's more active, I want to show him the love that I should've shown a long time ago. After seeing Ho-Oh, I'm more at peace with everything. All the work I did, all the dreams I had of beating the strongest Pokémon, and the hope I regained... given to me by a trainer who I bit as soon as I met him. I don't deserve this but Mitch doesn't see it that way. Never will I ever take him for granted.

Time seemed to slow down as I couldn't go back to sleep. The magnitude of what I did is now setting in after just staring at the trophy. Mitch was beyond knocked out so I made the move to get out of bed and walk over to the trophy to observe it. The artwork was pretty cool with the one wing from each legendary bird coming out from the center. I still couldn't find a way to fall asleep so I think it's time.

I tiptoed my way to the nightstand where Mitch had put everyone else's ball. I sniffed around until I found Ruby's ball. Staring at it wasn't going to do anything so I took the plunge by tapping the circle to let her out. Luckily the giant flash of light didn't make Mitch stir as she came out sleeping.


"Wha?" She stretched a bit before looking at the alarm clock. "Shade... it's almost 4:30. Are you okay?"

"I can't sleep. Step outside with me?" I walked over to the balcony door to attempt to open it by jumping and dragging the handle down. The door finally opened slightly after about the fifth try. I turned to see Ruby grinning.

"I got this," she said playfully.

"Oh yeah? I loosened it," I teased We both made our way to the balcony and sat on the thick railing staring out into the horizon of stars that were not covered by the clouds. The calm silence was broken when I rubbed my head against her cheek. "You cold? It was a little warmer during the battle."

She returned my nuzzle with her own. "It's gorgeous out here. I think Mitch would prefer his bed though."
"Thank Arceus I didn't wake him. The man's been through a lot and he needs his sleep."

"All of us have. Come to think of it, I've always wanted to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"Why did you save me that night so many months ago? That Noctowl should've killed me. I had no psychic power, no speed or power beyond one Quick Attack, nothing left for Swift, and no energy to run away. I used to have nightmares about the time I lost to Kingdra through when we found Mitch. Every night it was something. But here we are… champions and in the care of a loving person. Ho-Oh was right about us."

"How can I put this… you were scared and needed someone to help you get through a tough time. I was always willing to help outsiders by giving them directions or giving away berries. I made it very clear that any lost Pokémon should be sent to me but Noctowl was always looking for a meal; smaller Pokémon at night didn't stand a chance since he would get to them before I would. After what he did to you, I felt that I had to do more than give you a berry. You were -and still are- beautiful which made me a little more protective of you. If someone had done… other things to you… and I saw it, I'd bite down on their neck and shake it well past the breaking point or slam them into a tree." She locked lips with me for a long time before parting.

"I feared you at first, but then you fed me and told me your life story which made me feel comfortable. I do remember you telling me that you didn't do that with forest Pokémon because they're selfish though. Next thing I knew, we were snuggling in the nice bed of leaves you made me."

"Yeah… and then you kissed me first," I said with a grin; Ruby was blushing. "And that made me even more protective of you. Do you remember what happened next?"

"Tell me," she cooed.

"I blocked the wind from ever touching you that night and sang a lullaby to help you sleep. I think at that point we were mates, but neither of us said anything at the time and we waited until later in the journey. I didn't want to take that next step because of where we were, if you know what I mean." She rested her head on my shoulder.

"All that matters now is that I'm here with you. Nothing could be better." She gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

"That Ponyta I ran into by Mount Silver told me to embrace you like it's our last day on this earth and to tell you how much I love you every chance I get. I love you more than life itself Ruby."

"I love you too Shade." It was time. I hopped off the railing onto the floor with Ruby following me.

"I couldn't bring myself to say it while the three of us were on the bed after Mitch brought me back from Mount Silver so I'll do it now. Ruby… I want to have kits with you after this is done. I want to love you like no other Pokémon has ever loved before and raise an Eevee with you." I was breathing heavily after it came out; I can't believe I finally had the guts to say it.

Her whole body might as well have been red. She immediately threw herself at me and held me tight while throwing in a few more kisses. "Shade! I-I… yes! I want to have our kits!"

My body broke free of her grasp and I threw myself at her. We both cuddled on the balcony under the stars in silence until we thought we should go back inside. Mitch was still unaware of
everything that had been going on since he was sleeping like a rock. Both of us crawled into bed with me next to Mitch and Ruby next to me. We silently kissed and nuzzled each other until both us were about to fall asleep.

"Shade… I've been thinking the same thing for a long time but was too scared to ask. Thank you for telling me." I buried my head in her chest then looked her in the eye.

"My beautiful mate is going to make a beautiful mother."
Chapter 56- Decisions

How many times have I been able to sleep peacefully on my journey? Not too many. As soon as I stopped talking to Umbreon, that was it. The setting made it easy for me to easily stay asleep until a wet tongue made its way onto my cheek. Turning to the other side was the best way to handle it until another licking made me open my eyes. Umbreon was still going at it as my eyes flickered open.

"Mrrrrggg… alright alright Umbreon. I'm up," I mumbled while my vision adjusted. Espeon had been sitting on the floor looking at the two of us. "Let me guess… Umbreon let you out, didn't he?" She nodded. "Arceus, I guess I can't have one of you out by yourselves," I joked. My phone vibrating took my attention away from the two. So many unread texts yet Jasmine's stood out the most.

Text me when you wake up. Sent at 9:15am; no way was I going to notice that.

I'm awake. What's up?

Come to my room around 3. You'll get a knock on your door shortly. Jasmine replied immediately. Another incoming text came in from the doctor.

Saw your note. Tell me when you want their check-up. It would take a few hours to get everyone fully examined and I'd hate to have you waste your day just waiting around. I'm free all day so stop by whenever. Congrats by the way!

I'll be over by around 1 or 1:15.

My mom's texts were up next and she must've been a little too excited. Over 50 were sent while I was battling and included a lot of "that was close" or "great job honey." I'll give her an A for effort. Her last text was after last night's presser and it was that they couldn't wait for me to return home. A knock on the door followed.

"Hello? Mitch? You have a delivery," a woman said before I got the chance to open the door.

Six bulky bags were stacked on a cart. "What's this?"

"Food. Specifically Pokémon food. Each bag holds about 15 pounds. Where do you want it?"

"On top of the dresser I guess." After I helped her move the bags, she went on her way. Guess Jasmine wanted to make sure that everyone was well fed for the rest of the time I'd be here. The alarm clock read noon so I had some time to do what I wanted as I laid back down against the pillows.

I tapped the bed "Come here you two. Relax with me. I'll do two at a time starting with you guys."

It would be easier to have all six of them out at once, but I felt giving individual attention to them was better. Umbreon was way more affectionate compared to what he did up to this point for some odd reason. Espeon opted to sleep on top of me until Umbreon accidently nudged her a few times.
She stared at him then looked at me then stared back at him.

"You okay Ruby?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. It's just that... it's just that... Mitch... I want kits when this is all over."

Umbreon gently kissed and nuzzled her while I thought about what that would entail. I'm sitting on 500,000P so I could live anywhere I wanted to. It's only a matter of time before I'll truly be financially stable with endorsements or if I didn't get any deals, find a way to invest my money carefully. It also helps that the average trainer can handle raising a hatched Pokémon on the road so I'd think it I'd be able to do it with the resources I have.

I turned her on her side and rubbed her stomach carefully trying to avoid the scar. "You two were both out last night..."

"We were but now's not the time. Trust me... you'll know. You're okay with that?"

I kept rubbing it. "Of course. You'll be a good mother." I turned to Umbreon. "And you'll be a good father." We stayed still as the sun peeked through the window until I felt it was time to switch out to two other teammates. "After I'm done here, I'm going to take all of you to see a doctor. Be nice to her please. She's going to give you a physical to see how healthy you guys are. I'll call all of you out and tell you if I'll challenge the Elite Four. If you want to pour yourselves food, go ahead and eat it on the balcony. I want a little alone time with everyone else." Espeon floated over the six bags of food and shut the door to the balcony. My next pair would be Ampharos and Gyarados. "Come on out!"

They emerged stretching as I turned on the television for some noise in the background. Channel surfing yielded highlights of my battle or the talk shows talking about what happened last night. Both were happy to see themselves on the small screen. Ampharos walked over to the trophy; I knew what was coming.

"You can poke it girl. You've earned it." She was delighted to touch it and bring it over to us. I'm pretty sure that Gyarados shed a tear of joy looking at it sparkling in the strip of sunlight.

I talked to both on how well they did this entire tournament. Ampharos liked it when I remembered he quick thinking and pulled off a feint against Carly opened the door for Gyarados to finish against her Typhlosion. As much as she acts like a goofball outside of battle, she's very cunning. Gyarados did what it always does in battles and it had no regrets about going all out. They too went outside after I was done petting them. The only two left were the ones who were the smallest. Furret took after her friend and poked the trophy before using Lugia's wing as a back scratcher.

"What are you doing girl!" I asked in fake disbelief.

"Furrrrrrrrr," she droned as she rubbed against the wing. I came over and scooped her up then sat down on the bed. She hung around my neck like a scarf as Growlithe hopped into my lap.

"You're such a good boy!" I said like it was the first time he'd done something right. Furret leaned down a little more from my neck and they kissed. "And for you Furret, your favorite." All it took was my index finger to scratch her chin and that was it; she was in heaven. Both eventually laid on top of me and I squeezed them together. "You guys are small, but that doesn't matter if you're fast enough to dodge or beat whatever's in front of you. I wish I could find Russell so I can thank him for Iron Tail too." She hopped over to wrap around Growlithe and really all over each other; it's almost like I wasn't in the room.
"Do… do you want an egg, Furret?" She threw the puppy dog eyes at me then started to quietly sob. "Come here. Let me tell you something." She buried her head underneath my shirt while I continued. "I'm sorry I was so stupid, girl. I didn't notice you loved Growlithe until halfway in our journey; even then I wasn't sure how much until now. Espeon told me the same thing earlier. But it's all okay because I'm not mad at you. Anytime you want, just tell me okay? I'll leave you two alone when it's time." Her head poked out of my collar so we were eye to eye.

"Are you waiting until this is over?" A nod. "Espeon said you all wanted to challenge the Elite Four so I'll do it as early as I can if I decide to go through with it. I love you Furret and I want to do everything I can to make you happy. Ampharos and Gyarados probably can't have offspring so I'll let them love each other the way they want. Now go get some food with everyone else." Espeon peeked in as they exited to the balcony. They all ate until they were stuffed.

Doctor Harrison wasn't surprised to see me stroll into the public Pokémon Center lobby on time as she held a thin binder nearly bursting at the seams. She led me back to her office to get started. The same burly man that tried to intimidate us earlier in the tournament was sitting patiently in a spare chair. I instinctively reached for Growlithe's ball.

"Remember what I said before about how much I care about my Pokémon?" He stood up as if he didn't care that I could kill him in a snap.

"I do… which is why I came to apologize."

"I won't regret ki- wait, what?"

"Relax Mitch," the doctor calmly urged me as she walked in behind me. "Let him talk."

He sat back down. "That man Cory paid me a lot of money to make sure he would win. Giving out false medical information to opponents on top of overpowering them is the combination he was going for. He told me to do anything to make sure that the behind the scenes work was taken care of. For the record, I'm not proud of what I did last week. My wife and I were laid off from a shipping company that does business in Olivine and we're trying to have a child. Let's just say one guy thought I would make a great personal security guard one night and I haven't looked back."

"Does your wife know what you've been doing this whole time? Does anybody know what's been going on since the layoff?"

"No. Now I'm ready to turn myself in. I can't live a lie anymore and my wife deserves to know the truth eventually." He turned to the doctor. "Thanks for talking to me over the phone and in person yesterday. You could've turned me in, but you didn't and you cancelled the investigation into what I did. You may still hate me despite saying otherwise but that's fine." As he stood up, I thought of an idea; it was crazy that she didn't want to press charges or have him investigated but the idea of a child coming into the world swayed me after my Pokémon told me they wanted their own.

"You want to make an honest living?" He nodded as he stopped walking out of the door. "You want to make sure your child doesn't have to hear about how their father is a criminal because of a desperate move?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Look, you want to protect what you love the most and so do I. There's the Moomoo Milk farm north of Olivine. You should walk up to the front door, ask for a job, and you'll both have some money and a place to stay until you find something better or maybe you'll come to love it and stay. Tell the owners that Mitch sent you."
He looked at me skeptically. "You mean it? This isn't the first time I've heard something like that."

"I swear on Tom's grave." He looked confused about who Tom was, but he left without another word as I turned around. "Just tell me when they're all set. I'll take your advice and walk around for a bit." A few reporters that were still were at the Indigo Plateau spotted me outside walking back to the hotel and shoved voice recorders in my face.

"Mitch! Mitch! Any thoughts to challenge the Elite Four?"

"What were you doing in there?" I stopped walking to plan my response.

"You will hear about my decision in a formal press conference after my Pokémon are taken care of. No further comments until then." The still tried to get something out of me but I didn't give in as I made my way into the lobby elevator to go back to my room. My phone buzzed as soon as I could get service.

*Hey Mitch it's Lance. Ashley gave me your number so I could tell you to go to your room around 2. We need to talk.* I was supposed to go for a walk to clear my head. I wound up channel surfing for the time it took Lance to knock on my door; another thick folder was in his hand.

"Before we get down to business, how's the past 24 hours been?"

"Crazy to say the least."

"Are you going to challenge us anytime soon?"

I swear to Arceus I'd tell him to shut the hell up if he was anyone else. "My Pokémon are getting a full physical so I'm waiting to make that decision. How much time do you guys usually need to prepare?"

"We'd prefer at least a few hours but we're always ready since challengers are still getting eight badges all year long. You get priority to face us since you won the Silver Conference. Now let's go." He opened the folder and slid a profile of Allison to me. "Your opponent in the finals is quite an interesting person."

"So Ashley told you what I told her?"

He pointed to his brain. "She only confirmed what I already thought. Look at this." A thick packet of paper was staring me in the face with all kinds of pen marks. The columns and numbers indicated they were bets.

"These are all of the side bets she made!? That's absurd!"

"Yes, it seems that she wanted to break even by any means necessary. Anything that she had total control over she would put more money on. Now think about this for a minute: how would one go about making all these bets?" His question sounded like it had an answer that wasn't logical.

"Electronically so it's easier to collect the winnings?"

He stood up. "You would think that, but that's not the case." Two more pictures slid my way. "Allison had a woman named Kara and a man named Scott placing the bets for her just before you two battled. Some of these were made a few days ago while others were made minutes beforehand."

"How did you know these two were in on it?"
"A lot of bets placed under only two names in a short timeframe raised suspicion in the Goldenrod Game Corner. Even known high rollers are watched carefully after that many transactions. The moment security wanted to talk to them was the moment they ran. They managed to catch Scott with the help of Pokémon League agents but unfortunately he tossed the briefcase of money to Kara as she had her Golbat use Haze to escape."

Damn… couldn't get both. "So Kara has how much money? What about Allison's wager?"

"Kara ran off with about 300,000P out of an expected 550,000P from the side bets. As for Allison, we ahem… 'convinced' Scott to tell us that Allison used a well-made fake ID card and a matching disguise to place the bet under another name. Upon finding out that only she herself would collect it the day after the battle, we froze the account. As of now she hasn't been spotted anywhere in Goldenrod and nobody of the three has an electronic collection account."

All those facts disgusted me. Allison wasn't some run-of-the-mill wannabe criminal. She outsmarted everyone in some way and her Pokémon are strong enough to keep everyone else away from her if it came down to that. There's no doubt in my mind that she'll find Kara and take back the 300,000P on top of keeping a low profile. I also have a feeling she'll find a way to collect her own original wager.

"Lance, I'm no expert here but the money that did get away is enough to hire someone to take Umbreon and Gyarados back in case you didn't know she was the buyer."

"Ashley did tell me that and all I can say is that every police force in Johto will be aware of her. Every Pokémon League official is on notice. Every Interpol agent will know what went on today." With all that manpower, there's a chance she could still live normally with the help from underground organizations but she'll have to keep one eye open at all times.

"Why did she want Umbreon anyway? I can see Gyarados as a lab experiment, but Umbreon seems random." Lance thought about it for a minute before responding.

"I think she wanted an Eevee to raise, but the result ended up in her favor. Umbreon have naturally high defenses and can protect themselves very well. Off the field, you know about the loyalty they have with their trainers. Allison's team last time against me was lacking something that could take multiple hits. In her case, it was the added moves that would've helped her against myself.

"Can I ask you about something easier to solve?"

"I don't see why not."

"My Growlithe and Espeon were physically abused well before I added them to my team. Is there any way you can track down my opponents from my quarterfinal and semifinal matches since they were the ones who did it?"

He sat back down. "Do you have evidence? That's a bold accusation."

"Espeon has a nine-inch scar on her underbelly and can replay events of the past to show everyone what happened to both of them."

Lance shook his head. "As much as it pains me to say this: the memory isn't reliable in an abuse case. Pokémon can create false images and memories. Years ago, a man was arrested and falsely punished in an abuse case because the accuser's Kadabra made up a false memory for everyone to see. He was released after the man was caught bragging about getting away with it. Psychic types are truly beyond our comprehension."
"Let me cut you off," he said calmly. "You have a case; it's just not concrete. If you want to go through with it, then go ahead." Oh how I wanted to tell him I would solve the problem of Cory and Sara by myself and with my own personal way. Then again, he'd probably say how that's not a good look for the new champion. "I mean if we found them, then the process would start. Then you'll get called in and your life is going to be centered around this investigation for the next year or so. I'm just telling you what'll happen when the time comes; if the time comes."

Somehow I didn't collapse from the sheer amount of weight and knowledge Lance put on my shoulders. "Anything else for me?"

"No. I'll offer you this: you're the champion of Johto now. The pressure isn't going to go away until next year's tournament. How will you handle it?"

"Wait… I thought you were the champion?"

He made his way to the door. "In the eyes of trainers, you're the true champion of Johto. They see me on another level but in reality, I'm just a trainer." The door shut and I deeply exhaled. My phone was still blinking from my other unread texts so I spent the next half hour reading through and responding to everyone. My dad had casually mentioned a friend in the Sprout Tower sculpting department working on a small statue that was roughly 50% done; please let it be of something normal.

*Coming up now* I texted Jasmine after realizing I didn't want to sit around in silence for another 15 minutes. *I still have that card you gave me.* Getting past the security this time around was easier since I knew where I was going compounded by them remembering me. Jasmine left the door unlocked so I made my way in.

"Jasmine? You in here?" The sound of running water led me to believe me that she was in the shower. The sight of her walking out in a towel was more than enough evidence.

"Mitch! I didn't know you you'd be early!"

Guess she didn't have her phone in the shower. "Oops. Well I'm here now," I laughed. "I'll wait outside while you change." The balcony overlooking the stadium still looked majestic just like last time I looked out the window. I took the chance to ask about my Pokémon.

*How many are done doctor?* I didn't expect her to respond right away so I took in the view as a crew of stadium workers tried to extinguish the sacred flame; it's not going out guys. The balcony door opened and Jasmine walked over slowly before draping her arms around my neck and clasping her hands together.

"You… are an amazing person," she whispered in my ear with a smile. I turned around to meet her eye to eye.

"I had a little bit of help," I whispered back. We shared a quick kiss. "Thanks for the food by the way; everyone loved it. The same for the Pokémon food."

"How did you know?" she teased. "Helping people is what I'm good at. Our gym leader manual has a section on it even though I've been doing it since I was a little girl." Both of us turned to face the horizon as the sun was out in full force.
"Kinda hurts my eyes a little bit. I didn't get to bed until sometime past 3am last night. Doesn't mean I'm tired though."

"Well tonight you'll sleep just fine. I promise." We stared in silence until she broke away from me. "We're going for a walk around Mount Silver's base to clear your mind."

I pointed to my belt. "No Pokémon."

She pointed to hers. "We'll be fine. No Ponyta would last too long after seeing Steelix and you have a few spare balls on you just like anyone else." Jasmine's idea was a good one for sure; just wish she didn't have to bear the burden of protecting us with just three Pokémon.

A few more media personnel saw us walk out to the pathway and mobbed us with cameras trying to ask more questions. Jasmine did all the talking while I kept my mouth shut. Even the relationship questions she handled well. For a second, I thought about my Pokémon having kits would affect how we handled our relationship. Raising them in one place is a whole lot easier than if I was on the move. Sure they can stay in their balls, but I think it'd be better if they had a stable early life.

The scenery was beautiful in the forest around us as Pokémon hid while we walked along the path. Occasionally a few tried to battle, but Steelix sent them scurrying away. We talked about life the entire time and how our experiences molded us into who we were now. Good battles, bad battles, our best moments, our worst moments, nothing was off limits as we walked all the way to the base of the tallest mountain in Johto.

It was daunting thinking about how people have been able to climb the side or make trails inside that lead to the peak. Ascending this thing is probably a challenge I'll lose even if I had everybody with me. The sun was setting after we enjoyed the scenery for a few hours so we decided to return to the hotel before it got dark. Not a single Pokémon was to be found until we were only a quarter of the way through the forest.

"What's that?" Jasmine asked out of fear as the bushes were aggressively shaking. What came out was an abomination. Its fur was matted all over while being covered in a mixture of leaves, cuts, dirt and blood. A dislocated or broken right hind leg stayed suspended in midair as it looked at us. The look in its eyes was a mix of fear and adrenaline; it looked like it had been fighting to stay alive for quite some time. The first thing Jasmine did was call out Steelix to protect us as the wild Pokémon got into a battle stance. "Use Iron…"

"Wait!" The tough look of the wild Pokémon disappeared as it collapsed. "Let me capture it and see what the Pokémon Center can do." As I reached for a basic Poké Ball, a voice echoed.

"Thank you young man for saving me."

"I guess you got your wish about me coming with you. I don't think I'll make it back though."

"Jasmine, what's faster: us running or riding on Steelix and taking the path back?"

She understood the scenario. "Hop on." Steelix went as fast as it could go until we were within an eyeshot of the main Pokémon Center. "Steelix return!" The center had become a ghost town after the quarterfinals were done but Nurse Joy was still there waiting for me with my team in front of her.

"Hello Mitch! All of your Pokémon are…"

"Sorry but I need this ball in the healing machine now! Get a stretcher and have a doctor be ready
for a surgery!" Nurse Joy was shocked at my attitude.

"What's wrong?"

"Take this Espeon and put it in the healing machine first then put it on a stretcher!" She did so then called it out.

"Oh my! Let's get going!" She wheeled it over to a Chansey who took it away while she paged the doctor on call. "Your Pokémon are in fighting shape. As for the one you just brought in, come back for it tomorrow. Gotta go bye!" She sprinted down the hallway as I left the center trying to keep it together emotionally. The last words I heard were: stable condition.

"Just take me to the room." Once we got in the room, I laid down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Tears started to form before I just sobbed into a pillow. Jasmine laid down next to me to comfort me.

"What's wrong Mitch?"

"That Espeon… was my Espeon's mother."

"Oh my… I had no idea. What was it doing out there like that!? Who would just leave it like that?"

"I know exactly who the trainer is!" I yelled into the pillow. "And I couldn't do a damn thing about it! She told me she rearranged her team and I missed the fucking point!" She stayed silent as she rubbed my back; I eventually lowered my voice. "How could I be so dumb?"

"But that second Espeon wasn't yours. You couldn't have known…"

"It should've been my Pokémon," I interrupted. "I couldn't protect it even though I knew what could've happened." Jasmine stopped rubbing my back as I sat up in bed. "I have two pairs of Pokémon wanting kits down the road. A former champion is out to get me and two other trainers treated my Pokémon like trash before they became my friends. All I want is for my Pokémon and future kits to be happy in this world!"

She wiped a tear away from my eye. "You protected that Espeon from death. The nurse said it was in stable condition." I sneezed for a little bit as she gently rubbed my head. "And you've been doing a great job of keeping them happy, right?" I nodded. "They still love you too, right?" Another nod. "Well I still love you too." She pulled the sheets over us so we wouldn't get cold while getting us comfortable.

"I'm fucking sacred Jasmine. I'm scared I'm not strong enough to win anymore. I'm scared that I can't protect my Pokémon, I'm scared that all my hard work will mean nothing, and I'm scared that everything I've worked for will be gone just like that!" She kissed my forehead.

"We've been over this before Mitch; you don't have to be scared. Your Pokémon will have your back for life and that's something not a lot of trainers can say. Your parents will help you. I will help you." Silence echoed throughout the room as I started to fall asleep. "We can sort what just happened tomorrow when you're refreshed. I promised you would sleep just fine tonight and I intend to keep that promise. I'll be right here the whole time protecting you like you would do to everyone else," she cooed while giving me quick kisses.

My head ended up buried in her neck when I woke up later in the night. She had fallen asleep but I pulled her closer and nuzzled her a little bit before lying awake, unable to get back to sleep. I opted to close my eyes to see if that would help. What ended up happening was that my coat pocket started to glow and a small sliver of light was trailing across the sky; Ho-Oh was close by.
reflected on what happened today and realized how lucky I was to have healthy Pokémon after a brutal tournament on top of a support system to keep me mentally strong when I was hit with upsetting news. All things in my life considered, there was only one decision left to make in my mind.

I will challenge the Elite Four to prove that I am strong and that my Pokémon are strong. We will show the world what it means to persevere.
Chapter 57- Elite Four Will

Nightmares of my encounter with Ruby's mother plagued me as I went back to dreamland. She didn't even look like a Pokémon let alone an Espeon when we spotted her. I tossed around in bed until Ruby herself popped up in front of me in my dreams. She was looking around as the background went from a distorted red to pure white. Her presence immediately change my emotional state and the scenery reflected it.

"Finally! It took some time but I got here on my own. I can feel the boost of power ever since I learned Psychic. Now I'm just like my mother! What's up Mitch? Are you okay?"

I don't want to tell her but if I don't, then she'll keep asking. "You remember I asked if I could take your mother away from Sara?" She nodded. "Well I didn't have to do anything; Sara let her go and I found her."

"That's great! I can't wait to see her!" Poor thing has no idea.

"Ruby… I love you so I'll tell you the truth. Your mother is teetering on the edge of death right now. Jasmine and I found her far worse than whatever condition you and Shade were in when I found you. Her body was cut up and her leg was so broken that she had to hang it in the air to keep the pain to a minimum. Mount Silver is a very unforgiving place." Ruby sat there emotionless and took my words to heart. Before long, she looked at the ground.

"She's really going to die?" Ruby asked with no emotion.

"We rushed her back as fast as we could. The machine took care of the cuts but the rest is in the doctor's hands. I don't know how weak she truly is at this point. All we can do is wait until tomorrow."

"…I see." Ruby left me alone without any hint of how she took the news. Once she faded away from the dream, I went back to sleep knowing I had a long day ahead of me when I woke up. It took some time, but I was soundly asleep as the moon was still in the sky.

Jasmine nudged me awake at the crack of dawn with the intent to go down to the lobby and talk to Nurse Joy about its condition. We made it to the lobby in silence as a few assistants were crowded around the main desk drinking their coffee. Each one looked like they had gone through the wringer multiple times. They pointed to the back room once I asked where I could see the elder Espeon as they finished their coffee. Nurse Joy was just getting out of the examination room when she saw us before we could get to the viewing window.

"You're here to see how it went huh?"

"Please don't sugar coat anything," I pleaded with a hint of frustration.

"Come with me and I'll tell you. We were led to a simple side office with a desk and two chairs. "Both of you can take a seat. Let me organize my files for a second." I was anxious as Jasmine gently gripped my hand in a show of support. "Let me start by saying she is still alive although very weak now. As soon as we got her in that room, she tried to keep us away. Our guess is that the
adrenaline kept her fighting enough to where we had to call in a Hypno to put her to sleep while also fighting her psychic resistance. Take a look at this." A sheet of paper filled with numbers was staring me in the face and I couldn't decipher any of it.

"What are these numbers?" I was shaking a little bit out of fear of the unknown. Jasmine rubbed my hand for comfort.

"These are her vital numbers when you brought her in. Heart rate, blood pressure, response to stimuli, energy output, things like that. Every one of them was at the borderline of fatal but we managed to somewhat stabilize them now. Most of that changed for the better when we bathed her after she was put to sleep; her fur being covered in dirt and cuts contributed to some infections while the medicine we used should help her recover faster." I put the paper down.

"The leg? What about the leg?" Nurse Joy handed me an x-ray.

"As you can tell, it was broken. However, there's more to it than just a broken bone. We believe that she was dealing with it for about three to four days because the surrounding ligaments are ripped to shreds. Surgery has already been done to repair as much as possible but I'm afraid it will take days of intensive physical therapy before Espeon will be able to walk on her own again. There is a high probability that she will never battle again. Her new 100% effort will be 30% at best when it comes to physically moving around based on past Espeon data. She might as well be a sitting duck in any given battle."

I exhaled deeply while rubbing my forehead. "At least she's alive. Can I see her now?" Nurse Joy shook her head.

"Not now. She needs to be alone while she sleeps so that she doesn't exert her powers the moment she senses someone walking by. Sensors on her body will alert us to when she wakes up. In the meantime, we've contacted a team that will come here and work with her. After they get her walking around, then you can administer the aftercare."

"That's fine I guess. It's just… how much is this going to cost? I'm willing to put up the money but I'd like a number." She rummaged through more papers.

"Normally it averages 1,500P per day for everything. However, you are the champion and I do owe you for acting like a jerk when we first met so the league will help you out. I already made the calls necessary to make sure this transition is smooth." I sat there figuring out what to do with an Espeon that can't battle yet wants to reconnect with her daughter. "There is nothing else for you now but feel free to take the folder with you to look at. You should be able to see her in a few hours." Nurse Joy left the room while leaving behind the folder.

We rummaged through it and looked at as much data as I could understand. There was so much red ink or numbers while the words "critical" and "fatal" were used so much, that I just couldn't look at anything anymore. I just didn't get it; I made it through the most dangerous parts of Johto fine for the most part. Come to the safest place for trainers… and I've had three mental breakdowns in the span of two weeks.

I didn't sign up for any of this extra drama, but I'll be damned if I don't take care of problems that need to be taken care of. Running away isn't going solve anything. If I ever saw Cory or Sara again, I would make them beg for mercy. I'm not going to hunt them down for the sake of my sanity though.

I had asked Ashley to set up a small presser for me after I exited the office to announce that I will be challenging the Elite Four and by the time I walked over to the stadium, the room was ready. A
press release had been issued across the world so it was only a matter of time before Pokémon came flying from all over or people running into the room to see me at the podium. I kept myself modest by wearing a simple shirt, black athletic shorts, and my trusty sneakers. She nodded after I did a microphone check.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, I'd like to thank you for coming on such short notice. I will not be taking questions, but rather explaining what I am going to do." I looked up into the crowd. "My Pokémon and I have decided we will be challenging the Elite Four in 48 hours starting with Will. We concluded as a team that we were as healthy in body, mind, emotion, and spirit as we could ever be. To my friends, I'm sorry I didn't call you guys first. That will be all." Chaos erupted as they all tried to get me to talk but I had tuned them out and security helped them file out. Ashley was already radioing to her superior.

"My boss will fill you in on what's going to happen in a letter tonight. I'm sure the Elite Four are happy that you gave them so much time."

"You sure? Two days isn't that much time."

She smiled. "Compared to what I've heard, they appreciate this. It's either wait until the last possible day or immediately following the tournament. Very rarely is the challenge in the middle." She left me with Jasmine as we returned to the main gate Pokémon Center. It had been only an hour but the sensors had shown that she was awake.

Espeon was still scared stiff as she looked at her surroundings. All the medical technology and sensors on her nearly made her fire off powerful psychic bursts until we stepped into the room. She stopped herself before hiding under the blanket.

"It's okay, you can come out. I'm not Sara and she's not Sara." Her head poked out while the rest of her was covered. I offered my hand for her to sniff. "That it… nice and slow," I whispered as she eventually licked it. "How are you doing?"

"Much better than when you found me."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Sara called me out around Mount Silver after the loss and sent out everyone that you didn't battle against. She forced me to fight each of them one by one. I was never much of a battler since I wasn't good in pressure situations but that changed. Weezing and Tentacruel were beaten in a matter of seconds but her Magneton gave me trouble. It paralyzed me before I beat it and then she sent our Heracross to use Megahorn over and over again. Eventually I felt a snap in my leg and I threw it back at her. When she tried to send out my mate for a two on one fight, I pinned her to a rock and almost crushed her windpipe. I fled after Heracross hit me one more time. Jump ahead a few hours then I felt my ball was destroyed." She sulked back underneath the blanket.

"Come here," I pleaded quietly. She tried to bite my hand as I went to pet her. "Okay okay, I won't touch you." The situation felt oddly familiar. "So the rest of the story is you fighting to stay alive?"

"Correct. Then you brought me here. I prayed that Arceus would take me every single day I spent wandering around. Now that I think about it… I'm upset he didn't. Sorry about the bite. How can I trust you not to hurt me right here when I'm defenseless? What do I have left to live for anyway? Nothing. My first master died and was so isolated that he had no family to take care of me so I was let go, my mate is just a shell of his former self, I can't even battle again, the list goes on." I pulled out Ruby's ball.
"You do have one thing. Your daughter wants to say sorry after telling you that I raised her better than you. I didn't know anything about your first master."

"Neither does my daughter; let's keep it that way."

I leaned down at eye level. "Very well. Aside from all that, I am your master now so here's what's going to happen whether you like it or not. Nobody will ever lay a finger on you in anger or frustration. You will never be released into the wild again. You will never be forced to battle. You will be loved, fed, welcomed into my home, and treated like a dear friend. I just thought of an idea to make sure you'll feel welcome in my family."

"You mean that?" Espeon asked while still hiding.

"I told your daughter similar rules when I found her. It's up to you whether you want to come with me in the end. There will be some people helping you to walk again so please work with them in the meantime. It'll hurt to go through physical therapy but they won't make you do anything you can't do." She didn't respond which I took as my cue to leave. Jasmine took a deep breath once we were in the elevator.

"What are you going to do Mitch?"

The elevator arrived at her floor. "Homework. Will is my opponent and I need to get some information. As much as I want to help Espeon, she controls her own future." I pounded away at the keyboard long enough to find Will's information. Every member of the Elite four had a complete bio along with team changes through the years.

Elite Four Member Will

Age: 24

Years of service: 3

Pokémon type specialty: Psychic

Pokémon registered: Xatu, Exeggutor, Slowbro, Jynx, Xatu

It's almost like league is saying: you know their Pokémon but you can't beat them.

"I have some advice for you Mitch," Jasmine said while looking over my shoulder. "Xatu is the only Pokémon that can get inside of your head with no effort since it can see the past better than any psychic type. It can relay all kinds of information to Will and he'll use that to his advantage. He did it to me so I should know. He had the nerve to ask me on a date after asking about… never mind." Probably some past relationship thing that I'd be better off not knowing.

"Figures he'd be the gatekeeper for the Elite Four."

"Right. A battle is more than just having the strongest Pokémon."

I gave her a quick kiss. "I thought gym leaders weren't allowed to help trainers. You're right by the way: once you lose your mind, you lose the battle."

"Hmmm you would've figured it eventually," she cooed back.

"You are so smart. Now let's get something to eat. I'm starving." We ordered a few items from the room service menu and ate on the balcony while talking more about our pasts. Workers had gone
from trying to put out the flame to making the field playable. As much as I enjoyed Jasmine's company, it was time to spend some time with my Pokémon in my room. The bags of food were as I left them so I had Ruby pour everyone's food while I tried to figure out a game plan. My head started to feel a little pressure so I opened it to let Ruby in.

"Tell me about my mother right now," she said coldly. She must have been listening through her ball.

"Your mother is stable in terms of physical health. She just needs some time to get healthy enough to walk and rest her mind. Unfortunately she may never battle again. Don't worry though, I have a plan to make her feel welcome despite her condition if she wants to come with me."

"Does she not want to come with you?"

"Like I said, she needs time to rest her mind. On the chance that she does come with me, I'll leave you two alone to catch up on the more detailed things. You can probe my mind all you want, but the memory of our conversation is just words. I can't paint a picture like she could. Now I need to talk to everyone." Ruby broke the link and I looked around to see everyone looking at me.

"Alrighty guys listen up. I made the decision to challenge the Elite Four like you wanted. We're all pretty healthy at this point so I thought it was the right time." They jumped for joy at the announcement. "Now we're going up against Will first. He's a psychic user with a team of two Xatus, Junx, Exeggutor, and Slowbro. You all match up well against his team so everyone's on standby. Espeon, I'm going to need your help in the mental battle. Will's Xatu can get into my head with far less effort although I'm not sure if I'll feel it. You up to the challenge?" She nodded. "I'm going to go with Umbreon as the lead. Finish eating and let's relax a little bit." A bellhop knocked on my door with an envelope for me; I read it after he left.

Dear Mitch,

Congratulations on becoming the champion of the Silver Conference! As champion, you will be an ambassador for trainers of all ages as they strive to reach the Indigo Plateau. You will also be automatically entered in next year's tournament; you may still collect as many badges as you like. Upon hearing your formal declaration to challenge the Elite Four, here are the rules that shall remain in place for the duration of your challenge:

1. Every member will be only allowed to use five Pokémon while the champion of the Elite Four will be allowed six Pokémon. You may use as many as you like.

2. You may change your roster at any time.

3. Only you may substitute Pokémon during the battle.

4. There is no halftime period against the Elite Four.

5. Only one Pokémon out on the field for each side.

6. No running on the field until the match is over.

7. You will face the Elite Four one by one in consecutive days. All matches will be set for 7:00pm on field one with the roof open. Inclement weather will result in the roof being closed for the match.

8. If you lose a match then the challenge is over. However, you are eligible to apply for a second attempt at a later date.
9. There will be no formal press conferences before or after battles. You are entitled to conduct interviews or make statements, but the league is not responsible for setting anything up.

10. Enclosed are 25 general admission tickets; five for each day. Invite anyone you want.

11. All referee's decisions are final.

Best of luck,

-The Pokémon League

The gauntlet has been thrown so I called up my friends one by one with the same opening line.

"Hey… what are you doing two nights from now?"

I had spent the rest of the day walking around the Indigo Plateau with Jasmine or my friends and then repeated the process the next day before heading over to the stadium. Security guided me to my lounge for some last-minute mental preparation for the battle against Will. The television was set to the live feed of the stadium as camera angles changed to show the massive crowd. Texts flooded my phone wishing me luck as the clock continued to wind down.

"No turning back guys," I whispered. "I think we're all sick of running away though." I unzipped the jacket Jasmine gave me before double checking to see if I had one thing. "Growlithe doll... check. Wait, what's this?" I pulled out the spare piece of paper. "I should really deposit my prize money after this." A knock at the door got my attention.

"Let's go Mitch. You're up." The walk out to the field felt different compared to the previous times in the tournament. For the first time here, I felt happy to be in this situation. The announcer was doing his thing as I stared at my opponent.

Will was slightly taller than me and sporting a maroon dress shirt, maroon pants, a formal black vest, white ascot, and some kind of masquerade mask to go with his purple hair. The referee told us to meet ad midfield for the handshake.

"Hello Mitch," he said while bowing. "Or should I say 'champion'. I've heard a lot about you and it's nice to meet you. I have travelled the world with my psychic Pokémon to get stronger. At long last I have earned the right to be in the Elite Four. I can only get stronger battling strong opponents. Show me what got you here."

I shook his hand. "You got it." We returned to out boxes as the referee went over the battle rules one final time. She threw up the flags and we were underway.

"Xatu!" The psychic bird eerily stood in place.

I'm still going with my game plan. "Umbreon!" Will smirked as if he expected me to lead with him; looks like he did his homework too.

"Figured that you would send out the mutant Pokémon first," he said nonchalantly; I immediately got defensive.

"He's not a mutant!"

"Whatever you say. It's still undeniable that he's killed a fair amount of Pokémon in his lifetime." Unbelievable… I didn't even tell anyone close to Will about that. Xatu is already inside my head!?
"I hope you're prepared for a two-pronged attack Mitch."

"Umbreon, use Faint Attack!" He charged ahead to nail Xatu; it popped up immediately.

"No Mitch, it's not going to leave so easily. Quick Attack!" Xatu flew straight ahead to hit Umbreon and send it flying.

"Bite!"

"Confuse Ray!" Umbreon was too close to avoid the bright beam of light but he still managed to clamp down on a wing. "Ruffle its feathers!" It couldn't keep the tight grip for too long.

"I'm surprised that it broke through confusion too Mitch. Future Sight!" I can't allow him to reply to my thoughts much longer. Umbreon rammed into the wall before receiving the Future Sight attack.

"Umbreon! You want to go all out on your own?" He looked over in a mix of confusion and happiness; it felt like letting giving a kid 500P and telling them to go buy as much candy as they wanted. "Have at it!" I closed my eyes and the crowd roar dulled as silence echoed. I had to take care of the other battle.

Being the gatekeeper for Mitch's mind wasn't easy. I felt three different forces trying to barge in all at once but they were easy to keep away since they were not out of their balls. I felt an eerie presence nearby and I jumped backwards at the sight of Xatu; I didn't feel it come in at all.

"Well this is an interesting mind for sure," it droned. "Let's see what secrets lie within. Or better yet, I'll toy with him and give my master an advantage by looking at the past."

"Hey!" It looked down at me. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

It pushed me back with psychic energy. "Foolish girl. Do you think I'll listen to you? Ah! It seems that Umbreon is quite a character. All the Pokémon he's killed… I'm surprised he hasn't been put down. My master should know this," he noted as I saw the left eye glow.

"You take that back!" I rammed into him but he just glided backwards instead of falling.

"Weak minded… the both of you. Getting in here was easier when Mitch lost his focus on the battle." We both started to go at it with Xatu getting the better of me due to experience. He started to probe Mitch's mind as I fought just to keep it from getting to more important bits of Mitch's memories for minutes. I was soon lying on the ground exhausted. "You're not as strong as you think you are. Give up and save yourself from overexertion." Footsteps came from behind me.

"It's true that she's new to this whole thing about getting in people's heads. That doesn't mean I love her any less or think of her less."

"Mitch…" Xatu turned to him.

"It's rare that I can get a trainer to abandon the battle to come here, even if they have psychic Pokémon to help them out." A laugh came from my master.

"Abandoned? Are you kidding me? I let Umbreon battle on his own. Your physical body is like a punching bag and only reacts to Will's commands because of natural reflexes; you can't think on your own since your mind is in here and you're just projecting your body here. Or am I wrong?"
"..."

"Umbreon can improvise while you're trying to mess with me. Based on how he battles, you…" Xatu faded away immediately; he turned to me then rubbed my head. "Thank you for protecting me through that. You okay?"

"Yeah, I just need to catch my breath for a few seconds. I didn't sense it at all."

"What about others?"

"They're easier to feel. If you physically wear them down out there, it looks like they'll be weaker in here too."

He started to pet me all over. "The rest of his team has a massive type disadvantage so I'll make it quick. I'll find a way to repay you win or lose."

"Save the love for after; get back in the game."

Ruby fighting off Xatu was all I needed to win the first round. When I opened my eyes, I saw Umbreon biting down on the poisoned bird as Will was at a loss for words. Umbreon looked like he had taken a few shots to the side of his body as well. Xatu had stopped resisting which got the referee's attention.

"Xatu is unable to battle. Umbreon wins!" Even defeated, Xatu still looked like it was trying to record more memories to be used against me. Will recalled his teammate as he stared me down.

"Espeon huh? It's weak when it's not battling and playing my game instead. Although… I will give you credit where credit is due for pulling off a bold strategy. I may be at a disadvantage type wise but that doesn't mean I'll quit. Umbreon had a few slip-ups with its attacks so maybe it's not your ticket to winning like you thought. Exeggutor!" I could feel a headache coming on; it's trying to get in my mind.

"Umbreon, return! Growlithe!" A rest for Umbreon is well deserved after how he handled the fight without me. "Flamethrower!"

"Redirect the flames with Psychic!" It easily tossed aside the attack. "Egg Bomb!" Glowing orbs were scattered in the air and rained down all over the field. I definitely saw a few hit Growlithe before the smoke engulfed the field.

"Flamethrower!"

"Psychic again!" Its flames were split on either side.

"Charge in with Flame Wheel!" Exeggutor was caught off guard as Growlithe's fiery body collided with the part grass type. "Bite!" It managed to bite down on a leg and shake it like a stuffed animal.

"Leech Seed!" A series of vines covered Growlithe and he immediately lost some energy. "Toss it with Psychic!" He was sent into the side wall while Leech Seed weakened him even more.

"Take Down!"

"Egg Bomb!" The attack was aimed straight at him; Will took the bait.

"Jump and use Flamethrower!" The slower coconut Pokémon couldn't even use Psychic to defend itself from the onslaught of flames and eventually fainted. The minor headache had faded as well;
damn thing was fighting Ruby until the end.

"Exeggutor is unable to battle. Growlithe wins!" Will kept calm as he sent out Slowbro as his third choice. With Leech Seed still in effect and a type disadvantage, I made the switch to Ampharos. "Slowbro versus Ampharos. Begin!"

Again, the headache started to come around. "Let's get a quick one Ampharos! Thunder Wave!" The weaker bolt of electricity found its mark and Slowbro was practically a sitting duck.

Will didn't seem to care. "Amnesia!" It closed its eyes as its body glowed in a purple aura.

"Discharge!" The surge didn't seem to faze it like I thought it would.

"Use Curse!" Now its body had a yellow aura surrounding it before it was done.

"Thunderpunch!"

"Body Slam!" It got off the ground, but paralysis affected it while it was in midair. It was defenseless as Ampharos punched it into the ground.

"Discharge again!"

"Psychic!" It got off a hit on Ampharos but it was too late to stop the spread of electricity all over the field. Slowbro twitched in pain before it stopped moving.

"Slowbro is unable to battle. Ampharos wins!" Despite the odds heavily against him, Will is going to fight until the end. Even though he may have gotten here by messing with his opponents' heads, he's still a good trainer. It takes guts to commit to training psychic types when you can't really touch dark types.

"Xatu, let's go!"

Shit! I forgot he had another one! "Ampharos, return! Umbreon!" The rest period had him looking a little better. "Just like last time Umbreon!"

"Xatu versus Umbreon. Begin!" I felt my headache die down a bit as the two sized each other up on the field. I closed my eyes and I saw Ruby by herself.

"Where's the second Xatu?"

"He has another one?" Ruby asked with a hint of surprise.

"Yup. We'll be ready for it though." A few moments passed but it didn't appear; it finally hit me. "Oh shit! I think I messed up. Will got me!"

"Calm down Mitch!"

"No! He's taking advantage of me trying to defend myself in here; Umbreon's getting hit hard out there even though he can fight on his own. If he goes down, you may have to be on your own. Can you handle it? Be honest," I pleaded.

"The other two were annoying but I kept them away. I'll fight like hell to make sure your mind is safe."

"Fine. But if you're getting exhausted, get out of my mind. You might have to be called out and I want you as healthy as possible. Got it?" Ruby looked like she wanted to argue until she gave me
the signal to open my eyes. Umbreon had been taking a beating and Xatu didn't look worn out in the slightest. He tried to ram into it with a full force Faint Attack but the power was lacking due to how exhausted he was.

"Xatu, use Quick Attack!" It moved much faster than the other one and with that attack, Umbreon had stayed down for the count.

"Umbreon is unable to battle. Xatu is the winner!" This battle just got a whole lot harder. My dark type is out, my mind is an open book, Growlithe is beaten down, and Amphiaros isn't 100% either; she's my best bet though.

"Amphiaros!" She materialized still taking deep breaths. The pain in my head spiked as I tried to call a command. "Use Cotton Spore!" Dammit! I wanted Thunder Wave! The balls of cotton formed scattered around the field and some of them attached to Xatu. "Thunderpunch!"

"Two can play that game! Psychic! Move the remaining spores to Amphiaros!" They were sent at her, but not fast enough as she connected on the punch. "Future Sight!"

"Discharge! Zap it into next week!" She let loose a lot of electricity that forced Xatu to fly out of the radius. "Again!" She tried to fire something, but nothing came out.

"Use Psychic to hold it in place then Quick Attack!" Amphiaros was helpless in the middle of the field as Xatu came in at top speed. With a few feet to go, I saw some sparks fly out of her body and more when Xatu hit her. While on the ground, the Future Sight attack knocked her out of the fight.

"Amphiaros is unable to battle. Xatu wins!" A smile formed across her face as I recalled her; that's the second time at the Indigo Plateau she's pulled that trick off. Will was looking more confident despite his ace being paralyzed.

"It doesn't take a psychic to realize you're starting to lose momentum in this battle."

"You must be losing yours. I had a memory of Amphiaros faking running out of power yet you didn't see it coming. Explain that."

"Well, you didn't do it on purpose last time nor did you think she had any power. I guess I have to hone my skills even further to see through tricks like that. Now who's next? The Furret with a phobia of rock types?"

I grabbed her ball. "Good guess. Now I hope you're ready for her. Come on out Furret!"

"Furret versus Xatu. Begin!"

"Use Return attack!"

"Psychic!" Amphiaros' last ditch maneuver made Xatu unable to move as Furret slammed into it with full force; Arceus I love that move. The headache immediately stopped once Xatu was on the ground.

"Xatu is unable to battle. Furret wins!" For the first time all battle, I looked at the scoreboard and saw how close I was to sealing the deal. Just a Jynx stood between me and the next Elite Four member.

"We're not done yet! Jynx, I choose you!" After what I went through in Ice Path, I'd thought I'd seen the last of Jynx.
"Jynx versus Furret. Begin!"

"Ice Punch!"

"Dig!" The recompacted field made digging a little harder to do, but Furret was hiding underground until she popped up to hit Jynx.

"Double Slap!" Its hands furiously connected with Furret's face until she could back up. "Lovely Kiss!" The move connected and Furret started to curl up in a ball before going to sleep.

"No Furret! This isn't nap time!" My screaming didn't even make her flinch.

"Psychic!" A ball of pure energy was fired at her and the damage she took made her snap back to reality.

"Let's end this! Dig!" She burrowed like last time and waited. "Now Quick Attack!" She popped up to hit the Jynx while still flying to the sky.

"Ice Punch when it comes down!"

"Iron Tail!" Furret waited until she was close enough to somersault just enough to drop the hammer on Jynx. Its head was slammed into the ground by Furret's tail and when it pulled itself together, it collapsed.

"Jynx is unable to battle. Furret is the winner! This match goes to the challenger Mitch from Violet City!" I could've listened to the crowd chant my name all day long but Will walked over with his hand out after I recalled Furret.

"That was more than impressive Mitch. It's been a long time since I've had a battle where a trainer handled my Xatu strategy. Everyone with a dark type just assumes they'll waltz their way to victory until they realize Pokémon battles are more complex than they think."

I shook his hand. "It was a learning experience for sure."

He came in close to my ear as the referee walked back to her tunnel. "Xatu found out more than you could guess," he whispered. "Your Espeon's inexperience with her powers can lead to problems down the road. I'm willing to help you so that she can be a good mother when the time comes." I was at a loss for words.

"I'd appreciate that."

"Let me tell you something before I leave. Xatu gathering memories from a trainers' past can help me in battle as you may know. Normally, I use embarrassing moments to distract opposing trainers. However, Xatu uncovered more of your past that made me stop that. You're a good trainer for raising each of your Pokémon on top of what you've done for others. May I visit the other Espeon?"

"Only if I'm there with you. You may be a master of psychic types, but I'm not sure if you'd want to handle her in her current state." He stood up straight.

"Fair enough." He turned around to leave but stopped. "I'm sorry for going after Umbreon. I'll wipe that information from my Xatu's memory as well as my own. Not everyone needs to know his story."

"Do what you want; it's not like it's a secret anymore."
"Regardless, I will continue to battle strong opponents to see how well they match up to you. Good luck with the rest of the Elite Four." He walked off to a round of applause while I stayed in my box. This could've turned bad in a hurry. At the end of the day a win is a win no matter how ugly it is.

Next round here we come.
Chapter 58- Elite Four Koga

The crowd roared as my face took up the scoreboard with my team down underneath it. I loved the praise but I felt a little guilty taking in all the credit so I let everyone else out to take it in. They acknowledged the crowd by taking a bow as some fans in the upper levels started to head for the exits. After some time in the limelight, I called them all back so the injured members of my team could stay in a somewhat stable condition. Ho-Oh's flame atop the stadium grew ever so slightly as the announcement was made for my next battle tomorrow; the scoreboard went black before a person filled the entire screen. He was dressed in what could best be described as ninja attire.

"Congratulations on winning your first battle of the Elite Four, Mitch. I am your next challenge on the way to the top. You may think you can win on brute force alone and I will tell you right now that you are wrong. Confusion, sleep, poison, and other tricks await you in our battle. I, Koga of the Elite Four, am looking forward to our battle tomorrow." The screen went black for good and what was left of the crowd cheered in anticipation of the showdown. On the way to my tunnel, a few elementary school kids ran to the railing trying to get my attention.

"Hey! Hey! Miiiiitch! Miiiiitch! Over here over here!" It would've been so easy just to ignore them but I did leave a lot of people in the dark after I won the Silver Conference title. Besides, I could use some practice with my people skills.

"How'd you guys like that battle?" They were a little past star struck.

"G-g-ggood." The girl looked at her friends. "I mean... it was so cool!"

"Well tomorrow's battle will be cool too!" The small group pulled out markers plus programs that were handed out to the crowd. All of them were turned to Umbreon's picture.

"Can you sign these? Pleeeeease? Umbreon is so awesome!" I took a few extra seconds to look through the program. My entire team had a page dedicated to them including: a still photo, action shots, noted appearances, and even individual win-loss records from the first preliminary battle to the present. At least the league didn't have their full history although it's possible to find out if they dig deep enough.

"I don't see why not." I signed by Umbreon's picture one by one as they were jumping in place. The parents eventually started to usher them up the stairs. "You folks have a good night." The kids waved but the parents weren't so happy as they gave me a look of disappointment. Many other kids were trying to rush over to the railing as I left but I told them to wait outside. Will was waiting by my lounge when I tried to go back in.

"She wants to talk with you tomorrow."

"Who?"

"Espeon." How did he know? "She would've talked to you right after our fight but she figured that you would rather enjoy the win."

"So how did she talk to you?" Will opened the door and motioned for me to sit down.
"That Espeon may not be a seasoned battler, but all of that psychic power isn't going to waste. I could feel a presence after the battle so I let Xatu be a medium. Remember when she spoke to you earlier in the tournament and you had no idea it was her? That was from four floors above you and on the opposite side of the hotel. Psychic types still have limits with their powers; being in any kind of ball prevents them from unleashing their full power although they can still try to get into the mind. Xatu managed to do it once but it was too taxing to maintain."

Makes sense considering she can reach out to Will under a blanket instead of in a ball. "What time does she want me to come visit?"

"Around noon." He got up to leave. "It's funny...she was willing to hop into your head during our battle but she's still very weak. If she had done that, her power alone would've forced Xatu to stay in my mind instead of yours. The fact that she could talk to me in her state means that she's stronger than Xatu when healthy. To my knowledge, only the Sabrina the Saffron gym leader is on par with me in terms of Pokémon and psychic strength. I'd like to keep talking but I'll let you relax before tomorrow." Nurse Joy came in as he left.

"You requested a portable healing machine?" Will waved while not looking back at me; I don't think he needed Xatu for that bit of knowledge. I placed the balls in the machine as I checked my phone for my messages. No surprise that my parents sent me more than anyone else. "All set! Have a good night!" I replied to everyone quickly so I could meet anyone outside the stadium. Learning how to handle my title, relaxing with friends, and have my alone time is going to take some time. Food is the universal thing that will get us to meet so they would wait for me in the cafeteria like last time. Calling my parents would be better because there's some things that a simple text can't communicate.

Two league officials in suits were waiting by the stadium exit after a decent sized crowd formed behind metal waist-high barricades. They let me do as I wanted but would escort me to the hotel at the first sign of trouble. Most of the action was signing things or taking pictures with people of all ages. It was going well until a group of people decided to show up late chanting with signs.

"Cheeeeeeaterrrrrrr! Cheeeeeeaterrrrrr! Cheeeeeeaterrrrrr," the group of about 20 chanted with signs having No Umbreon No Win, Put Umbreon Down, Criminal, and Team Rocket's Ally written on them. They moved on to screaming about how I was illegally battling and how I was a fraud or bad example. Before I got a chance to respond, I was dragged away from them and police went to shoo everyone away as politely as possible. When I did try to go back, they just yanked me along until we entered the empty hotel lobby. I'd like to think the mob wouldn't be able to stay too long before getting kicked out.

The person that cleaned my room left me a congratulatory card as well as a Growlithe made of bath towels as a little friendly gesture. I let Growlithe out to look at it as I went on the balcony to call my parents. Ringing echoed in the phone until a click on the other end.

"Mitch! How are you doing?" They had their home phone on speaker but it was my mom doing the talking.

"Good. Just a little tired at the moment. How's things at home?"

"Sprout Tower is still as charming as ever," my dad answered sarcastically. "Although there have been less people coming in recently so the maintenance work is lighter. Just holding out until retirement haha!"

"What about you mom?"
"The same really. Oh! My office talks about you all the time. Heck, the whole city is talking about you. All your teachers still remember you too! Especially Mrs. Miller after the Pidgey incident when you…"

"Yeah let's not go there. I'd like to keep embarrassing things to myself if possible," I interrupted with a smile on my face. I'd rather them show my baby pictures to the world than tell that story. "Anyway, I have something I want to ask both of you." A long pause on their end until my dad told me to continue. "The Violet City government gives you a Pokémon if you work in Sprout Tower, right?"

"Right. Your father still has Machoke to help carry heavy materials and I have Aipom to help me in the office or do minor maintenance work as needed."

"Can you keep them for yourselves? I can't remember if you told me that."

"Aipom yes, Machoke no. However, both could battle if something were to happen. We have to pay for the food and whatnot but the city only gives each worker one. Any other Pokémon we want must be caught by us. What are you getting at?"

"I know you hate talking about it, but you guys are getting older. Dad is 55 years old, you're 53. As much both of you hate this, I think you could use some more help around the house in the form of another Pokémon."

"What Pokémon do you have in mind? Did you get one for us out there?" It shocked me that they didn't try to argue about getting more help.

"An Espeon," I mumbled.

"A what!?"

"An Espeon. She needs a home and she's docile. Her psychic abilities are stronger than the Elite Four member I just got done battling. If you treat her like you do with your Pokémon at home, she'll be fine. Maybe dad could take her to work if she wanted to go. Thoughts?" Silence echoed through the line until my dad spoke up.

"Your mother and I need to talk about this." Of course... it's never that easy with them. "Anything else for us?" they asked cheerfully; at least they're willing to end this on a high note.

"Nope. I'll call you after my battle tomorrow. Are you going to watch it?"

"Yes we will! Violet City actually set up a giant projector screen against Sprout Tower so anyone in the city could watch. Nobody's going to miss it here! Good luck and we love you!"

"Love you too. Bye!"

I spared them the long story this time around but I can't bring myself to hide it. Something happens to them while I'm not around and Espeon's at fault? That'd set off a chain reaction that would most likely lead to a broken home for me, Ruby's emotions all over the place, and I'd take out my frustration on Jasmine or just live alone until I was strong enough to move on. The world is a much bigger place when you have 500,000P floating around in your bank account but it's also more dangerous.

Growlithe had tackled the towel duplicate as I walked in and gave me "the pouty face" as I called it. He didn't think of the makeshift doll as praise but he quickly changed his attitude when I started pouring his food before letting everyone else out.
Okay guys, eat up! I'm going downstairs to eat and I can't bring you along unfortunately. I think it'll be nice for you all to have some time to yourselves. You all did a great job tonight so have seconds if you want!" Nobody objected as I made my way to the door before going to the cafeteria. Everyone was there with the addition of Jasmine this time around.

"Hey Mitch! All the food is getting cold so let's eat!" It was like what I had the night I won the Silver Conference with the champagne as a nice touch. We talked about the battle or our experiences with psychic types since Wes was into the idea of using the mind infiltrating technique next time he returned to Orre. Between all the talking, Jasmine's phone went off well after we were done eating.

"My assistant Janina? At this time of night? I'll be right back." She excused herself while answering. "Do trainers not get it!? I'm still here…"

"Pssst. Mitch," Carly jokingly said loud enough so that everyone else at the table could hear. "You know she's a keeper, right?"

My face turned red immediately. "Um, yeah? I guess?"

"Oh look! He knows it too," she teased. "Jasmine told us everything and let me be the first to say that you two would be great together." Everything? I hope not.

"Hey that was my line," Davis chimed in as soon as Carly was done. She gave him a quick kiss.

"Beat ya to it! Anyway, she seemed so happy about what would happen after this whole challenge thing is over with." Carly's words hit me in ways that I never thought words could hit me and then I thought about it even more.

"This'll sound bad but it's a big thing on my mind. What if she noticed me because I win so much? What if I got eliminated before the round robin stage? What if I didn't even get eight badges? Would she still have even looked in my direction? If she did tell you everything, then you know about the night in Olivine after I stopped Amphy from being hurt more than he already was. The more I think about it now, the more I realized I took advantage of her." Wes leaned over the table.

"Cut the crap and use your head for a second." The change in demeanor made me cringe. "All you asked for was a place to stay after you won the badge. Anything she did after you asked the question was on her. By the way she told that story or any other time you two hung out, she didn't feel taken advantage of. And about the winning thing? That means nothing. If anything, winning made it harder for her to talk to you. Don't blow this because you're not thinking straight."

"What he's trying to say is that you're overthinking it," Rui followed up sensing Wes may have gone a little too far after a few too many drinks. "It's a big change in your life on top of what you've already done on the field. We're just trying to be supportive so you're not overwhelmed." I rubbed my forehead while taking deep breaths.

"Understand one thing: I've never been in this spot before. I've had to work for everything and the way this all happened, it just seems like it's too easy."

Davis leaned back in his chair. "You actually worked hard for this. It's just that you're finally seeing the results instead of right away like you would a battle. Good things in life aren't recognized by people right away; they take time. Like how you mentioned that no other trainer ever has had more badges than Carly or me. That took until the end of the round of 32 before people noticed our hard work." Well he has me there.
"I guess you're right. Back when I first saw her, I sort of... wanted to ask her to lunch. Then things got bad for a time before evening out."

"You'll see things as time goes on. When this is all done, enjoy the date with her in Olivine. If she goes to a place to escape the crazy life of a gym leader and wants to take you along, that shows she trusts you." Jasmine came back to the table with a frustrated look on her face.

"You'd think the Pokémon League would understand we're here for the Elite Four battles but no. They decided to force all of us to take challenges with this going on. Amphy's needed too; guess I couldn't keep him or dodge them for too long." She turned to me. "I'm sorry, but I have to go to Olivine and prepare for about four to seven trainers tomorrow and I don't think I'll make it back in time. You need anything from me?" She means good, but I still feel like I'm taking advantage of her.

"A little bit of luck," I joked.

"How about some right now?" She kissed my lips. "I'll talk to you tomorrow after the battle. I have to go wait for a bus to take me back around Tohjo Falls." She leaned in again. "I love you."

I kissed her lips in return. "I love you too. Travel safe." Our group was quiet well after she left until Davis nudged me.

"You'll be fine Mitch. We'll be there tomorrow as always. At least you gave all of us a heads-up on challenging them so we could come back. Take some leftovers up and get some sleep. Hell, take the rest of the champagne." I said my goodbyes and went to take a shower before saying goodnight to my Pokémon.

Managing to sleep was hard because Furret was purring loudly and the echoes of the anti-Umbreon crowd reverberated through my head. How much should I really use him? Is he going to be threatened forever? What's his quality of life after this is over? Sure, I'll love him until the end of time but that only goes so far.

"He'll be fine Mitch."

"You know I've been thinking about him since I learned about his condition. I'll make a deal: if I stop thinking about it, you go to bed. We've got a big battle tomorrow."

"What are you talking about? I've got day two of physical therapy tomorrow."

"Oh! I didn't know it was you. Both of you sound the same."

"You'll know the difference when both of us are in your head at the same time. Before I forget, we're still talking at noon tomorrow. Goodnight."

I should be thanking Arceus that they're not into pranks.

The computer room was empty at 11:30am which allowed me to scout Koga with no outside distractions. Almost every article on the front page of the league's website was about me winning although not every article was purely positive. One writer dubbed me "the luckiest man in Johto" citing how I never dominated a battle; guess they forgot about the clean sweep against Sara. Will offered a formal statement on his defeat late last night and he took the loss in stride. Koga's page wasn't too eccentric and he didn't really make any more comments after his message.

Elite Four Member Koga
Age: 40

Years of Service: 12 (5 years as gym leader & Elite Four member at the same time)

Pokémon type specialty: Poison

Pokémon Registered: Ariados, Weezing, Forretress, Muk, Crobat

Good to know that Espeon will have a field day. I love it when the game plan is so simple.

Will arrived in the lobby as I exited the room just before noon ready to go in the back room where Ruby's mother was being worked on. Nurse Joy brought us back to a room with a few rehabilitation machines and there she was working with a doctor on some sort of modified leg press machine. We waited patiently for her to finish her set as the doctor gave us privacy.

"Hold on a second Mitch," Will cautioned as he called out Xatu; she didn't look happy as it stood in place not trying to use its power. "Xatu's here to benefit all of us so there's no need to worry." She still stood cautiously.

"So what did you want to tell us Espeon?"

"Well, I thought about your offer and I think I'll take it. I want to stay by my daughter but I can't battle so I think it would be better if I stayed with your parents." Looks like she already cut to the chase.

"Great! I can bring out your daughter so you can tell her yourself. She'll be thrilled to hear that we could visit you anytime we want!"

"No!" she quickly responded. "I can't face her in my current condition." All things considered, maybe it's for the best. "What is your home like?"

"It's in a city where there's a trainer school to teach people how to handle Pokémon. I think…"

"I mean your house. Where your family is." Her tone sounded like she wasn't worthy to come with me.

"My family is my mom and my dad. They're a bit on the older side at 53 and 55 respectively but they still work in the city. Dad works at Sprout Tower helping with repairs and he has a Machoke for work only. Mom works in an office and occasionally small time maintenance. She has an Aipom that follows her around but I don't think it'd be a problem to you. Right now they're talking about what to do when you come home."

"Sounds like they don't want me."

"That's not true. It's a big change for them and you so they need some time to think about it." Her eyes looked at the ground. "If they don't take you in, I will. Remember what I promised you."

"Fair enough." Her eyes shifted to Will. "You told me that you can help my daughter get a better sense of her powers. That true?"

"Of course. I'm a man of my word after all." Will must've withheld the fact that Ruby wanted kits or Xatu is acting like a mind shield. "If you give me permission, I can work with her when it's convenient for Mitch. I need you to stay out of our minds so she can work with her own power." She was a little hesitant but gave him the green light.
"Did you know I was ready to intervene in your battle? Don't think I won't jump in if I feel something is going wrong. No way am I making another mistake after leaving her behind that night."

Will bowed. "Yes ma'am." He recalled Xatu and headed for the door. "We'll keep in touch. When you talk to me, Mitch should know what's going on eventually. Farewell." I kneeled to her level.

"Thanks for listening to us. Will you be paying attention to my battle later tonight?"

"Yes I will! I won't even think about interrupting battles from now on as well. I just have to accept what's going on now instead of the past or future." She took a step closer to me and lowered her head. "Please…pet me," she started to sob. "I'm scared and just want to be loved." I slowly stroked her head.

"Me too, but sometimes you have to push through it in order to get stronger. You're not in this alone. A good friend told me that you don't recognize good things until later in life." I rubbed under her chin as the doctor returned. "Your daughter's ready whenever you are and I know that you'll be loved just like everyone else on my team." I left to make sure I had everything ready to go and deposit my 500,000P check; really want to make sure that money is safe.

Koga entered the field with an icy look while the packed stadium roared to life. On any other day I would've been nervous but I was much more confident with Ruby's mother willing to come with me and Will ready to help Ruby control her powers. Add in the fact that Ruby practically sweeps his team makes this battle a little easier on the mind. Our referee went over the rules as a refresher before Koga spoke up.

"I already told you what to expect young man. Let's see if you remember. Ariados!" The spider-like Pokémon appeared looking very threatening.

"I choose Espeon!" The flags went up and I was ready for the fastest battle in Elite Four history.

"Double Team!" It made roughly nine duplicates that ran around her to keep her confused; she didn't even move.

"Good job staying calm! Use Psybeam!" Ruby failed to move at all, let alone try to find the real one. "Don't be scared! You got this!" She closed her eyes and curled up in a ball. What was she doing!?

Koga kept a poker face. "Spider Web!" Ariados spun a web over Ruby that dissolved quickly and she responded by standing up.

"There you go! Psybeam!" She fired off the attack indiscriminately as if she was scared. "No! You have to stay calm!" Ruby managed to pull it together long enough to fire a weaker Psybeam at the correct Ariados for a heavy hit.

"Giga Drain!" Its legs dug into Ruby's body, sucking her energy away.

"Psybeam!" She was too scared to fire the attack and opted for Quick Attack to keep her distance. I suddenly had this feeling that I should've went over the game plan with everyone instead of act like this would be a cakewalk.

"Mitch, call me back. Now! I've had enough. No more. I don't want another scar," she pleaded.

"Espeon, return!" The red beam touched her but nothing happened; she was stuck on the field against something that scared her. But why? She has the type advantage.
Koga formed a small smirk. "Baton Pass!" It cried out for a second as it returned to Koga. "Go Forretress!" The bug and steel bagworm Pokémon happily spun in place after being sent out.

"Come on ref, that's an illegal substitution," I moaned. "Can't switch like that." She shot me a dirty look as if she knew I would say that.

"Baton Pass is an official Pokémon League move that any trainer can use regardless of the official rules." Arguing was only going to get Ruby hurt since my attention would be divided.

"Come back Espeon!" Again, the beam failed to recall her back. "But how?"

Koga smirked again. "Baton Pass is a move that carries all effects from one Pokémon to another. That includes effects on your Pokémon by mine. Had I switched out normally, Spider Web would've completely dissolved. Now use Spikes Forretress!" Sharp spikes flew from its inner hide onto my side of the field but they didn't seem to hurt Ruby.

"Psychic!" With Ariados gone, she managed to hit Forretress for some damage.

"Not even a scratch. Swift!" It fired back with sharp pointed stars that found their mark. "Keep it up!"

"Use your own Swift!" The battlefield turned to a firework show as stars collided with a few hitting both Pokémon along the way. "Psybeam!" My saving grace was that it got confused.

"Break through and use Spikes again!" Forretress calmed down long enough to set more spikes on my side of the field.

"Psychic! Toss it!" It was my best chance to put a dent in it but it held strong.

"Now come the barrage! Swift!" It just kept sending stars at Ruby and there were too many to counter with her own or dodge. When the onslaught ended, she lay unconscious.

"Espeon is unable to battle. Forretress is the winner!"

That may have been the first time I lost the first round of a battle. If not, it had been some time since I lost an opening round. I was upset that I let my guard down, not at Ruby for panicking at the sight of Ariados. Wait a second! She said she didn't want another scar. She got that scar from… ah! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Linda told me that she got that from an Ariados and she must've been having flashbacks. From now on I'm not taking anything for granted.

"Growlithe!" I know it's severely weak to fire but one or two Swifts aren't going to be enough to knock it out. As he landed on the field, he winced in pain from the spikes scattered at his feet. Damn, that move hurts any of my Pokémon on switching and I have no way of getting rid of them. This was Koga's plan all along.

"Growlithe versus Forretress. Begin!"

"Flamethrower!"

"Protect!" A shield went up in front of it to prevent the potentially deadly hit. "Now use Explosion!"

"Flame Wheel as a shield and use Flamethrower as well!" It was worth a shot to use as much energy as possible to keep Growlithe in fighting shape for later in the battle but the blast was too much for him and both competitors fell to the ground.
"Both Pokémon are unable to battle. This round is a draw!" Koga folded his arms while admiring his work.

"I told you brute force would not work against me. Your psychic and fire type are out of this battle. Two of your most critical Pokémon gone in such a short time while there are two layers of spikes on your field. Looks like you weren't ready like I thought you would be."

"Elite Four Koga, please send out your Pokémon first."

"Very well. Ariados!" He was going for a rinse and repeat method. Despite being a bug type, it had no bug type moves.

"Umbreon!" He came out as if he was going for a kill.

It drove me mad that Ruby had to see another Ariados in front of her after that night from Hell itself. That son of a bitch made it so she couldn't go back to her ball too; Mitch reaching for my ball is what I was hoping for. The spikes on the field dug into my feet but I was too angry to let a few pokes get the best of me.

"The legendary Umbreon has made its appearance," his opponent mocked. "I wonder if it will be able to stand up to my Airados." Oh you don't have to wonder at all. "Spider Web!" The thin web entangled me but there was no way I would be intimidated.

"Faint Attack!" Mitch knows me too well. My condition didn't prevent me from sprinting full speed ahead with a dark aura around me.

"Giga Drain!" It got in a hit but I kept running until I slammed it into the side wall causing it to faint. Thanks Ruby; you set me up perfectly.

"Ariados is unable to battle. Umbreon wins!" Better believe it. On top of that, I felt Spider Web's effect fade away but there's no way I'm calling it quits.

"You good Umbreon?" I'm not too weakened now so I shook as much off me before howling. "Bite!" My condition didn't kick in as I managed to somehow bite down on a head and shake furiously.

"Sludge!" Dense balls of poison forced me halfway across the field and I started to feel the poison weakening me.

"Faint Attack!"

"Sludge!" I kept running through the balls of poison and sent Weezing backwards. I'm already covered in this stuff so why bother to shy away from it? "Tackle!"
"Quick Attack!" The effect of Toxic made me take longer to get ready to use my move but I managed to sprint ahead while Weezing met me in the middle of the field. We were head to head until I tossed it into the ground. "Jump and use Faint Attack!" On the way down from by jump I ended using Toxic yet again which allowed Weezing to get into a prime position.

"Smokescreen again!" I took damage from the poison, me hitting the ground off balance, and the smoke made it hard to breathe in my current condition. "Sludge!" I couldn't see where the assault was coming from until I was hit by a wave of poison.

"Umbreon, return!" I immediately shook Mitch off; I had enough left in the tank. "Dammit Umbreon don't argue with me!" Again, I shook my head. Anyone who messes with Ruby needs to pay until I can't fight. "Alright then, Moonlight into Faint Attack!"

"Tackle it!" My rings started to glow but Faint Attack was what ended up winning out over Moonlight and I met Weezing in the center again. We collided but I got the better of it yet again as it fell to the ground. I was ready to celebrate until the poison made me collapse.

"Umbreon and Weezing are unable to battle. The round is a draw!"

"Very interesting" the man mumbled. "Your Umbreon also knows one of the deadliest moves in existence. No matter; my goal has been achieved. This battle is all but over for you. Muk!"

"Return Umbreon." Mitch was feeling a mix of relief and anger but I didn't care if he was angry. I took care of business and put us in a good spot to win. I just wish I didn't have this stupid condition. Finish the job guys.

Had I known he would try to play the hero, I would've called him back much sooner. Being stubborn is fine, but I need to talk to him about blatantly disobeying me when I had a plan. Doesn't matter now that he forced a draw against Weezing. Muk took its place and now it was time to set my plan into motion.

"Ampharos!" It pained me to send her out with all the spikes on the field but I had no choice. At least she had enough common sense not to poke at them like I thought she would.

"Muk versus Ampharos. Begin!"

"Cotton Spore!" Muk is already slow, but this will ensure that a close quarters fight will be in favor of my team. Balls of cotton littered the field and a few attached themselves to the pure poison type. "Now charge in wit Thunderpunch!"

"Acid Armor!" A purple body turned clear for a split second as Muk looked like it became more rigid before the impact. I couldn't afford to let its defenses get stronger.

"Come back!" She looked disappointed as the beam took her away. "Furret!" No surprise she didn't appreciate the spikes on the field. "Dig!" She burrowed in a spot clear of spikes and waited in silence.

"Aim Sludge Bomb at the hole!"

That was my cue. "Hit it hard girl!" Furret came up to nail Muk for a big hit despite Acid Armor boosting its defense.

"Toxic!"
"Jump and use Iron Tail!" She easily dodged the mass of purple and slammed it for yet another solid hit.

"You'll have to do better than that. Sludge Bomb!"

"Back in the hole!"

Koga anticipated my move and had Muk fire the attack straight down into the hole. A few small explosions sent smoke out of both ends.

"Furret?" No response.

"Toxic!" It let loose a wave of purple into the hole.

"Get out Furret!" The sheer amount of poison sent through the second hole forced her up near where she dug the first hole. "Girl?" The Judge's flag went up.

"Furret is unable to battle. Muk wins!" Maybe Sludge Bomb poisoned her and she was too weak to climb up a long distance; that's something I should talk to her about.

With the playing field even at two Pokémon apiece, I chose to go back into Ampharos at the risk of the spikes hurting her even more. A slow Muk isn't going to cause me problems if I can hit it from a distance. Koga remained emotionless under pressure although I could feel the tension between us was growing now that we're in the late stages of this battle.

"Use Discharge!"

"Minimize!"

Ampharos let loose a scattered bolt of electricity as Muk shifted its body to get smaller. Luckily for me, the move hit its mark and even paralyzed Muk.

"Discharge again!"

"Sludge Bomb!"

The two attacks met in midair causing an explosion with enough force to push both Pokémon backwards. As the smoke cleared, Ampharos was conscious but poisoned while Muk had been knocked out.

"Muk is unable to battle. Ampharos wins!" It's two on one by the scoreboard but it's much closer than that.

"Well you certainly earned the right to be here young man," Koga droned. "But I'm afraid your time is up. Crobat!"

I asked Ampharos how she was doing because I would have to decide between two tough choices. Her response was to raise her hand in the air as high as possible; I know where this is going.

"Ampharos versus Crobat. Begin!"

"Double Team!"

The surprise wasn't ready quite yet with all those duplicates. "Cotton Spore! Wait for the better option!" More cotton balls were spread throughout the field as Crobat's movements became much more predictable. "Discharge!"
"Quick Attack to dodge!" Crobat's speed before the effect of Cotton spore allowed it to easily dodge the potentially devastating attack. Ampharos then went down to one knee from being so weak. "Wing Attack!"

I didn't even have to call out the final Thunder Wave to make Crobat easier to deal with. Anyone that got a good look at her while she was collapsing would've told you she was smiling.

"Ampharos is unable to battle. Cobat wins!"

Never did I ever want it to come to this but desperate times call for desperate measures. Gyarados hadn't battled or even moved around that much since the Silver Conference final so he may be a little rusty. When he emerged, he looked like he hadn't skipped a beat and the spikes didn't seem to bother him as much as everyone else.

"Gyarados versus Crobat. Begin!"

"Let me see if your Gyarados is still able to out maneuver Crobat. Paralysis isn't much of a problem when I have deception. Double Team!"

This thing needed to go down as soon as possible. "Hydro Pump!" A burst of water whizzed past each Crobat clone as it swooped in for a Quick Attack. "Keep firing!" He couldn't hit the bat as it bombarded him with Wing Attacks.

"Toxic!"

"Hyper Beam!" Gyarados managed to clip its wing as he found himself poisoned.

"I promise you the end is here. Double Team!" It took a little longer due to paralysis, but clones littered the field while Gyarados was getting worn down.

He said he'd do what it takes no matter what. Everyone on the team would die for me if it really came down to it and I would do the same for them. I hate to put him in that spot with his future health on the line, but he's always been adamant about making sure we succeed as a team.

"Thrash! Don't stop!" Gyarados began to flail uncontrollably and all the clones disappeared within seconds. The real Crobat got pummeled into the ground so much that it fell unconscious about two feet into the ground.

"Crobat is unable to battle. Gyarados is the winner! This match goes to the challenger Mitch from Violet City!" I dropped to my knees and pounded the ground out of pure joy. Koga wasted no time walking over to me and shaking my hand.

"You managed to fight through all of my tricks and earn a victory. Come back here and put your skills to the test against the rest of the Elite Four." He left with me looking around the stadium filled with cheering fans. Only one thing was on my mind after he left into the tunnel.

Do I actually stand a chance?
Chapter 59- Lapses in Judgment

Kids lined the railing waving markers while the announcer thanked everyone for coming out to watch the second battle against the Elite Four. I acknowledged them with a wave but didn't want to stay behind due to the fact I had Gyarados as the only Pokémon able to battle. Even if he was conscious, I felt like he reinjured his spine after the severe thrashing to hit every clone and smash Crobat into the ground although he showed no immediate signs of pain. Still, any adrenaline rush masks pain in addition to adding a boost of power. Gyarados' quirk of preferring to get hit before he attacks has gotten him this far in life; I'm not sure if I'm comfortable using Thrash to get me out of tough spots anymore.

The tunnel underneath the stadium had a few reporters looking for a quick quote but I bypassed them on my way to my lounge while looking at the floor. They looked upset at the cold shoulder I gave them which annoyed me because I'd figure they'd let me heal everyone up. Nurse Joy was already waiting outside the door beside a league official by the time I arrived.

"Why don't you come in and let me heal your Pokémon?" We were escorted in as the group of reporters sprinted down the hallway for a last chance at an interview. Nurse Joy locked the door and let out a deep breath. "Those people are relentless. Come on, the machine's already set up." I placed my team in to get healed.

"I didn't even ask for this yet so who did?"

"A few people actually," she replied still monitoring the progress of the machine. "Besides, you've gained a reputation for dodging any conversation until your team is healed; not a lot of people are like that once they get here."

"Guess not." The machine signaled everyone was ready to go. "Do you think you could help me just a little bit more?"

"What is it?" I didn't want to admit anything but I'd be doing a disservice if I kept any secrets.

"Could you tell doctor Harrison that I need to see her tomorrow in her office well before my next battle? It's late and I'm not in a good state of mind to talk to her about what I need to talk about."

"I can do that. Have a good night." She slowly unlocked the door and made sure nobody else came in as I immediately went to lock it again.

"Okay you guys, I need answers," I mumbled to three balls in particular. "You first Espeon." She materialized yawning before shaking her head. "What happened out there?" I asked firmly with no hint of emotion.

"You don't remember that conversation with Linda in the Blackthorn Gym do you?"

"Of course I do girl," I whispered gently while I moved closer to her.

"Then you would've known that an Ariados gave me this scar. An Ariados tied me down exposed on a tree and his group fired poison needles at me until I almost died! He could've done anything
he wanted to me before that if he felt like it and I was defenseless." She stared at the floor. I'm over Sara now but that...that was different. To be at the mercy of someone that tied you up while having a field of poison below you is bad enough; then you see the same species of Pokémon that did it to you even though it's not the exact same one. This isn't going to go away. Shade saved me that night but that memory nearly overshadows what Shade did." I felt awful that I forgot about the rest of Linda's story because Sara was the one that put her in that situation in the first place.

"From now on, I'll go over the battle plan with everyone; this one was for you to use your psychic attacks since they were super effective. I...I'm sorry." I went in to pet her but she stepped back.

"How could you leave me out there in battle like that!?" I couldn't tell if she was upset or just hysterical so I waited it out until she spoke again. "We're done for now. Call me back."

"I need to talk to Gyarados and Umbreon though." Ruby glared at me in annoyance. "Gyarados is a part of this team and I need to ask him about his health now," I sternly shot back. "Umbreon too."

"Fine! Make it quick." I hesitantly called out Gyarados to see how he acts while he was in a resting position. His face told me he wasn't in pain but that wasn't enough for me.

"How's the tail?"

"Okay I guess; not really sore or tight."

"No tweaks when you were thrashing?"

"Nope."

"Good. Hey Gyarados, I think I'm leaning towards not using Thrash. The movements you do make me nervous knowing your medical history and I'd rather not have you take a hit before you start dealing damage."

"So you remember more about him than me? I see how it is."

"Well wait a..." Gyarados got right in her face before I could finish.

"Listen to me selfish Pokémon. I told Mitch a long time ago that I'd fight until I was unable to move a single limb in my body. Yes, he's messed up before but he thinks hard about his decisions when he has all of the information in front of him. " The staring contest continued until Gyarados backed up. "Now you let Mitch finish talking to Umbreon. No communication means no trust and that almost cost us tonight."

"Just call out Shade so I can go to sleep." Umbreon emerged looking proud after thinking about the win and what he did to help.

"Umbreon...why did you disobey me?" I asked sternly. The key was not to sound upset; I was like a father talking to a child standing next to a broken vase. Letting him tell me his side would make this easier.

"You heard her. That Ariados may not have been the same one as before but any Ariados in front of me is going to get beat down harder than any other Pokémon out there. Besides, I got two knockouts."

"Playing hero isn't going to work every time Umbreon. What if you didn't knock out Weezing? I jeopardize the rest of the team and our chance to win." I could see that Ruby was getting agitated until she stepped forward.
"I'm not just going to sit here helping you berate him! You can finish this without my help. Good night." She sprinted to my side and jumped to let herself back in the ball.

"For Arcue's sake," I sighed. "Look Umbreon, you just have to trust me okay? I'm sorry about what happened. By the time I noticed, it was too late for me to do anything other than forfeit the round. You all said that you'd fight for me no matter what and I hold you all to that."

"Breeeee," he sighed.

"I have more to say but I'm too tired right now. Maybe we'll all feel better tomorrow." I held his ball out. "I still love you though; still love Espeon too. Always have and always will until the day I die. The Elite Four gauntlet isn't just about the physical side of battling and now it seems like we're figuring it out the hard way." He looked content as he was sent back; I turned to Gyarados. "You're still going to see the doctor tomorrow. Now come back for some rest." It was just me in the lounge on the couch with the night dragging on.

"Mitch? You okay in there?" one of the officials asked from outside the door.

"I'm good." No way am I going to tell them that I have a problem now. "Give me just a few more minutes."

"We'll take you to the fan area whenever you're ready. No media is waiting for you out here." At this stage, everything gets amplified to absurd levels. Every individual victory is one step closer to Lance while each matchup I lose feels like I still need years of training to press on. Fans, detractors, impartial critics, the entire world watching my every move doesn't do me much good right now considering I can't enjoy anything without thinking about the next battle in front of me. My dad's words from when I was a frustrated teenager struggling to get Growlithe to trust me started to resonate in my mind the more I felt like screaming.

_Raising a Pokémon…easy? Nobody said it would be easy, but everyone said it would be worth it. You train one to at least respect you and it will do whatever it takes to make you happy._

"Take me to the fan area guys. I can't leave them waiting anymore," I yelled through the door. Time to earn the respect of people who may still be wary of me.

Roughly 250 fans packed in the area allotted for them hoping to have some form of interaction with me while others opted to take pictures of me for their memories. Children always got first dibs when it came to autographs, photos, or even a quick conversation. All of them had a sparkle in their eyes when I did what they requested but unfortunately most parents weren't 100% comfortable with me simply because of Umbreon. Most them had the decency not to lecture their kids about my situation in front of me but there was always that one parent who scolded their child for blindly admiring me. Time seemed to pass by faster with each request being done until the anti-Umbreon group made their presence known.

"Come on you idiots! Can't you see Mitch is a terrible role model? Can't you see that he's a cheater who managed to get lucky and not get punished? Open your eyes people! Any one of us could win in his shoes." I wasted no time going over to the person in front of the mob.

"Let's get one thing straight here: I am _not_ supposed to be a role model. I'm a trainer first, role model second."

"Ah ha! So you admit that you're a terrible person?"

"I never said that. If anyone wants to model themselves or others after me then so be it. You can
look up to other people. I could care less how people raise their kids or view me." The person shifted their eyes to my forearm.

"What's this?" For a split-second, the redness of Ruby's claw marks wasn't covered by my jacket. By the time I noticed, my sleeve was pulled up revealing the scars she had given me and security got between us. "Do I have to spell it out for you people!? Mitch's own Pokémon attacked him because he pushed them too far. I bet it was that abomination." I maneuvered through the guard's arm to grab at the man's shirt.

"If anyone from your group ever calls him an 'abomination' in front of me, they'll get an earful. Anyone who tries to go after him will get a free ride to the hospital. Don't start with the 'you wouldn't hit a woman' crap either. Everyone's fair game the moment they try to physically attack either of us." The guard managed to pry me away, but not before I felt a hand touch one of my Luxury Balls.

"Give me that Umbreon!" he yelled once there was some distance between us. "You think we're scared of you!? Look at all the security around! That alone proves you're weak. You wouldn't do shit." I ducked under the guard's arm and I landed a right hook to his cheek before firing haymakers on his head; I stopped once my knuckles started to hurt and four officers dragged me away while yelling at both of us. In that five second span, the fans and the protesting group dispersed amidst the chaos while I tried to go back for more.

"That security is for your protection. I can handle myself!" I screamed as loud as I could. The man was dazed but a woman helped him stand as security led them away. "What the hell are you doing!? I'm not done with them yet!"

"Dammit, just calm down and keep walking away!" the guard yelled back. I was taken back into the tunnel away from any curious eyes. "Do you have any idea of what you just did?"

"Yeah! Protecting my Pokémon!" He shook his head.

"Expect something from the league tomorrow on this. Even if they reached for your Pokémon, assaulting someone like that isn't the way to go." I folded my arms and took a deep breath.

"Easy for you to say; you don't have any Pokémon."

"Just wait in the lounge a bit before you go back to the hotel." I walked back to the lounge and pulled out my phone to reply to any stray support texts. I didn't feel like hanging out with my friends as I pulled up Jasmine's name. I didn't want to talk to her, but I'd rather break the news to her than someone else.

"Mitch! I was just about to call you! Congrats on the win!" Jasmine's cheerful voice has been my saving grace throughout my time at the Indigo Plateau.

"Well it wasn't easy. I'm starting to think I'm not going to much last longer here for a lot of reasons."

"Talk to me," she replied bluntly. "Bottling anything bad up isn't a good idea. I did it once and snapped at Amphy; that hurt both of us for about a week. We couldn't look each other in the eye." I was still silent, unsure if I should tell her anything. "Let me help you Mitch. Please. Don't be stubborn," she somewhat pleaded.

"Two of my Pokémon are arguing with me and a third is fighting against them. Basically, we're losing our bond. Add in the fact that we won 1-0 and the future isn't looking so good." She paused
"Challenging the Elite Four isn't something that all eligible trainers do. We as gym leaders can challenge them anytime we want for a right to join them but we all know that getting just one win would be a miracle, let alone five. It's supposed to test you in many ways."

That was news to me. School had taught me that getting eight badges was the best thing to do so a trainer could show the world their skills. Never have I ever thought about the negatives of challenging the league. Maybe our teachers didn't want to crush our dreams so easily or maybe they wanted us to figure it out on our own. I don't want her to figure anything out on her own so I figured it was time to tell her the other reason why I'm upset.

"There's also some anti-Umbreon group that's annoying me. Recently, they've come up to me after my battles and have said some…unflattering things about Umbreon and me."

"They're not getting to you with their words, right?"

"Not really. One person tried to grab a ball though; couldn't tell if it was Umbreon."

"What did you do?"

Here it goes. "I landed a right hook followed by firing haymakers on the top of his head."

"Oh Mitch," she sighed. "Why?!"

"Two reasons. Nobody should be stealing anyone's Pokémon and the phrase 'talk shit, get hit' comes to mind. Retaliation in a nutshell."

Jasmine let out a surprised whistle. "Well I wasn't there but it still sounds excessive."

"Should've given him a concussion to be honest. I have no idea why this is such a problem at this point in time."

"Now that would've been too much. I don't want you getting in trouble for a problem that can be solved in more effective ways."

"I'll do my best to stay under control." I stared at my team on my belt. "I'm walking a fine line with how I act but it's because I don't want anything bad to happen to my Pokémon. Maybe I love them too much if that's possible."

"Loving them too much isn't the problem. You just need to channel that passion and use it for your benefit." She yawned after she finished. "It's getting late for me. I might be there tomorrow to support you."

"Before you go, how'd you do today?"

She let out a small laugh. "Undefeated including three sweeps."

A smile formed on my face. "You're strong alright. Both in battle and as a person. Goodnight Jasmine; I love you."

"I love you too Mitch. Get some sleep. Tomorrow's a better day." My best bet was to stay in the lounge just a bit longer before walking back to my room. There were some small snacks for me to much on in addition to a few bottles of juice. Nobody had come to check on me so I laid down on the couch before I eventually fell asleep.
Beeping from my phone woke me up as my little power nap turned into a full-blown night of sleep. The notification was a missed call from my parents around 9:30am but the voicemail was only one second long. I silently cursed that I didn't make it back last night while I turned on the television to see the recap of last night's battle since I didn't do it with Will. What I saw was not good.

"Recent Silver Conference champion Mitch from Violet City is in some hot water after punching a man..." Figures that incident would be more important than my win over Koga; I changed the channel. A roundtable discussion was happening while a video of the fan fight was going on the side of the screen.

"Yeah this kid's good, but he's a hot head! Of course owning an Umbreon like that is going to carry some problems even though the league said it was okay," a man stated as if all of this was my fault.

"Come on now, his Luxury Ball was grabbed by this person and the video shows that. I expect the league to fine him but this was self-defense. Who cares if they exchanged threats," a woman retorted. Wait a second…

"Give me a break Brandi! This kid's out of control and the league can't trust its fate with this kid if he can't take a little heat."

"Let me say this: he's doing something that is justified for this situation. We'll take a quick break so don't change that dial! You're watching 'Battling with Brandi' on WJTV." A small chuckle came out of me; the one person on the biggest station in Johto who tried to rip me to shreds actually defended me. Hell may have just frozen over.

Leaving the stadium felt like a relief as the sun was high in the sky. A few people were out roaming the grounds yet no media personnel were in sight. The process of getting to my room was agonizing knowing a camera could pop out of nowhere. Clicking from my door allowed me to exhale knowing I won't be bothered for some time. Unfortunately there was a note already there to kill the mood.

Dear Mitch,

Due to the events of last night, you are advised to avoid any interaction with anyone after your remaining battle(s) during the Elite Four Challenge. Our discipline committee has reviewed all footage of the incident and it has been determined that you must pay a 25,000P fine to the league for such behavior. Self-defense is acceptable but you went above and beyond the necessary force for the situation. If you would like to set a fan interaction session during your remaining time here, please notify the public relations department and we will be happy to assist you. Let security do their job in the future as well. Best of luck in your next battle.

-The Pokémon League

No charges…yet. Although I think it won't matter if it came to that. The person has a problem and he tried to steal someone from my team; my family.

Everyone was let out to eat except for Gyarados because he had to go pay the doctor a visit. Neither Espeon nor Umbreon showed any signs of any lingering uneasiness from last night's conversation after the battle. Ampharos looked a little nervous without Gyarados alongside her so I did my best to calm her down long enough to get her eating and me out the door. Getting to the exam room without interruptions was a nice bonus.

"Hello Mitch! I hear you need something from me," doctor Harrison cheerfully said.
"Gyarados' x-ray results doc. I just want to make sure he's healthy since our next battle is in about six hours."

"Place him on the table then I'll get started. You can stay or leave."

"Scouting my opponent would be better. I'll stop back when I'm done." The computer room was empty like last time so I booted up the home page looking for my next Elite Four opponent.

**Elite Four Member Bruno**

**Age:** 32

**Years of Service:** 10 (8 serving as Kanto and Johto Elite Four member simultaneously)

**Pokémon Type Specialty:** Fighting

**Pokémon Registered:** Hitmontop, Hitmonchan, Hitmonlee, Onix, Machamp

Bruno's discipline must have been unmatched to have evolved three Tyrogues into legitimate powerhouses. Espeon would be an easy matchup but I don't know how mentally ready she is for this considering last night. Chuck pointed out earlier that most psychic Pokémon lack the defenses to take a hit against fighting types as well. While I figured out how to approach the fight, I made my way to where Ruby's mother was doing her exercises.

"Can I come in?" The physical therapist on duty waved.

"Just sit in the corner until we're done. She figured you would be stopping by at some point." A few more reps on the leg press, some work on climbing a set of boxes to simulate stairs, squats, and stretching rounded out the session. Espeon trotted over just short of me before bowing.

"May I be pet?" Her voice was still shaky when it came to that topic.

"You never have to ask me for permission; just come up and rub yourself on my leg or put your head into my lap. Something to indicate that you want to be pet!" She eagerly put her head on my lap and I tussled her loose fur. "How's therapy?"

"It's rough so far. The good news is that after a few days I've managed to walk on all fours. Running or standing for extended periods of time are still out of the question for now though. How's everyone on your end?" I'm no fool; Espeon could easily read my mind but I don't want to tell her that I wailed on someone.

"We struggled against Koga and today we have to face Bruno. From what I looked up, he's extremely disciplined and relies on pure power. My best bet is to beat him at his own game."

"Really? You're going to try to beat a top-tier trainer using his own strategy?"

"My last year in school was where I had to take advanced classes. We learned that certain types have at least one universal characteristic. Fighting types are strong physical attackers no doubt, but many them are slow. Faster fighting types have lower defenses so I'm going to see if I can take advantage of that."

"Sounds like you know what you're doing. I'll be watching the battle on a screen somewhere so good luck!" Her eyes grew heavy while I continued to pet her until I lost focus of everything around me. All that mattered was her.
"I can't wait to take you home Espeon," I whispered. "Great place to live, good food, freedom to roam around knowing you can come home; it'll be great."

"What about sleep? I haven't slept good in months." I gently kissed the top of her head.

"As often and long as you want. Keep working here until you're cleared." I checked my phone for the time. "I should go check up on a teammate before I have to go back up to my room. Hopefully I'll be able to stop by tomorrow." She laid on her side and started to fall asleep after I got up.

"Don't worry about what happened last night. They're either jealous or just nuts. All that matters is that you don't fool yourself. If only Sara put in half the effort you did..." We stared at each other in silence before I left the room.

Doctor Harrison messaged me as I was on my way down to her office only to stop when I knocked on her door. X-rays lined her desk while her computer had Gyarados' profile opened up. She had done more than her fair share of checking on him while I was gone.

"Here's the news for you Mitch: Gyarados can battle today. However, I did some mobility exercises and saw that he feels pain when his tail makes multiple sudden movements in a row." An x-ray was handed to me. "There's nothing wrong with the bone itself. The tendons, ligaments, and tissue around it are a little swollen though. Expect a decrease in power and mobility but the likelihood of severe injury from moving around is very low." That was a relief knowing there could be a potential problem.

"Thanks for the help as always. Now I can focus on Bruno."

"Bruno? The fighting type master?" I nodded. "This isn't meant to scare you, but a high percentage of trainers report at least one major Pokémon injury after battling him. A few trainers have had to come in for injuries because of the inaccuracy of his attacks that make their way to the trainer's box. Bruno isn't a dirty fighter; his Pokémon just hit harder than anyone else's. Maybe one of Lance's Pokémon has the raw power that Bruno does.

"I'll keep that in mind; hope I don't have to see you after the battle." Gyarados' ball was handed to me so I went back up to my room to deliver the news.

Everyone was lying around in the room or on the balcony when I returned with the last member of my team. Ampharos' ears twitched and she sprinted to me so she could see Gyarados again. He was let out before I gathered everyone into a circle.

"Listen up guys. Let me start by saying I almost blew it yesterday. I got careless by assuming a lot of things so that's not going to happen anymore." I could feel Espeon become happier after I admitted it. "For this meeting, I'm going over how to take on Bruno. This man is a fighting type expert that I assume has more discipline than anyone we've ever met. His Pokémon arguably hit harder than any others before us and there is a real chance that one of us could get hurt, including me. As a precaution, Furret and Umbreon will not be used unless it is an absolute emergency." They went to protest but Espeon looked their way and they stopped. "We're down to four now. I'll have Espeon lead off and see where it goes from there. Hitmonchan can learn elemental punches so be cautious on that front. He does have an Onix so Gyarados will handle it. Growlithe and Ampharos are going to provide excellent support with either a burn status or a paralysis as well."

"What if it does down to us?" Furret asked; I looked at the ground to recall what I learned in Violet City school.

"Furret's most likely to be faster than all of his team so use that to your advantage. Umbreon is a
little tougher since fighting resists dark but Toxic is the best option. Got a feeling for this?" They looked around trying to piece together the plan or figure out their role. "Hands in the middle, tail for you Gyarados. Win on three. One! Two! Three! Win!"

"Win!"

"Alright! Cut loose some more. Grab some more food if you want. We've got a few hours to kill." I ordered room service under my own name and ate my fill. After the numerous lapses in judgment in the past 24 hours, it was reassuring to have a plan in place and a meal in my stomach. My dad's advice echoed through my head again while I finished.

_Raising a Pokémon…easy? Nobody said it would be easy, but everyone said it would be worth it. You train one to at least respect you and it will do whatever it takes to make you happy._

That advice has gotten us this far and I hope it holds true against Bruno.
We managed to rest up until an hour before the scheduled match once everyone finished eating or doing whatever they wanted to mentally prepare. The feeling to go over to the stadium on my own time was something I loved now compared to in the tournament when I was on a strict time schedule. No press conferences or media obligations is a mixed bag because although I didn't have to deal with them, all that focus went to preparing for the Elite Four which was just as stressful. A knock on the door came just as I was done washing my face in the bathroom.

"Hello? Mitch? Are you in there?" The voice didn't seem familiar. "We're the security the league sent to escort you to the stadium."

"Coming!" I opened the door to see two men that were bigger than me in height and weight plus one woman a few inches shorter than me wearing formal league blazers and sunglasses. "Let me guess… I'm a problem, aren't I?"

"If that's what you want to think, then yes. We're just meant to get you to and from the stadium; nothing more, nothing less. We will leave whenever you want, but we were sent up here to make sure you were here." At least they're not babysitters.

"I was actually ready to head out now."

"Allow us to take the lead."

"Quick question before we start walking… which one of you is the strongest? What Pokémon do you guys have?" I asked with a smile. I'm all for formalities but a little small talk would be nice.

"I am," the woman coldly replied as she showed me her Ultra Ball. "Come out." She released the seal and an Alakazam materialized in front of us. I could feel a headache coming on until she threw up her hand as the signal to stop. "I have more but there's no need to worry. My colleagues have Pokémon that cannot be called out in this small hallway."

"Could you at least tell me? I'm curious."

"Rhydon and Kangaskhan; that's all you need to know." These guys are packing heat.

With me advancing to the halfway point of the gauntlet, more people were starting to take me seriously. More people were waiting on the path to the stadium as well as in front of the side entrance. The Alakazam remained out the entire time using Protect to shield us. I was hurt inside because I wanted to give high fives to fans but knew why I was in this situation in the first place. Maybe the dark rain clouds on the horizon made it protect us as well. We arrived at the lounge door with no problems and the three guards took their leave. The lounge area remained stocked with goodies to eat but there was a note on the coffee table.

*I wanted to surprise you after the battle, but I couldn't hide it. I'm here in the suite and want to wish you luck because only a few people get clearance to hang around the lounge for a long period of time. Luckily, I got Ashley to drop this off for me. Good luck against Bruno and remember, I love you no matter what happens. I believe in you.*
A wide grin formed while I shook my head. I knew something was off when she didn't call me. The game plan is in place, all 50,000 people are eagerly awaiting, my friends are probably figuring out what to eat after the battle, and my parents are home watching. Now's the time to step outside and have some fun.

Although Umbreon wasn't going to see much action, the roof was closed under the threat of heavy rain which meant his Moonlight attack was going to recover far less than what I want. A closed roof still provided a lot of room to maneuver around attacks or redirect attacks without hurting anyone. I snuck a peek at the luxury suites to see Jasmine staring ahead at the scoreboard before moving to the stands and seeing my friends jumping in excitement. The public address announcer took over once it got closer to the start time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Indigo Plateau! Tonight, we have a big match in store for you! Coming off a clutch performance against Koga, this trainer has done the impossible and then some! Please give a big hand for yourrrrrrrrrrr Silver Conference champion, Mitch!" The crowd roared to life as I calmly walked out to my box.

"Let's go Mitch! Let's go Mitch! Let's go Mitch!" Over half the stadium was chanting it slowly before speeding up as the announcer went back to the microphone.

"And now for his opponent. This man has held a black belt in karate for the past seven years, has dedicated followers across the world, and is the undisputed master of fighting type Pokémon in Johto. Give a round of applause for Bruuuuuuuuuuuno!" A muscular man walked out of the other tunnel with no shirt on, no shoes on, and karate pants held up by the black belt. He took his place then crossed his arms.

"Young man, I am Bruno of the Elite Four. Since I was a young boy, I pushed myself and my Pokémon to the limit because we wanted to get stronger. Are you ready to face our overwhelming power? I have sensed fear in you and your Pokémon since the semifinals of the Silver Conference. This is your last chance to back out before we display the full extent of our brutality."

Just like the past, I took out the Growlithe doll before throwing my jacket aside. I placed it in my right side as I took a few deep breaths. Scanning the crowd one more time allowed me to refocus on the upcoming battle. With everyone in the audience, I was fine knowing I had their support.

"Every single one of my Pokémon has stared death in the face at one point in their lives only to spit in its face. Do you honestly think that they'll be scared of a battle? As for me… 'bend not break' is a philosophy that I keep in my back pocket when the going gets tough. I'll be disappointed if you hold back," I shot back at him. He reached for his first Pokémon as the referee started the formalities.

"You both know the rules so without further ado, call out your Pokémon."

"Hitmontop!" The Pokémon came out on its feet instead of its head like I thought; usually not a good sign.

"Espeon!"

The game plan was still on with Hitmontop on the other side of the field. Espeon could easily run through everyone on Bruno’s team except Onix so I'll roll with that until he sent it out. Machamp may be a problem if Ruby gets reminded of that one Machamp in one of our earlier battles in the tournament. Until that point, it'd be better to let her go as long as she wants.
"Hitmontop versus Espeon. Begin!" Bruno remained still with his arms crossed.

"Use Detect," he calmly ordered. His demeanor is calmer than normal which may be a result of his personal training. Any trainer showing a severe lack of emotion in a battle is either arrogant or hiding something; better keep my guard up.

"Psybeam!" Ruby fired off a powerful blast with no effort. Hitmontop shut its eyes and easily dodged the attack, much to our dismay. "Keep firing!" She shot out multiple smaller blasts in an attempt to at least get off a small hit. All of them were easily dodged effortlessly and it returned to its starting point.

"Pursuit." That calm demeanor is unnerving.

"Quick Attack! Chase it down!"

They chased each other around the field trying to land a hit but couldn't get in close enough for a clean shot. When it looked like Ruby had the upper hand, Hitmontop gave up running and starting spinning on its head to keep up. They eventually collided at a high speed which sent them skidding backwards.

"Dig." Hitmontop shook off the attack then hid underground; then it hit me.

"Espeon, go to the hole and use Psybeam!"

"Get out of the hole with Quick Attack!" Bruno roared. Finally broke through that calm demeanor of his.

"Fire away! Stick your head down there if you have to!" She let loose Psybeams with no regard for accuracy as one of them eventually hit Bruno's Pokémon. It came up through the field and the added power from its own Quick Attack had it in the air. "Swift!"

"Detect!"

The maneuver spared it from being hit with the full force of the attack although it couldn't escape a few extra stars. It hit the ground hard and fell unconscious.

"Hitmontop is unable to battle. Espeon wins!"

That first round couldn't have gone much better. Espeon took only one hit and simultaneously made Hitmontop look like an absolute joke. A confidence boost was needed and I didn't think it would come so easily. In theory, this match is just as easy as Koga on paper but I now know that the battle is a different animal. Bruno wouldn't be so dumb as to just give me a round so I'm interested to see his strategy.

"I was a fool to assume you were scared," he huffed in frustration. "Not too many trainers dare to face me without flinching. I think it is time to show you the ferocity that my Pokémon are capable of now that you have had your fun."

"How dare you call yourself an Elite Four member for taking it easy on me let alone even thinking about it!" He unfolded his arms, let them land by his side, and clenched his fists.

"You will come to regret those words or anything else that might come out of your mouth. Go Onix!" Looks like I've "awakened the beast" inside of him and there's no turning back.

"Espeon, return! Go Gyarados!" He's playing right into my plan.
"Onix versus Gyarados. Begin!"

"Hydro Pump!"

"Slither away!" Onix lowered its body and moved to the side to dodge the fatal blast. "Sandstorm!" Its tail slammed the ground repeatedly to get dirt in the air before swiping the tail around to create a cloud of dust.

"Don't panic Gyarados. Hydro Pump!"

"Rock Slide to defend!" Again, the tail pounded the ground with enough force to break a chunk of the field off and reduce the amount of water coming at it. Some smaller pebbles got caught up in the sandstorm and Gyarados was being buffeted by debris. "Go on the offensive!" Rocks of all sizes were sent Gyarados' way.

"Hyper Beam!" It was a risky maneuver but the blast was guaranteed to turn the rocks into dust. I cringed at the bigger stones that were still left as the sandstorm raged on. I had to make the call to switch him.

"Gyarados, retu…"

"Bind!" Onix moved faster than I thought and relentlessly squeezed Gyarados; horrible mistake on Bruno's part.

"Hydro Pump!"

There was no way that it could dodge the water attack and the end of Onix's tail slammed down on Gyarados' tail as it was flailing. I heard a loud roar from my heaviest hitter and I recoiled knowing the injury was reaggravated. My one saving grace was that it fainted shortly after and the judge saw it all.

"Onix is unable to battle. Gyarados wins!" The roar of the crowd didn't mean as much this time around.

"Gyarados, return!"

There was an ambulance at the ready for my battles ever since Cory and I threatened each other in our match. If I sent Gyarados away, I'm honestly down to three viable Pokémon. However, the ball should keep his health stable. He would've asked to be called back if it was bad enough so I'll keep that in mind.

"That was a risky ending you went for just now. The lack of discipline and the willingness to take unnecessary risks will eventually lead to your defeat" Bruno lectured.

Now he's trying to get in my head. His position as an Elite Four member is established while I'm trying to go for the ultimate prize in beating Lance; of course I have to take risks. One loss from me means my challenge is over. One loss for Bruno probably doesn't mean much unless the Pokémon League has strict rules about evaluating their members. Also, he must've known that Gyarados had an injury and struck when the opportunity was right. Regardless, it may just have to be up to Ruby from here on out.

"You're one to talk! Nobody in their right mind charges into a water type like the way you did. Maybe you're the undisciplined one!" Calm down Mitch, you're losing it. Remember: lose your mind and you lose the battle.
"That is simply not true," he growled. "Hitmonchan! Show him the results of our training!" It came out feigning jabs and hopping around like any professional boxer.

"Espeon, get out here!" Ruby came out a little worried at what she saw from her ball, but the worry faded away when she saw what she had to fight in front of her.

"Hitmonchan versus Espeon. Begin!"

"Mach Punch!"

"Psychic!" Hitmonchan moved too fast for Ruby to get a grip on it. Its endurance was superior as Ruby had to take a break from trying to grab a hold of it.

"Charge in for the punch now!" I wanted Quick Attack. I wanted to smack it against the side wall, but I quickly remembered how bad Furret's concussion was against a weaker Noctowl so I opted for a better option.

"Psybeam!"

Ruby fired the attack straight ahead, but Hitmonchan ducked at the last second, then delivered a powerful right hook to Ruby's left cheek. She staggered backwards and tried to shake the cobwebs out of her head. "Use Swift!" Her attack was nowhere near hitting its target.

"Ice Punch!" It pounced at the opportunity to land another haymaker on my defenseless Pokémon.

Espeon started to become encased in ice as she still was dizzy from the Mach Punch shot to the face. As soon as she was fully frozen, I recalled her back. The referee was smart in not declaring Espeon unable to battle, but her time in this battle is over. I could let her take a beating from the remaining fighting types and eventually be freed via punches or kicks; not looking forward to that conversation if I actually let her stay out. Bruno would be stupid to use Fire Punch to thaw her out so he would just wail on her until the referee called the round. I have an answer to the elemental punches though.

"Growlithe!" He came out understanding the situation.

"Proving me wrong again I see" Bruno said while rubbing his chin. "Perhaps you do have some discipline in you. Let us see what you have for my Hitmonchan's well-rounded battle style."

"Hitmonchan versus Growlithe. Begin!"

"Mach Punch!"

"Flame wheel! Chase it down!" I figured that Growlithe could get his legs warmed up with a jog while also trying to hit his opponent. If Hitmonchan wanted to punch him, it would risk a burn.

"Meet it with Fire Punch then!" Damn… forgot about that. The two collided near the sideline with Growlithe steadily losing ground.

"Flamethrower!"

It was a risky decision to let Growlithe take a punch without the fire protecting him, but it paid off as it fired the attack from a distance. The full force of the attack wasn't there like I wanted, yet the result was good enough for me. Hitmonchan was knocked down and the breathing was starting to become labored.
"Thunderpunch!" Hitmonchan recovered quickly to deliver a hard hit to Growlithe's side. The impact sent him from the sideline into the wall. Bruno's words about tacking unnecessary risks from earlier rang in my mind which forced me to make another substitution. My new idea isn't going to involve power.

"Come back Growlithe!" He moaned in discomfort as the red beam brought him to safety; the indent in the wall was about two inches deep. "Go Ampharos!" I've cycled through the Pokémon I wanted to; hopefully I can get Hitmonchan under control before I just get everyone hurt more or have to use Umbreon or Furret.

"Hitmonchan versus Ampharos. Begin!"

"Cotton Spore!" I tried fighting power with power, but Ruby being frozen threw a wrench in that plan. Now it's going to be power against speed.

"Mach Punch!" The cotton balls clung to the punching Pokémon and the impact of Mach Punch wasn't as powerful as before. "Ice Punch!"

"Come on Ampharos, hit back with your Thunderpunch!" With the spores slowing down the opposing punch, I figured going fist for fist was a good idea; I was right. Ampharos' fist won out and pushed Hitmonchan backwards and it went down on one knee to catch its breath. "Discharge!" Electricity went straight across the battlefield and Hitmonchan fell for good.

"Hitmonchan is unable to battle. Ampharos wins!"

That win cost too much on my end. A frozen Espeon, Growlithe probably has a piece of the wall in his fur, and Ampharos taking a hit that I probably could've avoided... all for the sake of one Pokémon. Then again, that endurance was on another level. Slowing it down earlier would've been ideal but even then, it still packed a big punch.

"Very interesting strategy with shuffling your Pokémon around. But tell me Mitch... what do you have left for my remaining Pokémon? Our pure power has worn your team down and your only way to win is frozen. I would consider conceding defeat if I were you."

Bruno wasn't getting enraged or frustrated in his tone or body language. His request was almost a warning of what would be to come if I kept fighting on. Up to this point, he hasn't been shy about the physicality so I doubt it's stopping anytime soon.

"My Pokémon told me that they wanted to battle until they couldn't move so I'm going to honor their promise."

"So be it. Hitmonlee, get ready!" I decided to stick with Ampharos to keep up momentum.

"Hitmonlee versus Ampharos. Begin!"

"Cotton Spore!" Slowing that thing down was my first priority. Hitmonlee may not have any elemental kicks or punches, but those legs can hit just as hard.

"Foresight!" Its eyes shut while the cotton stuck to its body. "Now use Hi Jump Kick!"

"Discharge!" Ampharos' attack hit it while it was in midair, but its foot connected on her stomach and she knelt down to catch her breath. She looked like she was struggling to stand up fast enough.

"Come back!" This qualified as an absolute emergency. "Umbreon!" Part of the crowd went quiet as he stood tall. Bruno shook his head.
"Unnecessary risk my friend. I hope you're prepared to live with the consequences."

"Hitmonlee versus Umbreon. Begin!"

"Foresight!"

"Toxic!" I prayed to Arceus that his condition didn't kick in; it didn't. Purple liquid soaked the fighting type as it refocused.

"Hi Jump Kick!"

"Dodge it!" It was my only chance, but Hitmonlee was too dialed-in to let Umbreon's running around distract it and Umbreon took a powerful roundhouse kick to the side. He snarled as he sprung to his feet. Showing no signs of major pain, I kept him in.

"Double Kick!"

"Faint Attack!"

All four of us on the field didn't care about the consequences. The collision resulted in a stalemate at midfield as Umbreon's head met Hitmonlee's foot. Umbreon tried to churn his legs to keep moving ahead, but Hitmonlee held steady despite the cotton slowing it down. After a few seconds, the other leg swung around and decked Umbreon to the ground. It had perfect balance, was doused in poison, and still delivered a knockout blow all while getting attacked. What kind of training does Bruno do!?

"Umbreon is unable to battle. Hitmonlee wins!" My plan for Hitmonlee worked out; I got it poisoned and slowed it down for the rest of my team. Umbreon slowly turned to me and gave me a smile knowing he had done his job. I recalled him and started to digest the situation.

Bruno has a poisoned Hitmonlee that's been slowed down by Ampharos and a Machamp at full strength. I have a defeated Umbreon, beat up Growlithe, beat up Ampharos, potentially serious injured Gyarados, frozen Espeon, and a healthy Furret. I really don't want to use Furret, but I need to buy time for everyone else. She could easily run and hide from Hitmonlee before finishing it off. What I want to avoid is her getting hit hard.

"Furret!" I could sense some people in the crowd questioning my decision to use her. Bruno didn't offer anything to say to me. However, he turned to the judge before the round started.

"I concede the round." Gasps echoed throughout the crowd as he turned to me. "I will not let you gain an advantage by merely running around; Hitmonlee fainting was inevitable. My trust in my last Pokémon far surpasses that of the rest of my team. Go, Machamp!"

"That's interesting," I casually said, trying to hide the anxiety in my voice. "How many times has this happened?"

"I have done this whenever it was beneficial for me to do so. Prepare for the onslaught my Machamp is about to deliver."

"Machamp versus Furret. Begin!"

"Dig a hole, girl!" Furret wasted no time going underground as Bruno took a deep breath.

"Foresight." His shift back to a calm tone concerned me. I don't know if his Machamp prefers commands that way or if he's trying to intimidate me with the change in demeanor.
"Hit it, Furret!" She came back up and clipped one of Machamp's legs.

"Vital Throw."

"Iron Tail!" Machamp's hands easily grabbed her tail despite it being cloaked in metal and he slammed her to the ground. I was going to recall her, but Bruno was one step ahead of me.

"Cross Chop." I couldn't reach for my ball and aim it at her fast enough to call her back because of the distance between us and the fact that Machamp was charging at her so I had to go on the defensive.

"Quick Attack!" She jumped up and went straight at it with no hesitation in her step; that wasn't what I thought she would do. "No! I wanted you to dodge!" Her attack connected and she only got nicked. Machamp as a species was naturally slower so I decided to take a risk. "Use Return!"

"Again, Machamp." Furret sprinted before jumping into its chest to deliver a strong attack. However, Machamp's feet dug into the ground and he brought two hands on Furret. The impact left her unconscious.

"Furret is unable to battle. Machamp wins!" The crowd ooohed and aaaaahed as I lost my second Pokémon after only a few hits.

The tide of this battle has changed. Sure, Furret got in a few hits which is nice… but now my options are extremely limited. I think I'm at a point where I can't afford to make any mistakes. My friends were still rooting for me in the stands and Jasmine had folded her hands as if she was praying that I would find a way to get through this. Furret started to crawl back to me but I called her back before she moved too far.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered to her ball. "I was too reckless." Bruno offered me a blank stare before bowing.

"Although this battle is not over, I commend you for your act of humility just now. I sincerely apologize for attacking your character this entire time. However, I will not let up in my assault. Now show me your power!"

"Growlithe!" He looked rested enough after being slammed into the wall. "We need a big hit buddy. Think you're up for it?" He turned and sternly nodded.

"Machamp versus Growlithe. Begin!"

"Flamethrower!" The flames that came from his mouth weren't just red; there were yellow and blue ones mixed in as well.


Machamp stomped on the ground to break up the field before hurl sizeable rocks at Growlithe. He evaded the larger ones, but they eventually made it hard for him to maneuver around the battlefield. Some flames hit the rocks while others found their intended target after losing their power over the long distance between the two Pokémon. Rocks continued to rain down until a boulder hit him head-on and sent him flying to my feet; he was knocked out cold. I picked him up and cradled him in my arms.

"Growlithe is unable to battle. Machamp wins!"

This thing is an absolute monster. I can only imagine the injuries other trainers have seen their
Pokémon suffer. I'm officially at a fork in the road on what to do. Ampharos is probably ready to go again now that she's gotten her rest, Gyarados can hold his own but I'm worried about his tail from that earlier battle with Onix, and Espeon is encased in ice. With Machamp as his last Pokémon, he has no other options to defer to.

"Great job Growlithe. Take a long rest." I'm going to catch some heat for my decision. "Espeon!" She materialized still frozen, but the referee gave his signal.

"Machamp versus Espeon. Begin!" Both of us stood in silence as neither of us wanted to make a move. We both knew the implications of this round.

"It seems you have cornered me, Mitch. Conceding now would mean you would win the battle yet if I attack, your Espeon will become free."

"Bingo," I replied monotonously.

"I am content to wait. The roof may be closed, but it would be quite some time before she would be able to thaw out enough for an attack. Also, she would be more likely to faint from the cold." I immediately turned to the referee after he finished talking.

"He can stall?"

"Technically, yes. You can stall as well. It's not explicitly stated in the rules that stalling is illegal." We were at a stalemate since he didn't want to break her ice prison and this would be the perfect opportunity to thaw her out. The crowd booed as my group of friends looked on with worried looks on their faces for the next five minutes

"Ruby! Ruby! Can you hear me!?" I relayed to her hoping she would be conscious.

"So... c-c-cold..."

"I'm not going to play this game. Let me call you back."

"N-n-no! Let me try s-s-somet-th-thing." Blue light reflected inside the ice as Machamp started to come off the ground, only to be released after a few inches in the air. "P-p-perfect. I c-c-can d-d-do someth-th-thing. K-k-keep m-m-me in." Bruno's expression changed.

"Your Espeon is that strong? Very well. Machamp, use Cross Chop at the base."

It charged ahead and started pounding away at the thick layer of ice surrounding her. Ice surrounding her legs broke off first, but it kept attacking the legs. Espeon managed to move it back with a little force before it started to attack her midsection. The tactic was ruthless: attack her body but keep her head encased so her power would be limited.

"Espeon, return!" I couldn't stand to see her get pounded like that anymore, but I think she might have weakened it just enough. "Ampharos!"

"Machamp versus Ampharos. Begin!" The referee gets so much credit from me for keeping a steady tone after all the switches I've made.

"Thunder Wave!" The electricity surround Machamp and it went down on one knee. I wanted to end it here. "Perfect! Ampharos, return! Go Gyarados!" The referee announced the round and I immediately went for the win. "Hyper Beam! Give it all you got!"

"Rock Slide!" Machamp broke through the paralysis to hurl rocks at the incoming Hyper Beam and
toss some up so that they would land on top of Gyarados. Unfortunately for Bruno, the blast hit Machamp square in the chest and it collapsed. The rocks rained down on top of Gyarados and he was hit all over. A sizeable chunk landed on his tail and he roared in pain before collapsing as well.

"Both Pokémon are unable to battle. The round is a dra..." I didn't even wait for the referee to finish because I wanted to make sure he knew I had at least one Pokémon left.

"Gyarados, return! Go Ampharos!" A stare came my way.

"The match goes to the challenger Mitch from Violet City!" The crowd eventually cheered at my victory, but that meant nothing. Bruno recalled Machamp and bowed again.

"Having lost, I have no right to say anything else about you. I wish you well in your next battle." I bowed back as he turned around to leave.

"Thank you. It was an honor."

My mind was being pulled in different directions as I sprinted over to the ambulance on duty after he was out of sight. I gave them Gyarados' ball and told them to go to Doctor Harrison to put him the healing machine and then the x-ray machine to check for anything. Luckily for me, they had a portable healing machine underneath the passenger seat so I placed everyone in there. After they were healed, I sprinted to the lounge area to escape everyone.

I waited for an hour in total silence just looking at only five Luxury Balls on the coffee table. No television, my phone on silent, no food or drinks in front of me so I could distract myself by reading the labels, no noise. Onix's tail hitting Gyarados' should've meant the end of the battle but no… I was in a desperate spot and I got selfish. Maybe Ampharos could've won if the battle was dragged out. Maybe Espeon could've escaped the ice somehow and won. All those scenarios mean nothing now.

Two hours after I gave the ball to the medical staff, I received a text from the doctor. I had ignored anything else that came my way because I didn't feel like talking to anyone considering my circumstances. My friends were probably offering support or praise for how I did which I have always appreciated. However, reading this was more important.

*Hey Mitch, you need to come to my office. We ran some tests... and the news isn't good.*
Chapter 61- Motherly Love

The words in that text were not what I wanted to see. I had done everything in my power or at least everything within reason to keep Gyarados healthy ever since he told me about how much less he had in the tank after each fight. I've limited his battling time, but I'll admit that I've been lucky against Cory and Allison more than any other battle. All that previous luck means nothing now; I played with fire and got caught. I. Fucked. Up.

The same security guards that brought me over to the stadium were waiting outside my door when I went to leave. When I told them my plan to go back, they radioed for a golf cart since they thought it would get me there faster than walking. It pained me again to dodge anyone that wanted to take a picture or get an autograph but the good news was the anti-Umbreon crowd wasn't there this time around; they probably didn't think I'd use him. I have nothing against famous people, but I don't want to fall into the trap of having the "you're too good for me" attitude that some of them have if I were to come across an admirer. The least I could do was wave.

I was escorted into the doctor's office where Gyarados' medical charts were scattered across her desk. She shooed out the security personnel for confidentially reasons as she pulled up a chair. Any loose files were tidied up before she sat down across from me.

"My diagnosis is that Gyarados has a stress fracture on that C-52 bone. It's a minor crack in the bone." I slammed the arm of the chair.

"Fuck!" I couldn't think of anything else to say so I just kept pounding the arm of the chair until my hand turned bright red.

"I know it's hard to take in, but take some deep breaths and I'll tell you what's going to happen." She let me calm down before continuing. "A stress fracture is no laughing matter. However, it's not life-threatening at this point in time."

"Oh praise Arceus," I exhaled in relief. "What's his overall condition?" She shuffled through her stack of papers to check the results.

"My colleagues and I ran some tests on his strength and mobility. We concluded that Gyarados is experiencing numbness in his tail. The good news is that it's the only major symptom outside of some discomfort and a little weakness in tail strength. We have a brace ready to place on the area so that part of his body can stabilize while he rests."

"So a brace fixes the problem? He'll be able to go against the last member of the Elite Four tomorrow?" Doctor Harrison shook her head slowly.

"No. If he were to battle tomorrow and take a powerful blow to that spot in his condition, that bone is likely going to break and he will most likely be paralyzed from that point all the way down to the tip of his tail; the lower 15% to 20% of his body will be paralyzed. I strongly advise you not to use him tomorrow. However, you have the final call."

All I wanted to do was throw a tantrum. My companion that got me out of every tough spot was so close to being paralyzed and I contributed to it. He didn't ask to be experimented on in the first
place. He was expected to be rounded up again by Team Rocket. He didn't know I would capture him though. I didn't know if he would even listen to me or acknowledge me as a trainer. He thanked me for how I cared for him since that day when he fought Sentret as a Magikarp and this is how I repay him? By letting him get injured almost to the point of paralysis!? I kept a poker face while taking more deep breaths.

"I'm not risking his health. I'm not going to have him with me tomorrow. I'd rather leave him with you to be honest. Can you turn on the battle so he can watch?" She nodded solemnly after listening to my decision.

"Very well. However, I need you to call him out in the exam room so we can put the brace on him. His mobility will be limited, but he'll get the structural support and rest he needs for later. Follow me." We took the long walk to the exam room with security escorting us. The x-ray machine still hummed away and the previous images were on a computer screen.

"Let me have his ball please." The ball was nearly invisible to the naked eye in the dark room except for the red and gold stripes. "Come out buddy," I mumbled. Gyarados materialized looking like he had some discomfort around the tail and started to squirm. Doctor Harrison stood on the other side of the room to look at the images.

"Fitting the brace on him can't be done unless he stays still. After I get it on, I can give him some painkillers to swallow that look like food."

Gyarados kept his eyes shut from the pain until I took a step closer to him. The eye contact we shared was full of sorrow, despair, embarrassment, and yet there was some hope in his eyes. He didn't look upset at me for what had happened. Rather, he looked like he was relieved to be in this spot.

"Buddy… I'm so sorry. I let you down." He shook his head then lowered it to my level before pushing it against me. I gently rubbed it. "I love you which is why you're going to stay around here tomorrow when we face the next Elite Four member." He hung his head as if he expected me to say that but still grunted as if he was fine; the doctor came next to us.

"Mitch has made a good choice in my mind. Now can I get you to hold still while I go grab a brace for you?" He nodded and she left the room with security.

"Look Gyarados, I know you want to be out there with everyone else but I can't do it. I know you said you'd battle until you couldn't move, but this isn't the time to play hero. You're hurt and only one heavy hit away from being paralyzed." I pulled out Ampharos' ball. "I have to tell her what's going on and I want her to see that you're okay when I do. She's owed that much." I called her out as the doctor came back in with a brace.

"I'll give you three a minute. Excuse me." She briskly walked out of the room.

"Ampharos… Gyarados is really hurt and won't be with us for the next battle," Her lip started to twitch before she cried. Gyarados nudged her and she turned around to hug him. He explained what he had been going through the past few hours in addition to his current condition. Ampharos turned to me and threw herself at me as she cried on my shoulder; I rubbed her back. "I know girl, I know. I'm sad too. I'm sorry I let this happen but I'm doing this for his own good."

"Palu?"

"He'll be fine if he rests up. I know you guys haven't had much rest outside of the healing machines, but we're almost done with this challenge."
"Paluuuu," she sighed into my shoulder.

"Unless you want a break too. Come to think of it, I should ask everyone how they are. Maybe it'd be better to stop now..." Ampharos' ears perked up and she shook her head violently. "You guys want to keep going, don't you?" A nod. "You have to reach deep down for the will to keep going. I'm going to have to do some more soul-searching myself." She still hung onto me, but the emotional weight of the whole situation made her fall asleep as I held her up; I gently kissed the top of her head. "It'll be alright. I promise." Acting like this was nothing new for me but it felt more like I was a parent consoling my child more than a trainer consoling his Pokémon.

Doctor Harrison applied the brace and Gyarados wiggled around to get a feel for the added weight and limited mobility. When he was satisfied with it, I recalled him in order to get him in a more stable condition. She placed the medical information on the ground for me to pick up later after seeing how comfortable Ampharos was resting against me.

"Remember those questions I asked about your team earlier in the tournament? That cohesion you have with your team? You can be humble about it all you want, but it's something special. Don't fool yourself too much. Call me before you drop off Gyarados so I have enough time to set up a television."

"How did you get him to trust you? He knows you, but still..."

"My best guess is that he knew what was at stake. You raised it well." She went to leave. "I'll leave you alone for the rest of the night. You're free to leave whenever you want. Good luck in the next battle." After she left, it was Ampharos and me standing in the dimly lit room.

"Gyarados needs his rest," I whispered as she breathed softly in her sleep. "Looks like you need some too girl," I said with a smile; I gave her one more kiss on her head. "Great job today. He's proud of you." The beam took her back in the ball and I got the chance to look at my phone. Through all the texts, I managed to spot the one that mattered the most.

"We're in the cafeteria right now. We'll save you some chicken parmesan and a cold one. I love those guys.

The security detail brought me to the cafeteria entrance before leaving for the rest of the night. I thanked them for their work despite me not wanting them around. Despite all that happened to me today, I didn't want to dump my problems on my friends. They all smiled once I was in the doorway.

"That chicken parm still hot?" I asked shrugging my shoulders with my hands out and smiling. Jasmine got up from the table, sprinted to me, and jumped at me. I was exhausted, but not that exhausted. Catching her was probably the easiest part of my day. Her hands connected behind my neck while she wrapped her legs around my waist and looked at me seductively. Based on how much champagne that was left in her glass, the change in demeanor wasn't a surprise.

"Mitch! You're moving on," she cheerfully said as she hung on. She wasn't too far gone like the first time I was in her room. "I'm so proud of you!"

"Be proud of my Pokémon, not me," I joked; she laid her head on my shoulder.

"Well you're the one that raised them! Now get some food." She let go of me and dragged me over to the buffet line where I grabbed my fair share of food. The group of four still sat at the table holding huge grins remembering our talk about how I was a lucky guy.
Nobody pulled any punches about the battle and asked me almost everything there was to know. They all said from the stands, it didn't look as bad as I had described it which made me a little nervous considering Bruno could've legally injured my entire team. Nobody in the crowd heard the crunch when Onix's tail collided with Gyarados' which means if I lost my cool any more than I showed, they'd probably think I was a spoiled brat complaining to the referee like I did against Koga.

Wes kept putting beer cans in front of me so I kept drinking them until there weren't any left. Eventually it got to a point where the food was gone, the drinks were gone, and the six of us were leaning on our significant other all tired out from the day. We left the television on for some background noise until everyone peeked at the clock and wanted to pack it in for the night. Jasmine and I went to the computer room so I could scout my next battle before going up to bed. Punching in the information was hard to do considering what was in my system but I somehow managed to get it right.

**Elite Four Member Karen**

**Age:** 25

**Years of Service:** 3

**Pokémon Type Specialty:** Dark

**Pokémon Registered:** Umbreon, Murkrow, Gengar, Sneasel, Houndoom

An interesting lineup considering Gengar complicates things for me. Furret looks like she'll be my pivot since she can get off a few hits before I switch out to something stronger if need be. That Umbreon should be interesting test; maybe I'll have my Umbreon go against it.

"Oooh. Looks like she's a tough customer," Jasmine said while peeking over my shoulder. "If it weren't for her, Will might be the best out of their group. He'd still get crushed by Lance though."

"Well it's going to be tough for sure. I don't have Gyarados to deal with Houndoom. Everyone else looks manageable." Jasmine started to rub my shoulders as I kept staring at the screen while occasionally closing my eyes.

"Stay with me tonight. I missed you when I was in Olivine and sleeping in the lighthouse made me think about you. Also, I know you might be on edge after what happened to Gyarados and I want to help you get ready for tomorrow." I stood up and starting walking to the door.

"Let me take care of one thing first. You can go up now or wait in the lobby. I need to make a private call."

"Don't keep me waiting too long," she cooed. I brought up the contact screen and selected to call home.

My parents have always been adamant about one thing ever since I left on my journey: call home any time for any reason. I found it ironic that they almost never called me while I was on the road but I needed only a few seconds of their time.

"Mom? Dad? You guys up?" My dad was on the other end.

"Your mother's in bed but I'm just reading downstairs. How's it going?"

"Can I come home tomorrow? I think I need a break from this place for a few hours before I go
"Of course! You don't have to ask at all! Do you know when you'll be back?"

"Late morning to early afternoon."

"Well I'm sure everyone will be happy to see you around town. Anything else for us? I know it's late and I'm not going to bother you but you can talk to me if anything's wrong." I wanted to continue but I couldn't do it now. It's too late and I'm not in the mood to talk about Gyarados' health. I'm going to ask that question when I go home.

"Not now. I'll see you tomorrow. I love you guys. Goodnight!"

"Love you too. Goodnight!" I haven't thought of how I'm going to repay them with any amount of that 500,000P prize money for raising me into the man I am today. They're not quite ready for Espeon yet and I want to be there past the point where she meets them; I'm not going to dump her off and come back here. I think it would be better to have her meet them after I'm completely done with this.

Jasmine was waiting patiently by the elevator when I made my back to the lobby. I got a sense that she was starting to feel more like herself since it had been at least an hour since she took a sip of champagne. We made our way up to her room and did our nightly routines before slipping into bed next to each other. She noticed I kept fidgeting when I was trying to fall asleep.

"Tell me what's wrong Mitch," she said while rubbing my head.

"Besides Gyarados almost getting paralyzed? Well, I think I need a break from here so I'm going home tomorrow."

"That's bothering you?" Jasmine asked softly.

"Seeing my parents for the first time in months bothers me for starters. I'm not going to go into what's going to happen when I actually walk in the door to my house but it's going to be uncomfortable. These claw marks are probably going to be the first thing they'll see."

"I'm sure they'll understand." She gave me a quick kiss to calm me down. "I'd like to meet them someday."

"I wish I could say the same thing," I joked back.

The fatigue finally set in after all I had been through shortly after I finished talking. Her constant rubbing of my head made it much easier for me to go to sleep. This place has given me the most insane mood swings a trainer, no, a person, can experience. With all the lows I've gone through, the highs have almost balanced it out… almost.

Sunlight filtering into the room was my alarm clock since Jasmine was in the shower getting ready for the day. It was only 9:30 so I had some time to get everyone fed before I would head home. I also had an idea in mind that I wanted to pull off. When she exited the bathroom, I went to the balcony to let her get dressed while I looked at the stadium.

"Going back to your room now?" Jasmine called while she was getting dressed.

"Yup." She walked out and gave me a hug.

"You'll be fine when you get home. Have a good trip! I love you."
"Love you too." We shared a kiss and I left her room with a better feeling about the day.

Entering my room after a long day and night felt like heaven. There's something to be said about having the potential to block out the entire world in the comfort of a luxurious hotel but I know my time here is almost up; I think I'll be ready for reality after I'm done here. I let everyone out of their balls as I poured each of them their food.

Gyarados didn't show any outward signs of pain or depression considering the position he was in with his tail. Everyone looked at the contraption that covered his tail in silence occasionally while eating. I didn't want to tell them that he would be out for the battle just yet because I didn't want it to plant that seed in their minds and deal with it all day long. I gathered a few things into my bag for the trip home after I turned on the television where a panel discussion was taking place.

"This kid is on another level! How many trainers have gotten this far against the Elite Four?"

"Oh stop it! We all know Mitch is more lucky than good. All three battles have been mediocre at best. His performance against Will? Meh. Koga? Who the hell loses to poison types with an Espeon!? Bruno? Mitch almost blew a 4-1 lead... with an Espeon! People have blown 3-1 leads, but a 4-1 lead? I'd thought I never see the day it would come close."

"Espeon got frozen, okay? We all know that freezing the opponent basically means you with the round. Denying his greatness up to this point is a disservice to trainers everywhere."

"Now you're just making excuses for him. The fact is that Karen will put him in his place in one way or another. Besides, he assaulted someone and only got a fine out of that! Are you kidding me!? An average person would've gotten arrested."

"And you would let someone try to steal your Pokémon without retaliating?"

"Well I wouldn't throw haymakers. Back to the battle, Mitch has nothing for her dark types except Gyarados. My prediction if that he'll lose. What about the rest of you?"

"Lose but it'll be close."

"Lose handily."

"He'll win a close one."

"Really!? He'll get swept. Zero chance to win."

"Wow... that's a bold prediction. Coming up after the break, we have a third generation Moomoo Milk ranch farmer joining us to talk about how the delicious drink goes from the farm to your table. Stay tuned."

I stayed to watch more commentary on my performance last night and every new channel I flipped to said nearly the same thing; luck over skill. Yes, I thought about how lucky I was to make it this far and that a pinch or two got me through tight spots. If Sara had chosen to kick me out of here along with herself, none of this would be happening. Too much emphasis on luck is what had me upset because it seems like everyone is ignoring the fact that skill got us this far. The proverbial door was slightly cracked open and I barged through it on my own.

"We have to get going. There's a big battle ahead later tonight and I want you guys with me in case something comes up." It was a little lie I had to tell, otherwise I'd let them stay outside all day. After they were all back in their balls, I made a quick call to drop off Gyarados before heading down.
"Doctor Harrison? I'm here to drop off Gyarados." She was fiddling around with something on the computer as she took his ball.

"My laptop might be better for later. I can hook it up to a bigger television unlike this clunky desktop."

"Thanks again for holding him for me."

"No problem. We'll be rooting for you!"

My second stop before going home was to Espeon's physical therapy room. The therapist on duty was already done with the morning session since Espeon wanted to get it over with sooner and allowed me to visit her where she slept. Espeon had curled up into a ball underneath the sheets while her breathing was steady. I went to pet her, but I remembered how she almost bit me last time.

"Espeon. Espeooooooooo. I know you're sleeping but I wanted to see you." She stirred before poking her head out.

"Oh hi!" She offered her head and I stroked it. "I'm doing good. I can finally walk on my own. Next up is the process of regaining strength since I can't run. How are you today?"

"Good. I'm about to head home for something before tonight's battle so I figured I'd stop by here to take care of something." Espeon looked at me funny.

"Unless you can magically restore me to what I used to be like, there's not much you can do." I pulled out Ruby's ball.

"I want you to reconnect with your daughter while I'm gone."

"I'm... I'm not sure if I'm ready."

"The longer you put it off, the harder it will be to reconnect down the road. Also, I think it will help put her mind at ease once you tell her how you're doing."

"Does she know about this?"

"No. I trust both of you enough to do this while I'm gone. Anything that happens in here is ultimately up to you. All I'm doing is letting you two see each other face to face. You can hate me for springing this on you, but I figured this would be the best time since there will be no distractions for either of you." Espeon didn't look confident about what was going to happen.

"Fine. Give me a minute to stand up. I want her to know I can at least do that." She got comfortable before nodding at me to let Ruby out.

"Alright Ruby, come out." She stretched and then stopped to look up at the bed. The two Espeons stared at each other with poker faces.

"Mitch, what's going on?" Ruby whispered in a mix of fear and confusion.

"I'm have to take care of something. In the meantime, I want you to see your mother."

"But you told me she was on the edge of death," she whimpered. "This is a dream, right? I don't believe it."

"This isn't a dream. She's not as strong as before, but she's alive and healthy for the most part." Ruby
took one step forward then carefully jumped on the other side of the bed from the floor and stared across the way.

"My beautiful daughter… I missed you so much."

"I just can't believe it." Ruby sniffed around before pouncing, landing short of her mother and started to cry. "Mommy! I-I-I… ahhhhhh!" She eventually she gave up on trying to speak as she bawled her eyes out. Her mother gently wrapped her front paws around her and embraced her in a hug.

"Let it all out honey. Mommy's missed you so much."

With the two on the bed, I left them alone in private to return home.

How was this possible? I had been left to fend for myself, caught by a seemingly loving trainer that turned on me in the blink of an eye, beaten within an inch of death, released in a terrible forest, captured by a cruel Ariados, brought back to the brink of death, and finally saved for good. Then my mother stood before me in battle, only to tell me that we may never see each other again. Mitch then told me how she was close to death after finding her so I let go of any memories that I had to better prepare myself for the news about her death. Now she's hugging me while I cry.

"That's it honey, it's okay to cry. Mommy's right here to make it all better."

That's all I could do. No talking, no smiling based on how happy I was, no strength to hug her back, nothing to do but cry. Crying was the result of me witnessing a miracle that I thought would be impossible. I cried for minutes as she kept rubbing my back; how I missed that level of tenderness. Mitch did a great job of soothing me when I needed it, but this… this was something that nobody could duplicate. It's impossible to substitute a mother's love with anything. I'm old enough to have kits, yet I'm acting like one. When I was done crying, I fell asleep with my head on her shoulder.

My eyes fluttered open as I heard footsteps on the floor followed by the mattress slightly bouncing twice. She placed a bowl of water by my face with her psychic powers while keeping an eye on me. I was comfortably tucked under the covers with my head propped up on a pillow.

"Drink some water," she softly urged. I stood up and lapped as much water as I could until I was rehydrated.

"Thank you." We stood on opposite ends of the bed not moving. It's almost like we were both afraid to talk but she broke the silence first.

"Tell me more about your master." She knew a decent amount about Mitch considering she could effortlessly tap into his mind but giving me the chance to talk was interesting. Especially since she tried to insult him during our battle.

"Mitch has five others that he loves just as much as me: a quirky Ampharos, loveable Furret, loyal Growlithe, powerful Gyarados, and an Umbreon who loves me even more than Mitch does."

"When are you going to have kits?" If only I could read minds like her.

"Don't you know?"

"I've decided to stay out of your master's head and all of your heads… for the most part. You've all got bigger things to worry about."
"After this thing is over. My mate is ashamed of what he's done in the past but I don't care what's happened to him or what he had to do to survive. He's protected me since I was sentenced to death by Sara. All that matters now is that he loves me and Mitch supports our decision. You should've seen how nervous he was when he asked."

"I could only imagine. As for the kits, you'll know when they're on the way. Your father knew it too which is why we settled where we did. The process will be painful, but you can get through it." A little bit of pain wasn't going to stop me from starting my own family.

"Now it's your turn to tell me about father. What happened?" She let out a long sigh.

"The night we left you was the worst night of my life. He knew that we were no longer safe so he decided to move. It came down to how many of you we could carry with us along with a decent amount of food. When he suggested to leave you behind, I was furious. His attitude never changed when we were with Sara either. I may never know how he feels now."

"All this happened because I was the runt, right?"

"That's not entirely true. The other part is that you never showed signs of improving your battling skills which is what your father used as an excuse. I thought we should keep everyone together so I said I would battle him for the right to take all of you and leave some things behind; the one condition was that we would battle away from you all. I couldn't even touch him even after he gave me the first move. I wouldn't surrender until he gave me the scar with Pin Missile. He carried your siblings and I carried the food. Jump ahead a few months later and we were both captured along with your oldest brother who became a Vaporeon." It hurt to hear that. A bushel of berries was more important than me according to my father. I wanted to find him and beat him harder than last time.

"I wouldn't have even let him land an attack on me if I knew the whole story. Although I'm still glad I slammed him into the side wall during our battle." She smiled.

"He still couldn't believe that he lost well after the battle was over. Everyone got a mouthful from Sara but as you know, I got the short end of the stick." My mother laid down to stretch and stayed down. "Now I guess that won't happen again now that I'll be living with your master's parents. He thinks I'll like my new life in a home."

"You don't have to call him 'master' if you don't want to. Anyway, Mitch learned a lot about compassion from his parents so I think you'll be fine. He generally knows what we're feeling without my help unlike Sara."

"Her ability to sense how we were feeling wasn't as keen as I thought." She shifted to her other side. "When she forced me to run to Mount Silver, I had to rely on instincts to survive. I found myself fighting off Pokémon that wanted me dead for being an outsider for what felt like an eternity. There were only two outcomes I wanted during that time: a quick death or seeing you one last time before I died. Every day was a battle to see which feeling won out, but I wanted someone to put me out of my misery."

"Mitch found you first, didn't he?"

"Correct. I prayed to Arceus that he would kill me even though I thanked him for noticing me. Even when he brought me back here, I fought every effort by the staff to keep me alive until I was forced to go to sleep. When he visited me, I told him I had nothing to live for. He proved me wrong and rekindled my feeling for how much I wanted to see you. And here we are now." I didn't want to think about what had happened in the past right now. Curling up next to her felt much better
"You look tired from your therapy. Go to sleep. Mitch will be back soon." She put her head on my neck and hugged me.

"He's not going to be back as quickly as you think."

"What do you mean?"

"He's going home to get help and won't be back until evening."

"How come he didn't tell me!?" She smiled.

"Look at us right now. He wanted this." We were cuddled up together in the middle of the bed; the sheets were drawn so they covered everything except out heads. The warmth from it all forced a yawn out of me.

"I love you mom." A lick was offered on my cheek.

"I love you honey… and that's never going to change. You'll make a wonderful mother when the time comes. Regardless of what happens, you'll always be my beautiful daughter."

Seeing the two Espeons in the room reunite was a big sign that the past was losing its stranglehold on Ruby. Guilt riddled me as I left since I didn't want to tell her my intentions after leaving the room but I figured this reunion was more important than going home. I just hope they'll talk more but seeing Ruby cry in her mother's arms was a good start. I managed to find the one member of my security with the Alakazam after I talked to an elevator guard.

"I know you're meant to get me to the stadium and back, but could you do me a small favor?"

"Depends on what you want."

"That Alakazam you have… can it teleport me back to my home in Violet City?"

"I can manage that. It's meant for security instead of battling so it should get you back to Violet City." She called it out. "However, I have to come with you to ensure you get back here safely. We should arrive at Sprout Tower since it's a well-known monument. You can lead us the rest of the way." I pulled out my phone to tell them I was coming.

"Thank you. Go whenever Alakazam is ready."

We were transported in a blink of an eye to Sprout Tower after a quick flash of blue from Alakazam's eyes. It felt refreshing to be standing in front of the place where I hung out as a kid. People were shuffling about downtown as I took the short walk back home but I didn't recognize any of them; they waved to me as if I was a friendly face. They probably didn't know my parents or weren't sure if the face they saw was the same as on television.

My home was on the northwest side of the city surrounded by other homes in an area commonly called the "suburban city" due to the nature of the neighborhood being a more modern development. Since it was the middle of the day, not too many people were home which made the area a little eerie. Knocking on the door sent shivers down my spine. I could hear footsteps coming to the door. I can't believe I'm back home.

"Welcome home Mitch!" They both opened the door and hugged me at the same time.
"Yup! I'm back!"

"Well come on in and sit down for a minute. Relax!" The kitchen table had some food on it so I took a seat then a snack. "Taking a break before tonight?"

"That, and I need a favor from dad." He sat down across from me.

"What do you need? We'd be glad to help you out for your battle if you're not breaking any rules."

I didn't want to ask this question. All the work I put in up to this point would be eliminated in my mind. However, I had no choice. I needed every bit of help on all fronts. Emotionally, it was refreshing to be home. Physically, I was in good health. Mentally, I wasn't all there. I needed a gap filled regardless of the answer.

"Dad… can I borrow Machoke?"
Chapter 62- Elite Four Karen

My parents sat across from me at the kitchen table with only sunlight to light the kitchen. Aipom was inside of my mom's ball so it was just the three of us with no distractions after I asked the security guard to wait in the living room. I knew in my heart of hearts that Aipom probably couldn't keep up with Karen's Pokémon in speed or strength due to how it was used at my mom's job. Machoke on the other hand was a better choice in two categories: pure power and type advantage. My dad rubbed his forehead slowly after I asked for it.

"So let me get this straight... you want Machoke?" I nodded. "To battle against one of the best trainers in the world?" Still nodded. "I guess the next thing to do is ask why you need it. Who is he going to replace? You have six Pokémon." Dammit... he never made anything easy for me.

"Gyarados is hurt, dad. If I throw it out there tonight, then I run the risk of breaking part of his spine and paralyzing him forever. I'd like a full team if I can get one." My mom got up and poured herself a glass of water like my situation was no big deal.

"It could battle, but I don't think it could win even though you're facing dark types. Remember it's a government Pokémon and they're raised differently. Can't you just battle with five?"

I had thought about that as soon as the rules came out, but quickly realized that there was a reason that they told me I could go in with six. The previous three battles have showed why I need a full team. I'm glad that they were nice enough to let me change up my team, but the league is unintentionally telling me that I have a small chance to win with that rule.

"Battling with six is better and it's not against the rules to change my team. Even if it doesn't knock anything out, it allows everyone else to get some extra rest. I just need an answer because this whole situation is getting to me. I can prepare better if I know what's going to happen."

She sat back down. "If you say so. What do you think, dear?"

"Well... he's not breaking any rules and I'm sure my boss won't mind since Machoke has taken a few shots in its lifetime. Besides, we're getting an Espeon when this is over so I think it's fair to lend him Machoke this time."

A Great Ball was handed over to me as my dad smiled. If he turned my plea down, I'd have to rely on Umbreon's roulette to get me through most of the battle if Furret went down. The only issue is Karen's Houndoom since it's fire attacks could easily knock out Machoke and nobody on my team really matches up well with it. What's equally surprising is that they wanted to take Espeon in.

"You guys already talked about Espeon?"

"We figured that it would be comfortable here if we opened up to it. Is there anything we need to know about it?" my mom asked as if she still wasn't completely sold on the deal.

"All I told her was that she was to be loved, fed, not forced into battle, and not released into the wild. The golden rule with her is to make sure she knows when you want to touch her. She's been abused so many times that I want to find her former trainer and beat her twice as hard."
"Now Mitch, you don't mean that," she said as if I was joking. I slammed the table with an open palm.

"You guys raised me well... but she deserves a right hook to the jaw for starters. My own Espeon was dumped by that same person and she still has flashbacks." I pulled up my jacket to reveal my sleeves. "A massage turned into a mauling. And that protester I punched? He tried to take Umbreon away from me. I'm telling you guys that people are just lining up to fight me and I'm not going to back down. I can't back down," I growled.

They let me stew at the prospect of literally fighting Sara until I sighed knowing that my predisposition wouldn't let me do it unless I was under duress or she kept running her mouth. I wanted to change the topic to something else to clear my head from that at the risk of mindless questioning. Dad beat me to the punch.

"I heard rumors that you have a girlfriend. Is that true?" he said while grinning.

My mom started to laugh. "Oh! Our little boy is growing up!" I was blushing as my dad shortly followed with laughter of his own. I hate when they get like this but they're my parents so I shouldn't be surprised.

"Yup. She's Olivine's gym leader. Her name is Jasmine," I mumbled in embarrassment.

"Ah! I've seen her in the city a few times before. She seems like a very nice girl. We'd like to meet her sometime!"

"After I'm done at the Indigo Plateau though. One thing at a time." I checked the clock even though not much time had passed. "I'm sure you guys have more questions, but I just want to rest for now."

Dad stood up. "Last question: your Umbreon has gotten a lot of attention for being... different. What about the rest of the team? What are their stories? You didn't call from the time you got Morty's badge to the tournament and we were curious to see your team up close."

"You already know Growlithe." Not going to tell them his entire history. "Ampharos was caught normally, Furret took some time to gain my trust when it was a Sentret but it loves me now, Espeon was dumped in the forest Like I said, and the last two belonged to Team Rocket at one point."

"Really?" No emotion whatsoever. "That sounds... interesting. Anyway, what about the person that came with you?"

Thank Arceus that they let it go this time. "That person is going to teleport me back with her Alakazam about an hour before I take the field. I thought she would go exploring but I guess not. As far as I know, she's not much of a talker but I guess nothing would surprise me at this point." I gave them both a hug. "I love you guys."

"And we love you too. Before I forget, the gift for you winning the Silver Conference is a replica trophy by our best sculptor. She said she'd do it for free so don't worry about a thing; she wasn't sure if you could keep the trophy so it would be a nice keepsake. Go get some rest." With that out of the way, I went upstairs to my room and collapsed in my bed and embraced the feeling of my true home.

It was a long time coming.
I woke up from the orange tint the sun was radiating as evening rolled around. With two hours before the match, I had more than enough time to take care of my preparations for Karen. Picking up Espeon would be tough thing to do regardless of how she interacted with her mother. I wish I didn't have to rush into a battle every day. All three of them were in the kitchen when I walked in to grab one last glass of water.

"Getting ready soon Mitch? It's getting a little late."

"Don't worry dad. I'm about to head out now." I looked over to the guard. "Ready?"

She stood up. "Actually, there's just one thing before we take off."

"Ummm… okay? What is it?"

"How many tickets do you have left?" Wes, Rui, Carly, and Davis said they were going as usual.

"Just one."

She pulled out a walkie-talkie then called Alakazam out to help strengthen the signal. "Central, this is A-05. I need two golds ready when we return to base 02. Requested by participant. Over."

"Copy that. Over." I tilted my head in confusion.

"What was that about?"

"Your parents talked to me about a few things and they wanted to see you battle from inside the stadium. I assume you're fine with me giving them VIP passes?"

Normally, they've been working a lot of mornings the so I didn't think about convincing them to come. The amount of time it would take to travel would be around the seven or eight hours each way. Add in the fact that I already had four tickets being used which meant only one of them could come and it would've been stressful for them. I was an idiot for not asking about picking them up, but I have a chance to make up for it.

"Be my guest." I turned to my parents. "You guys have to let me do my own thing before the battle though. We can talk more after the battle is over. Thanks again for letting me borrow Machoke."

The four of us were teleported to the conference room where I talked with Lance the first time I saw him. My dad remembered Machoke's attacks and mentioned them before they were ready to leave. Our security detail escorted my parents over to the end of the table where two VIP lanyards where set and another man walked in to guide them to a luxury box for dinner. I was eventually escorted to back to Espeon's room. Ruby was sleeping since her mother was the one doing some leg-specific stretches as I walked in the door.

"You're back!" She trotted over carefully and rubbed up against me. "Did it go well?"

"Thankfully, yes. How did it go here? I'm not entirely sorry that I dumped your daughter here and left, but you already know why."

"We talked and got a lot out in the open. However, I sense that it will take some time before she fully trusts me again. All that matters now is that she's in a better state of mind. I don't know if I could ever repay you for what you've done for us."

"All I ask is for privacy within my head when I want it. Will told me your powers are stronger than his Xatu's."
"That's fine unless it affects my daughter; I'm not going to make any more mistakes with her."

I took a knee next to her. "I get that. I worried about making a mistake with her or Umbreon after all they went through, but I realized that it's impossible to be perfect and you'll stumble along the way. I know you think you're far behind so just take things one day at a time. Now I have to take her back so we can get ready."

"Wait! Let me help." Ruby started to levitate over to me as I brought my elbow to by side; she was gently placed in the little area I made. "She's been sleeping for the past few hours and I didn't want to wake her up just yet. Good luck in your battle; I'll be watching as always."

"Thanks. By the way, my parents will take you in. I can't wait to bring you home and they can't wait to see you.

She started to sniffle. "T-t-thank y-y-you."

I started to walk to the door. "You're welcome." Ruby stirred a little bit as I made my way back to my room.

Nothing changed with the pre-battle routine as I placed Ruby on the bed. She shifted in her sleep while I poured everyone's food then I sat next to her and rubbed her head to ease the process of waking her up.

"Rise and shine Ruby," I whispered. "We have to get ready."

"Mmmnh. Two more minutes," she whined before sitting up fully awake. Her head rubbed against my shoulder. "Thanks for letting me stay with my mother all day. It feels like a weight has been lifted off my back and I can live my life knowing she'll be safe with your family."

"And I got a weight off mine." I pulled out Machoke's ball.

"What is that?"

"Eat. I'll call everyone out to talk about it." They were all released except for Machoke and Ampharos struggled to eat. I walked over to her and rubbed her head while trying to get her to eat. Ruby looked at me with wide eyes as everyone started to murmur.

"Miiiiitch… they're wondering what's going on and I don't knooooooow."

I waved everyone over to me. "Gather around guys. I need to tell you something." Ampharos stayed in the back of the group. "Gyarados is really banged up so I got a substitute for our next battle. The new teammate? Meet him."

Machoke came out looking ready for battle. The room went quiet as he stared into the faces of the five other Pokémon he would be working with. Nobody showed any signs of aggression which was a good start. Growlithe stepped forward and barked as a sign to welcome it to the team. Not everyone was sold on the idea of it replacing the anchor of the team so I continued.

"He was given to me to help us win this battle. Gyarados needs his rest and I wasn't going to throw him out there where he could get seriously hurt. Here's the plan: Furret is the pivot in this battle so she's going to get in a few hits before I go out to one of you to land the bigger hits. Ampharos could easily take Murkrow. Karen is a dark type user so Espeon is probably going to be on emergency standby unless against Gengar. Houndoom is going to be tough so we'll have to cross that bridge when we get to it…"
A tap on my shoulder stopped me. "Sorry to interrupt, but where will I fit in?"

"Right! Machoke, you'll take on Sneasel and just be ready at the drop of a hat. Karen could be as crafty as Koga so we all need to stay alert. If something's wrong, run to me and I'll make a change. Hands in let's go!" Ampharos came from the back to join in. "Win on three. One! Two! Three! Win!"

"Win!"

Another packed stadium roared to life as Karen and I approached out respective boxes. Karen was the second youngest member but she was the most mysterious. Koga was pretty sly with his plan, Bruno left nothing to the imagination with his plan, Will was arguably more focused on winning the mental battle. Karen was the only person who didn't give off an aura; I couldn't get a beat on her.

"Well, well, well. It's quite an honor to meet you… Silver Conference champion," she said with half arrogance and half sincerity. "I am Karen of the Elite Four. Dark types are the hardest to domesticate even though trainers initially capture them. After the sun goes down, they could turn on us at any time. I see the moon has moved past the waxing gibbous phase and now it's a full moon. How wonderful." Her grin made her look like she was hiding a dark secret if her words didn't already do the trick.

"They say that weird things happen under a full moon. Maybe it'll be the extra push I need to beat you." I can't believe I contributed to the creepy aura she created.

Karen still held her grin. "How right you are. Let's see if you can keep me entertained for that long." Can't tell if that's arrogance or if she saw a lot of "scary" movies as a kid.

"Put up or shut up." No! I'm starting to lose it; she's getting to me.

"Think you can take us? Sneasel!"

Already!? I didn't ask for this start but I'll take it. "Machoke!" The crowd went from a roar to just above a murmur. All the talk was about the team change and speculation on who I replaced.

"Sneasel versus Machoke. Begin!"

"Hmmm… I don't remember you having a Machoke registered. You've certainly piqued my interest; I'll give you that much. Agility!"

Four times weakness against fighting types means any hit I land could be a fatal one. "Cross Chop! Cut its path off!" Running around the field to chase it wasn't going to get it done so I forced Sneasel to make a lot of hard cuts. As a result, it couldn't pick up enough speed to run freely.

"Slash!"

Sneasel made one last cut before charging ahead with its right claw extended. Machoke went to swing its arms down, only to miss as Sneasel lunged in with a shot to its chest. He took the attack surprisingly well and got right back up.

"Seismic Toss!" Even Karen was surprised as Machoke lunged ahead, grabbed Sneasel by a scale on its back, and slammed it repeatedly into the ground.

"Beat Up!" It got up to kick Machoke with a half-hearted effort.
"Vital Throw!"

Karen shook her head. "Not done yet Mitch. Look again." A slash to the chest, a punch to the face, another slash on the leg, and an acrobatic kick to Machoke's back. All those maneuvers happened in succession; there was no chance to retaliate. "Faint Attack!" It charged in and sent Machoke to the ground.

"Come on! Get up!" A battle cry echoed throughout the stadium as Machoke rose to its feet. "Submission!"

"Agility into Slash!"

Both Pokémon sprinted at each other with reckless abandon with Machoke attempting to grab Sneasel. The ice/dark hybrid got in its hit before it could be touched and my replacement Pokémon fell for the final time.

"Machoke is unable to battle. Sneasel wins!"

Not the result I wanted, but I half-expected it since this is the Elite Four. The crowd let loose a chorus of boos for a number of reasons. The inability to win the type matchup was probably the primary reason with a million other reasons underneath that umbrella of losing. Karen didn't show any emotion as I called Machoke back.

"A little desperate, don't you think? I thought you would do better than that." The monotony in her voice made it too hard to pinpoint how she was truly feeling.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."

"At least you're doing a good job of keeping this entertaining by switching up your team."

"I know, right? Maybe I'll win a round or two." I placed the stuffed Growlithe doll next to me and took off my jacket. She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh my… you definitely have gone through an ordeal or two on your journey."

Still couldn't tell if she was genuinely intrigued or trying to mess with me. "Go Growlithe!"

The referee waited for either of us to speak again before signaling the round to start. "Sneasel versus Growlithe. Begin!"

"Use Slash!"

Too fast to try to chase it; letting it come to us would be better. "Defend yourself with Bite!" Growlithe managed to fend off the first few swipes but couldn't get any leverage to fight back. Sneasel eventually sacrificed some power to attack with both claws and landed a few hits. "Flame Wheel!"

"Get out of there and use Beat Up!" Growlithe cloaked himself in fire before Sneasel could get away and it suffered an instant burn. It charged in to strike but it was considerably slower as the pain started to seep in.

"Flamethrower!" The stream of fire proved to be too much as Sneasel stopped in its tracks and eventually collapsed.

"Sneasel is unable to battle. Growlithe wins!"
Momentum is something that usually gets pushed to the side since most trainers focus on type advantage. It pays to have the type advantage, but Koga and Bruno showed a lot of people that type means nothing if you play your cards right. A Machamp was in position to decimate my entire team until I pulled off a desperate move that worked in my favor. I can't let her knock out consecutive Pokémon while I have to attempt to do the same thing. I'm not sure if I can afford to win every other round.

"Now we're talking," Karen said with a hint of excitement. "Allow me to show you the potential of my Pokémon now that the jitters are out of the way. Go Umbreon!" I'm not for mirror matches but if she's going to use the moon to her advantage, then so will I.

"Great job Growlithe! Return. Go Umbreon!" The look on his face told me all I needed to know about his state of mind.

Mitch bringing in an outsider to the team wasn't something I expected. All six of us worked well together and I'm not sure how the newbie would do replacing Gyarados. At first glance, he was strong enough to handle himself. I didn't expect him to do too much, but I expected him to win a round. Guessing what Mitch wanted out of that stunt was pointless since he was going to have the final say anyway.

Something inside of me clicked even though I was inside my ball. Night had always been a touchy subject ever since Tom took me with him and I evolved. It gave me that little bit of extra strength that I couldn't get any other way, yet the darkness favored only me and my enemies in the wild. Ruby didn't have my senses when it came to the dark so when we first met, I dreaded the sun setting even though I could help her. The one saving grace of night was whenever a full moon was out.

Any bit of light in the darkness helped Ruby and the moon gave me even more power that I could use. In this case, my opponent was also going to benefit from it too so we were on almost equal footing. This condition is never going to go away so I've been trying to embrace it as best I could. The weird part was that the other trainer looked at me funny.

"Will mentioned that your Umbreon wasn't off. While that certainly is true, you have earned my respect for gaining its trust and raising it up to now. You could've easily been roughed up worse compared to whatever it may have done to you."

Mitch looked at me then back at her. "I'm glad I took that chance." Rings on my body turned a glorious yellow as the other Umbreon growled at me.

"Umbreon versus Umbreon. Begin!"

"Mean Look!" Karen almost interrupted the judge because she was so quick to call out the attack.

"Dark Pulse! Try to put it in the wall!" The power inside of me welled up but the attack didn't come out; Toxic did instead. Purple blobs found the target before it shook most of it off. "Faint Attack!"

She didn't look surprised that I used the wrong attack. "Sand-Attack!" I ran up preparing for a heavy hit only to feel my teeth get stronger and glow. The change to Bite made me slower and the sand forced me to do my best to cover my eyes. "Confuse Ray!"

"Hold your ground!" It was only a matter of time before I had to open my eyes. The Umbreon's eyes went from red to blue and I started to stumble around the field. "Quick Attack!" My heart wanted to attack but ramming my head against the side wall was apparently the better option.
"Umbreon, return!" The red beam didn't do its job.

"Mean Look prevents you from calling it back, Mitch. Use Faint Attack, Umbreon!" I roared in a mix of frustration, agony from the pounding I gave myself, and the fact that I needed to motivate myself to keep going.

"Bite it!" My first step was faster than normal which meant Quick Attack was on the way. I adjusted myself to the best of my abilities and landed a hit on my Umbreon counterpart. It finally looked like it was starting to get weak from the poison I gave it earlier.

"Sand-Attack!"

"Get out of there with Quick Attack!" Sand flew at me as I failed to escape the brunt of the attack. My body betrayed me and I stumbled around the battlefield aimlessly just waiting to get hit. "Dark Pulse!" Violently shaking my head got me out of my confused state only to fire off another Toxic which looked like it had no effect.

What the hell? Every single time I tried to attack, the move gets changed! Mitch looks like an idiot to the crowd, I can't put my back into it for hard hits, I look like I've never seen a battlefield in my life, and the funny thing is that the other trainer looked sympathetically at me first instead of making fun of me. If there was ever a time not to mess up, this would be it. If I saw anything Team Rocket related, it would make for a wonderful chew toy.

"Confuse Ray!"

"Quick Attack!" I felt my first step was much slower than normal and could feel the dark aura around my body as I rammed into my opponent.

"Counter with your own Faint Attack!" The hit back wasn't as strong as I thought; the poison is finally kicking into full gear. Both of us were exhausted from the steady stream of attack.

Mitch looked like he was going to attack, but saw me breathing heavily. "Moonlight!" He took the risk to heal up and it actually paid off. My body absorbed the light from the sky and I instantly felt healthy. On top of that, the move felt natural the entire time; I wasn't afraid of another move being used. I don't know anything about the moon except that it affects me… in ways I don't know.

"Bite!" The madness started up again as Dark Pulse came out instead which was dodged. "Again!"

"Sand-Attack!"

Mitch took a bit longer to call out my next move. "Toxic!" He's really playing with the roulette wheel now.

Bite took the place of the poisonous attack this time as I rushed through the wall of sand sent my way. I was temporarily blinded but not before I dug my teeth into Umbreon's side. It tossed me aside eventually and collapsed from the poison that was sent its way at the beginning of the round.

"Karen's Umbreon is unable to battle. Mitch's Umbreon wins!"

Getting the win under the circumstances I was put in was practically a miracle. My body betrayed me at every turn, sand was still around my eyes, it was all set up because I couldn't get called back. Moonlight kept me in it long enough for poison to run its course too. I want to battle more but I desperately need a break with what I just went through.

"Two of my Pokémon down? Impressive. Let's see how you handle a change of pace. Gengar!"
Confidence oozed from it as it hopped in place trying to get loose.

I, on the other hand, didn't have any confidence.

Maybe Karen was right the moon and dark types in general. Umbreon never had a performance like that since I ran into him which had me concerned. Then the condition doesn't kick in when I wanted Moonlight so I'm starting to think he can use this to his advantage in the future. Calling out Toxic knowing damn well that it wouldn't do anything was risky but I figured it wouldn't be used anyway. Gengar was an unusual choice for her next Pokémon to have on the team until I realized that fighting moves have no effect on ghosts.

"Keep it up Umbreon!" His ears perked up and he trotted over. He had a blank expression on his face before pawing at my belt. "You want to go back?"

"Make your decision," the referee snapped.

"Alright, alright! Get some rest. You've earned it."

Karen looked at me confused. "That was odd. I don't think I've seen a trainer's Pokémon wanting to run away from a battle before."

When she said that, I knew he wasn't truly running away. "He's not running, Karen. He's going with his gut."

"That's ridiculous!"

"We both saw what happened so he thinks it would be better to rest up now. I have other options so he doesn't have to play hero. Espeon!" Karen look like she still expected me to play the type advantage game.

"Gengar versus Espeon. Begin!"

"Lick!"

Apparently a Gengar's tongue never ends. "Keep it away with Psybeam!" The tongue tried to connect with her face but Gengar had to move its body trying to dodge the Psybeam. Ruby found herself in a spot where she didn't hit it while the tongue dragged across her face and even started to rub against it.

"Your Espeon looks really angry. Does she have a mate that does that? Gengar gets itself in a lot of trouble that way," she nonchalantly noted. Ruby's eye started to twitch before she started firing Psybeams with no regard for accuracy.

"No, Ruby! You have to calm down!"

"Oh not another one," she mumbled. "Destiny Bond!"

A quick flash came from Gengar's eyes as Ruby continued to fire away and the finishing move was using Psychic to slam it into the ground. Even though it was unconscious, she ran over to it and picked it up with Psychic.

"That was all a warning. Only three living things on this earth get to touch anywhere near my mouth on purpose. My master when he wants to cheer me up, my mother, and my mate. I could care less that I'm going to faint so you should thank Arceus for that. If I ever see you again, you'd
Espeon managed to toss it aside before walking back to me and collapsing from the effects of Destiny Bond. The crowd heard a lot of yelling from her; I think it would be best not to mention that exchange to anyone else.

"Both Pokémon are unable to battle. The round is a draw! Elite Four member Karen, please make your selection first." That had to be up there for the fastest battle ever recorded.

She rubbed her forehead in frustration. "I apologize for that. Lick can be used in so many other ways but it goes after the face every time. Ghosts are a little harder for me to tame and I've had Gengar for a year."

"Umm… okay. I think it's riskier going for a specific part of the body because that isn't the first time someone has done something like that."

"Anyway, I'm starting to feel that I'm being pushed into a corner which is an odd feeling. Murkrow!" I had never seen one before so I was unsure of how strong it was, especially in the dark. There was a more important question that needed to be answered first.

"Is that a hat on its head?"

"Really? You still can lose this battle in a flash and that's what you're worried about? I can't tell if you're messing with me or not and it's a little unnerving." Oh, and what you've been doing all this time has been normal?

"So you don't know?" She let out a long sigh.

"Feathers. They are feathers."

"Ah! I see. Good to know. Ampharos!"

I hated the that fact that Houndoom was on the horizon so it would be in my best interest to finish this round as quickly as possible. This bird didn't look that strong enough to knock anyone out in one hit so it was probably meant to be an annoyance.

"Murkrow versus Ampharos. Begin!"

"Get in there with Quick Attack!"

"Meet it with Thunderpunch!" Ampharos couldn't keep up with the speed and was rammed in the stomach. "Try Discharge!" Murkrow couldn't escape the electricity let loose.

"Whirlwind! Phase it out!" Its wings flapped hard enough to send Ampharos flying back into the ball. A piece of debris must have activated another ball as Furret came out onto the field; she looked confused about the situation.

Having her take a hit wouldn't help with Houndoom so I wanted her off the field. "Furret, come back!" Before the referee could announce the matchup or before I could hold up my ball, Karen took advantage of the change.

"Got you! Use Pursuit!" Murkrow sent Furret sliding across the ground before the beam took her back.

"Unfortunately, that strategy only works once. Ampharos!" I didn't wait for the referee's cadence.
"Zap it girl!" She didn't give it a chance to escape the electricity or do anything else.

"Murkrow is unable to battle. Ampharos wins!"

Only a single Houndoom between a battle with Lance for the title of best Trainer in Johto. The temptation to use Gyarados was in my head knowing he was the only Pokémon that could singlehandedly take it on. The question is: how much carnage will there be? Bruno's Machamp could've easily swept me. Karen's Houndoom is much faster with almost as much power. Karen stared at the ball.

"An alpha Pokémon wanted me away from its pack so it attacked me one night when I was in a Kanto forest. Our battle was long but I caught it, raised it, and made sure it maintained that status. I've been close to being burned and losing my hand multiple times within the first month. Those days were behind us until the first full moon came out. I've learned to keep it under control, but this is an appropriate time to let it loose. Houndoom!"

"I'm not scared. None of my Pokémon are scared. Bruno knows it so you should too; my Pokémon have spit in the face of death. Ampharos, you good?" She didn't turn around but she raised her right arm. "Bring it!"

"Houndoom versus Ampharos. Begin!"

A smirk came from across the way. "I like your attitude. Crunch!" It's first step was fast for something not using a normally fast move.

"Thunder Wave!"

"Jump!" Houndoom easily dodged the paralyzing move and pounced on Ampharos before biting deep into the arm shielding her face.

"Discharge!" Ampharos didn't listen and opted to use Thunderpunch to deliver an uppercut to the jaw. "Cotton Spore!"

Cotton balls started to move over to the other side of the field. "Flamethrower!" The fire attack easily disintegrated the balls. "Keep it up!" Its stream of fire got bigger and engulfed Ampharos.

"Come on girl! Thunder Wave!"

"Flamethrower! Don't let that touch you!" Both attacks collided forcing black smoke to cover the field. "Crunch!"

Big mistake. "Cotton Spore!" Houndoom was too invested to change to Flamethrower and the spores clung to it. Ampharos took another heavy it once it passed through the field of cotton balls.

"Discharge!"

"Jump back and use Roar!"

Houndoom was too fast for the move to hit it while a deafening roar made most of the stadium cover its ears. Ampharos shot me a look of "put me back in" before the beam brought her back. No debris to interfere with Furret coming out a second time.

Our referee was ready for the switch. "Houndoom versus Furret. Go!"

"Flamethrower!"
No way I would let her get hit so soon. "Dig then come up soon!" Hiding too long would only favor Karen so coming up quickly would be better.

"Use Pursuit when it comes up!" Furret popped up before Houndoom could ready itself for the counterattack to hit it hard; Ampharos' Cotton Spore doing its job. "Crunch!"

"Iron tail to protect yourself!" Its jaws clamped down on the metal tail and she still winced in pain.

"Slam it down!" Houndoom did as Karen commanded then followed up with a close-range Flamethrower to make sure Furret would stay down.

I reached for my ball before the referee could say anything. "Furret, return!" The ball was ready to take her back, but she interpreted that to attack… so she did.

It wasn't a strong hit. It wasn't that accurate. But she had a smirk on her face as she collapsed after the impact. A spectator or two laughed at the miscue which is to be expected. However, it's a show of how far they're willing to go for me.

"Furret is unable to battle. Houndoom wins!"

My mind was already made up from the moment it used Roar. "Ampharos!" She wanted to finish the battle. Maybe Gyarados being out influenced her, but her eyes made her look like a feral Pokémon. My cute electric Pokémon that likes to poke things she knows not to poke is now acting as vicious as her opponent. Adrenaline is one of the best substances known to mankind and this is just one reason why.

"Houndoom versus Ampharos. Begin!"

"Crunch!"

"It's not as fast so use Discharge!" Ampharos didn't listen to me as Houndoom clamped down near the same spot on her arm as last time.

"How is it not down!?" Karen asked dumbfounded; I wish I could answer her.

Ampharos shocked it even though Houndoom held on tight. While Houndoom was trying to rip her arm off, she fired off multiple Thunderpunches to its skull in a similar fashion to when I punched that protester. Karen folded her arms and put her head down.

"There's nothing I can do to control it at this point. Your Pokémon's actions will eventually trigger Houndoom's natural instincts and they'll fight on their own since they both want to be the alpha. Normally I would let the battle play out, but you have earned my respect in so many ways. Especially the entertainment factor." She turned to the referee. "I officially concede the round. Bring out security to separate the two."

"Elite Four Karen has forfeited the round! Because that was her last Pokémon, the winner of the match is Mitch from Violet City!"

Rhydons stormed out on the field to manhandle them and drag them away from each other. Houndoom was knocked unconscious before Karen called it back while Alakazam held Ampharos in place until she cooled off. Her soft expression came back and she was let down on my side of the field.

Reality set in and I sprinted to meet her with my right index finger raised to the crowd. When I reached her, I embraced her before raising her arm up like a referee would with a boxer. Both of us
kept it pointed at the sky as we walked back to the trainer box with our other arms linked.

I saw Jasmine smiling. I saw my friends cheering like maniacs. Most shocking thing of all? I saw my parents crying. The first battle they saw at the Indigo Plateau was their son winning against the last member of the Elite Four.

Bring on Lance. Bring on the champion of Johto.
Chapter 63- On the Cusp of Greatness

Getting a loud sendoff was a huge confidence booster. Bruno was close to tearing down a 4-1 lead as well as my shot at advancing and the crowd took notice last time. One imaginary middle finger goes to those who thought I stood no chance; the other one goes to the anti-Umbreon crowd. If I had a third hand, another one would go to the media for the shit they've pulled my time here. I'm not sure if I want to see or hear what they will say after this win.

Ampharos draped herself over me after we made it safely to the tunnel. The thrill of victory did a good job of masking the pain she felt from a battle that had feral undertones. When her moans of pain started to get louder, I stopped walking with her to sit her down just outside of the lounge door.

"You don't have to prove how tough you are anymore, girl. Get some rest." She violently shook her head. "Why? What do you want?" I asked softly.

"Pa! Paluuuuuu!" She threw her arms out to the side, hunched over, and made an angry look.

"I don't get it girl." Her tail moved in front of her and she tenderly rubbed it as if it hurt. "Umm… Gyarados? What does he have to do with this?" She posed like a bodybuilder flexing their biceps. "You want him to see you like this? Just to prove you're strong!?" She nodded while smiling. "Where do you get the impression that he thinks you're weak?" Again, she shook her head to tell me I missed the point; I wasn't going to argue with her. "Fine, fine. Make sure to tell him that you wanted this. He may love me but when it comes to you, he wouldn't be too happy if I let you stay like this for too long. Let's get inside." Nurse Joy was already sitting on the couch when we walked in.

"Congratulations! Allow me to restore everyone to full health. Especially your Ampharos." I handed everyone's ball over but Ampharos moved behind me.

"Sorry about her. Stubbornness is actually one her prominent traits; it's not all bad though."

"There's some medicine I put under the coffee table."

I shook my head and laughed. "Won't work. Too much pride on the line for her to take it. Thank you for offering." The machine finished the process as security walked in with their Pokémon out.

Robots would be the best way to describe these guys since all they do is listen to commands and have the power to do things an ordinary person couldn't. At least the league didn't make them follow my everymove so I can be grateful for that.

A man recalled his Rhydon. "What's the plan now?"

I pulled out my phone. "Give me a second here. Just telling my friends they can meet me in the cafeteria for some food. I couldn't tell if they knew about my friends who've stood by me since the round of 32. "There should be seven people: Wes, Rui, Carly, and Davis have VIP passes, my parents you've already met, and Jasmine is the Olivine gym leader. Once we get in, we should be good."
"Understood."

"Thanks. Teleport us all to the medical area. I need to take care of a private matter." The woman nodded and Alakazam transported us outside the medical ward in a flash. "I thought you said it could go to landmarks and not very specific places."

The guard let out a small laugh. "This place is might as well be a landmark."

"That's messed up," I said with a nervous laugh.

"Hey, I'm just saying this is my fifth year doing this. I've made about 50 trips to these doors for a variety of reasons. Medical confidentiality prevents us from going back there with you, but we'll be waiting until you're done." She's not as emotionless as I thought; maybe I can capitalize on that.

"Look, I know you guys are here to keep me safe or whatever… but could you please just let me be for the rest of the night?" Her smile faded. "I've been wanting to for this for a long time… so I'd like to have a meet and greet tomorrow. You know, have me sit at a table and do things with people. Autographs, pictures, small talk, whatever for a few hours." All of them looked at me like I was insane.

"Are you sure? The Silver Conference champion hasn't done something like that in decades and we can only do so much."

I turned my back to them and took one step closer to the doors. "The letter I got from the league said that you guys would be happy to assist me. Regardless if you want to help me or not, I'll just set up a table by myself and sit around tomorrow at noon. If you guys want to spread the word, go for it. Take Machoke back to my parents in the meantime. Goodnight."

Navigating my way to Gyarados was oddly relaxing. There wasn't soul wandering around or sitting in a hospital bed since I was the only trainer still battling here. I'm not sure about the body count was, but I think it'd be better not to ask questions. Opening the door and seeing him sleeping by the doctor was a welcoming sight. He woke up and stared at Ampharos; she ran over to him and threw herself on him and started to cry. Doctor Harrison grabbed a small medical kit from her desk.

"Oh my! Is she alright?" Gyarados understood her as she told him what she told me earlier then looked at me.

"She'll be fine. Just showing off her battle scars instead of the other way around this time. I wish I could tell you exactly why she's doing this though. Don't worry about her." I looked at Gyarados. "We missed you buddy!"

"Are you sure she's fine? We saw the battle live and it was intense."

I took a quick peek to see how she was doing. "Maybe just some spray and bandages for now. I'll fully heal her tomorrow when the overwhelming sense of pride wears off." I turned to Gyarados. "Let her apply the bandages. You'll have a treat when we get back to the room."

Doctor Harrison quickly maneuvered around Ampharos' body with an antibacterial painkiller spray and bandages. Poor Ampharos was finally asleep and Gyarados supported all her weight as she breathed softly in her sleep.

"That should take away the pain for about 12 hours so you'll have some time tomorrow to get her back to full strength." She looked away from me shyly. "The way you battle is much different than what I'm used to seeing. And the way you care for your teammates is much different too. I don't know how you've managed to avoid the trap that trainers fall into once they get here; staying
humble or nice isn't easy."

A sigh escaped my mouth. "Humble? Nice? I hate to break it to you, but I'm not a saint. The replays of my battles here are all over the world and most the people who will see them in the future will think I'm a monster after what I let my Pokémon did to some of my opponents. I've called out the media, I've been so adamant about making it this far, and I can't afford to be humble now that I have Lance as my next battle."

She took a step forward. "Listen to me: you still avoided the trap. Not too many trainers can say that. Your Pokémon love you, your friends love you, you haven't paraded around here claiming to be the best one time. So many trainers lose everything once their time here is done or at least severely strain all of their relationships." I visibly shuddered at the thought of losing the trust of my Pokémon or the people who stood by me when things got rough.

"Can't argue that," I mumbled. "Can't argue what I've done to make people hate me too."

"You're right. But please… reminisce about the good you've done more than the bad. Be proud for your Pokémon at the very least. Gyarados could fight, but the risk of significant injury is higher so make sure you think about it before going after Lance." I turned to the two Pokémon in the middle of the room.

"At least they have each other if I lose my mind."

Recalling them was something I didn't want to do, but she needs her rest and Gyarados is probably looking forward to be back by my side. Never did I ever think that Ampharos would lose her mind in a battle, especially against a Pokémon that had the upper hand. Houndoom battling under a full moon with an experienced trainer calling the shots forced me to slow it down so that the rest of the team could take it on over time. I didn't even know she was capable of close combat. Maybe there was some truth to what Karen said about the moon.

Upon exiting the room, there was no security around like I requested which was odd. I honestly thought that they would try to talk me out of getting rid of them. Their absence allowed me to continue walking down the medical ward into Espeon's room where she was still moving around with a small television on a cart in the corner.

"Nice to see you still up. Your eyes hurt from squinting?" As per usual, she rubbed up against my leg.

"I'm not tired yet. And yay! You won!"

"Next up is probably the best trainer in Johto. No pressure," I casually stated; she obviously knew how I truly felt.

"Anyone's better than that woman. She gave me the creeps."

I scratched her chin. "You know who won't give you the creeps? My parents. They're here now so I think you should meet them."

"Really!?" Her tail started wagging faster.

"Yup! They're waiting with all my friends in the cafeteria too."

Her facial expression changed. "How many people are going to be there?"

"Only seven, eight if you include me."
"That's a lot of people and you don't have my ball to call me back…"

"Nobody will touch you if you don't want to be touched," I interrupted. "Don't worry. You can have some food if you're hungry."

"I guess I'll go."

"Take it slow and stay behind me if you want."

Our footsteps echoed throughout the hallway as we made our way to the cafeteria. From the lobby, we could see a mob of people outside trying to get inside to talk to me at the minimum. Espeon shifted in front of me in the hopes that nobody saw her as I pushed the doors open; she then went behind me again.

Davis stood up. "I never get tired of doing this whole 'food and hangout' thing." He moved slightly to the left. "Who do we have here?" The tone in his voice was friendly yet curious. Ruby's scar made it easy to identify her so Davis was aware it wasn't her.

"Long story that I really would rather not talk about… ever," I bluntly replied. "Although if my parents could come over to meet her, it would help." They walked over from the table and gave me a hug.

"Good job honey," my mom whispered. "It's been a long time since I've seen you battle." My dad was next.

"Good battle! I'm glad the league was nice enough to bring us here to watch you." Espeon poked her head out slightly and looked up.

"Thanks you guys. Now it's time for you to meet the Espeon I was talking about." Everyone else stood up to get a view of her. "I hate to act like this, but I need you guys to sit down and keep your distance around her. Don't touch her unless she wants you to either." My mom went around me and Espeon tried to hide until she realized that this would be a person caring for her from now on.

"Come here baby," she said as if she was talking to a newborn. She offered her hand and Espeon sniffed it longer than she did for me before she backed up. "Sitting down might help." We all made our way to the table as Jasmine, Cory, Wes, Rui, Davis, and Carly stood up to get some food. Espeon waited until they sat down before moving to my dad. I found it odd that she wasn't telling me anything.

"She's curious to say the least," my dad noted. She surprised us by hopping into his lap and rubbing herself all over him. "There it is," he whispered as he scratched behind her ears. "Such a pretty girl."

Espeon curled up on his lap; my mom looked confused. "How come she didn't even rub up against me?"

"Well I can think of two things. Aipom's scent is probably on you and her previous owner was a girl. You don't look like her, but Espeon knows you're a girl and associates a female owner with a negative vibe." I laid back in my chair as my friends came back with food. "She doesn't know Aipom and she's not as agile as she used to be. Dad having Machoke's scent on him probably doesn't bother her because she knows it'll be an easy win if there was ever a problem."

My mom leaned back as well. "What can I do to get her to trust me?"

"Time is the biggest factor. Maybe you and dad can work with her at the same time. Ease her into
the home; let her explore. You should avoid raising your voice to her or berating her. It looks like she'll be willing to come along after she's done with therapy. You try to touch her when she's not looking and you'll be sent flying; believe me. In the meantime, let me get you two a plate."

Getting Espeon to this point was hard enough but now she still has one more hurdle to face if she wants to live a relaxing life. I think if we were to return home and be in a quieter setting when she sat on my mother's lap, then she would warm up to both of them. Aipom might complicate the process too. There's still some therapy left so maybe there's a chance that she'll think about opening up to my mom.

I made sure that I gave my parents a little bit of everything from the buffet that Jasmine ordered for us. Due to the stress, I wasn't feeling hungry. The league is probably glad I'm almost done here because we've blown through so much food after my Elite Four battles and haven't paid a dime. Good thing I know some money management skills after I leave.

Our meal was also a time to reflect of what I've done up to this point. My parents were filled in on what had happened if they didn't already know and the best part was that everyone delivered the stories unfiltered. No details were left to the imagination as the cold drinks started to kick in. Wes dramatized a few things like usual as Carly kept comparing me to Cinderella. Jasmine was more reserved as usual while she occasionally looked over at my parents; my dad took notice.

"I think she'll be more comfortable when we're back home. Your mother and I think she's a sweet girl and can't wait to talk to her," he whispered while Carly pretended to put on her shoe like a glass slipper.

"Let's hope the clock doesn't strike midnight against Lance," I joked to Carly as I turned to my parents. "Thanks for that. She's shy at first, but she told me the same thing." A few catering staff members started to clean up the buffet after another hour of chatting.

My mom stood up. "Well it's getting late. I think we should get going."

"Hold on," I replied quickly. "Espeon. Espeooooooon you have to wake up so we can go back."

A little stirring came before a loud yawn. She hopped down and walked around to loosen her legs.

A little light bulb went on in my head. "Let me rent you guys a room for tonight and tomorrow so you don't have to rely on me to get you."

Wes somehow jumped on the table in his current state. "What a guy! Getting his parents a room. Dammit Mitch, this is why we love you!"

I turned back to my parents. "Can you see why love these guys? Now come on, let me take you to the front desk." My attention went back to the group. "Thanks for waiting again guys! I'll be outside the stadium signing autographs or taking pictures with fans tomorrow at noon if you want to stop by. No cutting in line," I joked.

"Goodbye Mitch!" I brought my parents to the front desk then escorted Espeon back to her room for the night. She paced around before hopping up on the bed; I felt my phone vibrate.

"Thank you for that. I do worry that your mother will..."

"Hurt you."

She lowered her head. "Yes. I'm sorry, but it'll take some time to get used to her. You dad is practically like you so I have that going for me." I went up next to her and started to rub her head.
"Funny you mention that. My mom taught me more about compassion than my dad. On the flip side, he taught me how to be stubborn."

"Just tell them I want to live with them. Please," she whimpered.

I got down to her level and looked her in the eye. "My mom isn't stupid; she's been alive long enough to experience this a few times. Their opinion of you isn't going to change like Sara's, especially when you'll be out of here soon. They. Love. You." She buried her head in the pillow and started to roll around trying to get comfortable. I pulled the covers over her and shut the light off.

Getting my parents a room for the next 48 hours was a little hard considering the receptionist didn't believe that anyone would want to stay at the hotel. Any non-trainer would have to pay about 5,000P per night. I cut a check for 10,000P on the spot, wrote one valued at 500P for souvenir clothes to change into for tomorrow, and wrote a third one for the 25,000P fine from punching that protester. Judging by the look on my parents' face that they gave me, they still can't wrap my head around the fact that I won 500,000P as a prize. Well... now it's down to 464,500P but that should be more than enough for what I have planned after Lance. When they were handed their clothes and a guide on tourist attractions from behind the front desk, they went to their room to rest up. I checked my phone after the doors shut; it was Jasmine.

Can I get an autograph? ;)

Yes you can :)

Come up to my room and I can trade you something for that autograph. Not sure how far gone she is, but she sounds similar to the night Lance talked to me in that conference room.

Knocking on her door one time was enough for her to open it, yank me in by my shirt, slam the door shut, and squeeze me as hard as she could. She wasn't crying, her heart wasn't racing, she just took deep breaths. Eventually she put her hands on my shoulders leaned back.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" Her tone was shy and her voice was soft.

I brought her back in closer. "More than the first time you let me sleep in the lighthouse?" Jasmine lunged at me for a kiss and she wasn't shy about it; she moved me closer to the bed while still holding it. Her breath was fresh and she sounded normal when she spoke to me so no liquid courage this time around. I was the one to break the kiss.

"Definitely more than the time we met." She then noticed now far she pushed me away from the door. "I'm sorry," she said while her face turned red.

"Don't be," I said while softly smiling. "Emotions run high around here. Did you know my Ampharos stayed outside her ball well after the fight just to show off how strong she was to Gyarados? I know an egg won't come from those two, but that doesn't mean they can't be happy together. As for me, I'm happy with you right here, right now." Jasmine gently pulled me onto the bed and then had me lie down next to her.

"I'm lucky... I'm lucky that I found you and I'm lucky that you cared about me when you brought that medicine to Amphy. I needed help that night after our battle but I was afraid to signal for help. None of that was your business; you could've gotten seriously injured. You could have anyone else in the world right now with where you're at yet you still care about me."

I pulled the covers up to our chests and stroked her hair. "No... I'm the lucky one. You could've
kicked me out of the lighthouse after I attacked Steelix. You were the one who saved me from myself when I needed it the most. Without the help you provided, I don't know where I'd be right now. I mean it when I say 'I love you' every single time."

She traced the outline of my face with a finger. "Would you like to move to Olivine afterwards?" Giving her an answer would only lead to more questions from her or myself so I decided to take the easy way out this time since I was too tired.

"Let me think about it down the road. Regardless if I move or not, I'll still find a way to see you no matter where I am in Johto. That is how much you mean to me. Come here." I embraced her softly and started to close my eyes. "I'll give you that autograph when I wake up since you gave me that kiss."

Dark clouds covered the sky when I looked out the window in the morning. Mother nature has been kind to me this summer season and throughout the tournament during the day. Can't do much about the cycle of the moon though and that's going to cause me some problems tomorrow night. With a little bit of luck, I shouldn't have to solely rely on Umbreon in any given situation.

Jasmine still slept soundly next to me so I opted to stay in bed and not move too much. There was so much pressure on me to make a good first impression with her parents. Sure we could be together but when you have the support of both families, it would make the relationship that much easier. My parents aren't that protective of me so it would take a lot for them to hate her. I figured it was time to get ready for the day after she started to move around.

"Hmmmm. Miiiitch. What tiiiiime is it?"

"About 10:30. Did you sleep well?"

She rubbed my head. "Yup."

"That's good. Hey… want to order some breakfast with me and a healing machine? I have a big day ahead of me and I'd like to eat with you before I leave the hotel." She got up and found the menu.

"What do you want? I'm getting fried eggs and bacon."

"Omelet with sausage. Oh, toast too! I wish I had more of an appetite right now." She placed the order then headed to the shower while I turned on the television.

Just as expected, my battle against Karen was the number one story throughout the region. Channel surfing led me to the same one I watched after I fought Bruno. The panelists looked like they had been dissecting the battle for hours and one didn't look like he wanted to be there.

"So we've been going at this battle for an hour and now I think it's time to change topics. Mitch is having a 'fan interaction' session starting at noon today. Guys, is this a smart move on his day off?"

"What!? No it's not a smart move! How many people have the chance to face Lance, let alone see him in person? Not many. Most trainers who get eight badges rarely challenge the Elite Four because of how tough it is. He should focus on preparing for Lance." Another panelist looking anxious to talk took advantage.

"Well here's the thing: maybe this would be relaxing for him. Now that he's won the Silver Conference, he must accept the fame that comes with it, good or bad. Doing something like this shows that he understands the situation he's in. I give him credit for trying to stay humble, but
nobody can stay that humble for that long. As long as he's not doing this too often, fans will love stuff like this. He wants to show everyone that he's not above anything or anyone. Bravo for him.” The host jumped back in.

"What about the people going just to cause problems? Mitch has punched someone in a group of people that don't like him and they were out in full force last night. We didn't see him leave through the front door last night." A different one leaned forward.

"Security will be there and with the eyes of the world on him. Mitch would get upset, but he wouldn't do anything drastic."

"Where was that common sense when you said he would get swept?" the host joked. Now I know why he doesn't look happy to be on camera.

"Good one. Anyway, he's handling it better than most trainers. Maybe I'll go to the Indigo Plateau and wait in line to get an autograph."

"I think we'd all like one. Coming up after the break, a surprise guest stops by to explain the process of becoming a Pokémon League referee."

A knock at the door a few minutes later forced me to get up and get the food; they made a nurse deliver the food and machine which made me laugh a little bit inside. Jasmine came out of the bathroom fully dressed so she joined me on the bed as we ate. We focused on more small talk or funny stories from our pasts as we changed from the talk shows to the cartoons. Both of us could care less that we were 21; we knew we were kids at heart. As the clock reached 11:30, I got ready to go back to my room to drop off my Pokémon.

"Have fun with the fans Mitch!" She gave me a quick kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too." I scribbled my name on a piece of paper before I left. "That kiss last night for this autograph. Just like I promised," I said while smiling.

"Almost a fair trade," she joked.

"How about this?" I kissed her passionately but not quite like what she did last night.

"Now we're even," she cooed. "What about tonight?"

"I think I need some time with myself tonight. After Lance, I'll be waiting for that text."

She blushed. "Good luck."

Sprinting to my room after I took the elevator to my floor made me feel like I had more time to get everything set even though I could get to the stadium on time. Bringing my Pokémon to the event wasn't a smart idea because someone would probably try to pressure me to call them out; nothing good could possibly come of that. I poured everyone's food and called them out.

"Relax and eat everyone. I'm going to take care of something and won't be back for a few hours. Play nice and I'll see you guys later!" I pet them all before I made my way down to the lobby.

Having my security team in the lobby was a convenience as usual, especially when the human resources department told them about this after I did. They thought about letting me walk to the stadium, but didn't want to cause a stir. Alakazam teleported us outside the lounge and I was led to the table I would sitting at. There were stacks of my official trainer headshot and a few markers to sign. I was only allowed to do pictures and autographs with a little small talk if I felt like it.
The massive line had me feeling anxious until the first person came up to me wanting an autograph. The person was more than happy to be standing in front of me and I'm sure I almost made them faint when I handed them the signed picture. From there it was smooth sailing. A few wished me luck while others tried to tell me their life story. Kids always had the funniest things to say so I got in a few laughs. Unfortunately, it got complicated two hours in.

"Pretty smart coming here without your Pokémon," a large man said before I looked up to see him. "Your Umbreon really shouldn't be able to stay with you. It'd be better if you put it out of its misery." Security stood up, but I threw my hand up to stop them.

"He's already been put out of his misery… by being with me. He's pretty happy now. What's your point?"

"That's not what I meant," he growled.

"Yes it was," I laughed back. "If you waited this long to tell me that, I don't know what to say other than I'm not caving in to people like you. He'll stay with me as long as he wants."

His eyes shifted to my forearm. "I'm surprised any Pokémon would want to stay with you after seeing these scars from a claw." He grabbed it and pulled up the jacket so he could look at them closer; security eventually pulled him away. "You think you're tough!? There's more of us!"

I stood up and made a fist. "Oh I know. Maybe you didn't catch the memo after what I did to one of your buddies. Let me say it again: the security is for your protection. If they weren't here, your jaw would be broken and you'd have a concussion five times over. Even if you sent out a Pokémon, there are hundreds here to help me out with their own. I wouldn't have to act like this if you didn't try to grab Umbreon's ball or me."

"Tough talk coming from someone who's afraid to fight!"

"Afraid? Out of all the things to be afraid of, you're on the bottom of the list. You can hate me all you want, but my Pokémon are off limits." He was dragged away and the next person stepped up to the table. "Sorry about that. It's a long story. So, picture or autograph?"

Another two hours went by without a major incident. Some people figured it would be worth the wait to tell me I suck and have no hope against Lance; bless their heart. The line of people died down and I made my way back to the lounge as everything was cleaned up. Before I got there, I turned back to the woman.

"Thanks for everything guys. I have another request to ask."

"We're here to help no matter what so fire away." I took a deep breath.

"Teleport me to Ecruteak City right now. Specifically Burned Tower." This is where I'm glad they act like robots and don't really ask questions.

"As you wish. Go Alakazam! Teleport!"

We were there in a flash although we were met with a drizzle; the storm was probably heading east since it was cloudy all day at the Indigo Plateau. I told her to hold her follow me south but when I got to a certain point, she had to stop. She wasn't on board with the idea until I told her that I wouldn't be going into the city. When the border to the cemetery was in sight, that was her cue to stop.

Navigating the graveyard was hard because I had entered through the other way twice before. The
headstones were nearly identical so I started to look at the text. One eventually caught my eye as a "Q" started the fifth word on the text plate.

_Here lies Tom and Quilava. Their courage in the face of Team Rocket shall never go unnoticed in this city._

The only thing that changed compared to last time was that a single rose was placed in front of the headstone. It must have been recent because the color was very vibrant.

Standing over the grave in silence was all I could do for about 10 minutes before I decided to kneel in front of it and put my head on the ground to pay my respects. When I raised it, I continued to stare.

"Hey Tom, how's it going? I'm sorry I didn't bring Umbreon this time. I just wanted to give him a break." The only sound was the rain falling; nobody else was in the cemetery. "I hope you're proud of everything that Umbreon has done. He's come so far since he stumbled into my camp. He was the one who delivered the final blow to win the Silver Conference. I've never seen him so happy when the judge said we won." I took a moment to pause as if he was there in front of me.

"More importantly, I hope you're still happy with me as his trainer." Again, I paused. "He's on the cusp of greatness and achieving his dream to be on top. It doesn't matter how long you had him; you laid the foundation for him to have a strong will to get through anything in his way. That is something I cannot take credit for no matter what anyone says." I took a few deep breaths and stood up.

"He's going to be a father in a few weeks. I'm sure he'll tell his child all about you. When we take the field tomorrow, you'll be in our hearts. Goodbye for now."

On the way out of the cemetery, Ho-Oh’s feather started to glow.

Looks like I'll have two more pairs of eyes watching me tomorrow.
Chapter 64- Johto Champion Lance

Leaving the cemetery was something I didn't want to do. No matter how many times I visited, it always felt like my time there was never long enough. A man that I had never met in my life influenced me in ways nobody could ever believe regardless of how much evidence there was that Umbreon belonged to him. What if I lose tomorrow? I don't care if people were to mock me after a loss. Could I ever confidently show my face to Umbreon if we lost? At the very least, he'll have an Eevee to raise and maybe he'll find happiness in that. He's stayed strong through everything and I just don't know when that last emotional outburst will come, if at all.

The rain started to come down harder so I jogged to the north. My security guard was waiting with Alakazam, ready to teleport me back to the Indigo Plateau. Before she took us back, she bowed in front of me.

"My condolences to you." I couldn't tell if she knew everything since Umbreon's past is well-known within the Pokémon League's upper ranks or simply just being respectful since I was in there for a long time.

"Thank you. I'm ready to go back now."

"You got it. Alakazam!"

Not a second later, we were back outside the hotel while the rain started to fall; the storm was on the move. We stepped into the lobby where a few tourists were getting ready to wait out the storm. A few of them recognized me and I didn't object to any pictures or autographs despite how worried security was. All of them offered moral support before I made my way to the elevator.

"Look, I want to do something special tomorrow."

She gave me a confused look. "What did you have in mind?"

"No teleporting or heavy walk to the stadium. I want to walk there myself." She started to talk, but I threw my hand up. "Hear me out. You guys can be in the crowd at checkpoints or something. Please… let me go out to the stadium on my own terms. I think my request is reasonable."

She nodded slowly. "That's fair."

I sighed internally. "One last thing: I don't know the process you guys have for moving up in rank, but could you consider moving Ashley up at some point? She's at rank 4 or something like that."

"Why? Just curious."

"If you get the chance, look at her reports with my name on it. I don't care if someone else took care of it; she was there for me when I need it the most. And most of this was before I got here." She actually smiled.

"I'll put in a word for her."
"You don't have to move her all the way to 1 or 1-A, but at least consider her for a promotion when the time comes."

"Oh we'll take care of it," she said with a smile. "You've heard it a lot but I'll say it again: good luck. Take care tonight and we'll be in the crowd tomorrow on your way to the stadium." I was left alone before the elevator took me up to my floor.

Every step to my room echoed in the vacant hallway. Walking through the medical ward earlier was creepy enough, but walking to my room felt like it was like something out of a horror movie. I could easily hear the scampering in my room as I unlocked the door to put me at ease.

Furret and Growlithe were jumping on the bed with Ampharos waiting patiently beside it since she was unsure if she would fit. Gyarados lay sleeping in the corner peacefully while Umbreon and Espeon were on the balcony despite the rain coming in. I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head as Ampharos couldn't wait to jump on the bed as well.

"Looks like everybody is having a great time," I casually said after a few minutes of staying quiet in the doorway. They all stopped jumping to greet me. "Hey hey hey! You guys miss me?" I tried to make my way to the middle of the room, but they all jumped at me and dogpiled on me as I fell on the bed. "I missed you too!" Espeon peeked her head into the room as I was petting the three.

"Yay! Mitch is back!" She trotted over and inserted herself into the fray.

I managed to sit up and gently pet everyone. "I figured you guys should get some alone time." Espeon stayed in my lap while the other three wandered around the huge room to find a new place to nap.

"You didn't want to take him?" I knew she'd figure it out at some point.

"Not this time. That's the last thing he needs. After? Maybe." Espeon rubbed her head against my chest before curling up.

"I've been getting something from Ho-Oh for the past hour, but not enough to figure out what it is. I keep getting this vision and hear words within rainbows above clouds, but they do not belong to just Ho-Oh. I'm scared Mitch. Why can't I be like my mother and just figure it out?" The frustration and worry in her voice was upsetting.

"Don't be scared Ruby," I whispered. "I think that's Tom or Quilava considering I just visited them. After this is over, Will said he would help you get a better understanding of your powers."

She looked up at me. "What do you think they're saying?"

I scratched behind her ears to calm her down. "They probably want to tell you that they're rooting for us. There's nothing to be afraid of." A bright flash of lightning preceded a thunderclap so loud that the door to the balcony shook. Umbreon immediately sprinted inside as the rain started to come down in droves while Espeon burrowed her head underneath the sheets after using her psychic abilities to shut the door.

"I hate thunderstorms! They always remind me about that night we met you," Ruby whimpered as a smaller wave of thunderclaps rolled in the distance. I laid down with my back up against the pillows for support then I grabbed her and placed her on my lap and gently pet her all over. Umbreon jumped next to her and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm right here. Umbreon's here. We're all here." She sniveled occasionally as everyone else moved closer to us except Ampharos who decided to move closer to the door.
She pointed outside then to the door handle. "Paaaaaaalu?" Her pleading was followed with puppy
dog eyes and arms together.

A facepalm wouldn't have done me any justice. "No girl; you're staying inside. Just because you're
an electric type, doesn't mean you're immune from lightning. Mareep can handle it, but your wool
isn't as thick as theirs. We had this conversation before we battled Morty." She sighed and hopped
next to me opposite Umbreon. "But the tradeoff is that you're stronger than any Mareep."
Ampharos blushed and licked my cheek. "That's my girl." Furret and Growlithe slept at my feet
while Gyarados curled up in the other bed as best he could.

Turning on the television was a nice distraction as I turned it to a channel playing older cartoons.
The nostalgia helped me relax which set the tone in the room since the thunderstorm showed no
signs of letting up. Within an hour, the warmth being radiated around our circle made me fall
asleep despite the fact is was only 8:30pm.

"Yeah I'll take him. How much?" a voice echoed in my head. Ruby must've let her powers get out
of control again and she's showing me something.

"Since he's the only Eevee here and Eevee are rare in general, it'll be 10,000P." It was a different
voice; a much older one.

"Are you kidding me!? All I have is two badges and 11,500P to my name," the younger voice
replied. A few blobs started to form into people and the scenery came to life as if an artist was
drawing a picture before my eyes. A lone Eevee was by the younger man's feet silently pleading
for the man to give it away to the trainer.

"Fine. Here's your money."

A white flash blinded my eyes and I was eventually shown the inside of Morty's gym. Morty was
in vivid color as his Gengar was panting heavily from a long battle while on the ground. It didn't
stand up as the referee signaled the battle was over. The sound of snapping fingers sent me to a sea
of darkness illuminated by only a purple Poké Ball pattern below my feel like the ones on a gym or
Indigo Plateau field and stars. It's like the night sky was all around me until I saw Espeon to my left
with her eyes glowing as if she was in a trance; it wasn't Ruby.

"And that was the last time I saw Umbreon happy until he found you."

A trainer about my age made his way through the darkness outlined in a bright yellow. I don't know why I did it, but I got
down on one knee and draped my right arm over my right knee while lowering my head.

"It's an honor to meet you... Tom." He knelt down in front of me and smiled.

"You can stand up, Mitch. I'm just a normal guy like you. And the pleasure is actually mine." I
stood up and surveyed the area.

"Just curious, how is this happening?"

"Ho-Oh is powerful beyond our wildest dreams and pulled a lot of strings for this meeting; I am
not permitted to tell you how or I risk not being able to do this again. Although this Espeon was
willing to help on her own accord so that made it easier. Enough of that though, I need to tell you
something."

"Go ahead." Despite being a spirit, his touch on my shoulder from his hand felt very real.

"Relax. Don't stress yourself out too much. Regardless of the outcome of this battle or any other
battle, you won't have to worry about me. You've taken care of him better than I ever could have.
Looking back on my short journey, I wish I lost every gym battle the first time so I could control my ego. I'm extremely lucky that I know Umbreon can easily be at peace with himself for probably the rest of his life."

"Even if he lost? He's got a lot of pride and I know that he'll have a tough time swallowing any loss. Even when we win as a team, he feels awful if he couldn't knock anyone out."

Tom let out a cheerful laugh. "Still has that attitude I see? As far as I know, you'll snap him out of it." His face turned serious almost instantly. "As long as he has someone to love him and care for him, he'll be fine. As soon as I figured out what had happened, I begged to for a second chance to be with him. With you around, he'll never go back to the depths of despair. You told me that he's about to be a father? Internally, I exhaled knowing I had Tom's full support.

"Yup. An Eevee is going to be on the way sometime... along with a Sentret or Growlithe egg."

"Let me tell you something. Pokemon have heat cycles in the wild but when a trainer captures them, the cycles nearly stop because the ball weans them off of their natural instincts. If they're willing to mate under a trainer's care, it means a lot."

"But they do it in daycare..."

"Listen! They'll mate in a daycare because they know they're safe and they know the egg will be safe. It's the environment that matters. Not a lot of trainers want an egg so Pokémon won't even try or they're on the go too much to properly raise it." He folded his arms and looked down. "All this knowledge about Pokémon and I can't share it with anyone except you. Unfortunately, I can't tell you any more than what I just did."

I let out a sigh. "You did more than enough. Is there anything I can do for you?" Espeon started to hunch over and moan in pain while the background started to become distorted; I kept calm. "She's strong, but I think she's starting to run out of energy."

"Ho-Oh would be surprised to hear that she held on this long so I want you to do one thing before our meeting is up: enjoy yourself. Overcome the bad moments, treasure the good moments, and keep striving for greatness. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what has happened since the day you took Umbreon in. You're the type of man I wanted to become on my journey."

"And I thank you for saving Umbreon from a horrible life by taking him out of that daycare. I don't care that you bought him; you thought it was an honest gesture. "The stars went from distorted to balls of light slowly expanding as if someone flipped on a light switch. "Expect another visit to your grave in the future."

"May we meet again sometime Mitch. If not here, you are welcome to visit my grave at any time."

He walked off into the abyss as the blinding light overtook everything and prevented me from seeing Espeon trying to maintain the connection. The light slowly turned to darkness as I was aware that my eyes were closed. My clock read midnight but I couldn't go to sleep. I figured staring at a computer screen would help me tired so I made my way downstairs into the computer room.

Booting one up took longer than I anticipated as I let out a long yawn. When it was loaded up, I remembered to visit Lance's page to see if there was anything I didn't already know about him. No new information on his bio was posted, but I wanted to check his team one more time since he could have made a lineup change.
Johto Champion Lance

Age: 27

Years of Service: 9 (7 as a member of Kanto’s Elite Four, 2 as Champion of Johto)

Pokémon type specialty: Dragon/multitype

Pokémon Registered: Gyarados, Charizard, Aerodactyl, Dragonite, Dragonite, Dragonite

Yup… nothing changed from the battle he had against Allison. The list of Pokémon made my body shake on its own and my stomach felt like it was in a knot. Half his team is only weak to ice and dragon to which I have only one of those attack types. Only Gyarados can match the raw power of any Dragonite pound for pound with Ice Fang or Hyper Beam. Using Thrash against it would be dangerous while Hydro Pump isn't very effective. The physicality of the battle will certainly cause him problems; I just hope his tail holds out.

Growlithe is the most expendable member on the team since fire attacks won't leave much of a mark and his physical size isn't enough to send anything off its feet. Espeon might be able to work with everyone to get off some chip damage while Umbreon may be the best hope for whittling everything down with Toxic. Furret's digging can only be for defense although she could still land a few heavy hits. Ampharos will be the key to this battle if Gyarados falls before her. If she goes down at any point, I'm in serious trouble since her electric attacks will cause Lance some problems. With the information in my mind, I went up to my room after watching highlights of other battles and snuck back into bed.

Getting up was easy considering Growlithe stood on my chest to lick my face. Umbreon pawed at my cheek to make sure I was going to get out of bed. After I gave them a quick kiss on the top of their heads, I poured out their breakfast and stepped on the balcony.

Workers were busy preparing the stadium for the last battle of this year's tournament in every way possible. I was gifted a clear day despite the ground still being wet and the forecast called for clear skies in the night with a full moon to boot; any advantage would be welcomed.

I went into hermit mode since I didn't try to leave the room. Sending texts all day to those close to me kept me distracted along with more cartoons. Ruby and Gyarados were the only two that didn't want to play in the grass below as the afternoon dragged on. Gyarados eventually made his way to the balcony then looked at his brace. He hadn't shown any signs of terrible pain, but I know that it could change the moment he takes the field.

"You want that off, don't you?" He stared at me emotionlessly not knowing how honest he should be. "We both know that you're on thin ice but I want you to be happy and healthy." He pretended to bite the brace. "Getting it off would keep you happy alright," I sighed. A grunt was aimed at Ruby and she came out from the bedroom.

"It's no use trying to balance happiness and health. He cares about this battle more than his health and knows he's playing with fire. Take it off."

"Got it." There was no use in arguing with him anymore. I had always given him the final say in how he wants to handle his body since he knows it much better than me. Who am I to deny his trust at this point? That doesn't change the fact I'm scared; I won't show it though. I can't afford to. I rounded up everyone back in the room for one last pep talk.
"Our game plan is very simple: fight like hell. You all know that dragons are tough Pokémon with only two weaknesses. That didn't scare us against Clair and you've all gotten stronger since then. He's led with his Gyarados a lot so Amphanros is up first. We'll take it from there. Lance has three Dragonites so pacing will be important; they're not going to fall in one hit." Nods followed as I felt Ruby poking around my mind.

"Sorry for intruding, but I think we should walk to the stadium. You didn't do this alone so why walk alone?" I took a deep breath.

"If anyone has a problem, they'll have to reach my belt. Now get some food before we head over. I need a shower."

They ate silently as I cleaned up. Considering the temperature, I opted to wear a short sleeve shirt and athletic shorts while making sure I pocketed the Growlithe doll and Ho-Oh's wing. The elevator ride down to the lobby was calming until I could hear a crowd through the door. When it opened, I was almost blinded by the camera flashes as red ropes kept people back and formed a lane to walk through.

Screaming from fans accompanied me all the way to the stadium regardless if it was for or against me. A few signs wanting Umbreon gone were front and center for me to see which I honestly expected. Security was out in full force, yet it didn't feel like all hell was going to break loose. When I got to the lounge, all my friends were waiting with my parents and a photographer. Jasmine stepped forward.

"Just stopping by for last minute support," she said while smiling. One by one, everyone came forward to offer a hug and pat on the back. A team photo was taken of me and my Pokémon with a formal one with the trophy to come later. Once my parents offered their advice, they all left for their seats leaving Jasmine and me in the lounge.

"Before I forget, no food tonight after. I just don't think I can handle the attention after the battle. I even made it so my press conference was tomorrow." I let out a deep sigh. "I think I'm ready as I'll ever be."

"Really?" she whispered. Jasmine put her hands around my neck and slowly moved in for a kiss; I met her halfway. She was very gentle and deliberate once our lips locked. I preferred this as opposed to the pervious times with some champagne in her system. Her hand caressed my face as the passionate kiss was broken. "How about now?" she cooed.

"Okay… now I'm ready," I whispered lovingly before kissing her lips. "I love you."

She rested her head on my shoulder. "I love you too. I'll see you after." With a few minutes to myself, I sat on the couch in silence with an empty mind.

Lance had already been introduced and was waving to the crowd. From his body language, he wasn't being arrogant or overconfident. Handling fame was obviously something he was accustomed to. Lance had thought highly of me and it was clear he was showing me respect while still pandering to the crowd; a delicate balance that's hard to achieve even for those who are stars. I looked down to my belt one last time.

"Everyone, come on out again." I made sure to release Gyarados carefully so he wouldn't bump his head. "Espeon was right; I didn't get here alone. Would you all like to walk with me out on the field for one last time?" They all cheered as staff waited for the cue to send me out. When it happened, I lost myself. The only thing I could hear was my own breathing and the footsteps of my
Pokémon beside me in a horizontal line.

On my left, it was Umbreon on the outside, Espeon in the middle, Furret closest to me. On my right, it was Gyarados on the outside, Ampharos in the middle, and Growlithe closest to me. We were told that we'd never get here by thousands of people; look at us now. Lance formed a soft smile once I stepped into the trainer's box.

"They wanted to walk, didn't they? I know you're not the arrogant type."

"Bingo."

"Fair enough." The referee moved to midfield and waved us in.

"Alright gentlemen, listen up. This will be a full six-on-six battle with only the challenger being able to substitute. There will be no halftime period as per the rules. Please recall everyone before choosing your first Pokémon. Any questions?" I recalled my team. "No? Let's get going." Ho-Oh's flame gradually increased to the point where some fans took notice.

Lance extended his hand. "I see we have a guest watching from the sky above. Let's have a good battle. Best of luck."

I gave a firm handshake. "You too. It's a beautiful night for a battle so that's a good start." That was the last bit of small talk. It was all business now. Lance was obligated to send out his Pokémon first.

"Dragonite!" His face told me he wanted to give me no hope early on; he was going for complete control as soon as possible. "I'm not taking anything for granted, Mitch." The only problem is I can't tell which Dragonite it is.

"We're no stranger to being underdogs. The thing is that the underdog turns into the wolf eventually. Go Umbreon!" He came out snarling while his rings were shining brightly underneath the full moon.

"Dragonite versus Umbreon. Begin!" Just like that, it felt like a normal battle.

"Use Twister!"

Toxic would be too risky with the winds sending the poison back at him but running in wouldn't be good either. "Find a better angle and use Dark Pulse!" Umbreon sprinted around the small cyclones to fire the attack. It surprisingly didn't change on me and it hit the mark, but Dragonite didn't look phased. "Toxic!"

"Blizzard!" Dragonite inhaled deeply before firing a powerful blizzard while Umbreon's condition kicked in and he darted ahead; Quick Attack wasn't what I wanted even for an alternate move. Umbreon ended up being frozen due to the miscue. "Twister!" The attack picked him up and slammed him into the ground which broke the ice. If it was like Karen's battle, I think I can maneuver around Lance's hits.

"Moonlight!" A blinding light covered him and he stood up refreshed. "Bite!" His head reared back and spit out purple blobs; that didn't take as long as I had thought.

"Ascend and use Hyper Beam!" Dragonite easily dodged, but fired its move before it had time to aim resulting in a miss."

I internally crossed my fingers. "Close the gap and use Bite!" The imaginary roulette landed on
Toxic again except it connected; mission accomplished. "Umbreon, get back! Go Furret!"

Lance didn't wait for us to get settled. "Thunder Wave!" I can't entirely be upset with that considering I've rushed in the past.

"Dig for cover!" Furret was too quick as Thunder Wave hit around the hole she dug.

"Hover and keep your eyes opened!" Finally got him a tough spot. Dragonite's attacks are less effective from higher up so he's forced to stay close to the ground and Twister doesn't affect anything underground.

"Move around Furret! Keep 'em guessing!" Bumps started to form on the field as she didn't quite surface, but she was on the move. Lance remained calm despite Dragonite's breathing getting labored from the poison.

"Go over to the hole and use Blizzard!" I wonder if he knew Koga tried that against me.

"Quick Attack!" She jumped out immediately and hit it square in the back sending it off-balance. It was in vulnerable position perfect for a knockout blow. "Iron Tail!"

A small grin formed on his face. "Turn around and use Thunder Wave!" My stomach dropped as the electricity went straight to her tail and she lost some power on the strike. "Hyper Beam!" From essentially point-blank range, Furret was hit and thrown back on Lance's side of the field.

When the dust settled, she was still standing while heavily panting. Even her serious expression looked more intense than what she normally had. There's something to be said about how much everyone wants this chance to win. Her staggering around forced my hand.

"Get back! Go Umbreon!" I am forever grateful that the red beam can recall Pokémon from long distance. It was my turn to strike quickly as the poison was taking its toll. "Dark Pulse!" The maw opened, but his teeth started to glow instead and he charged in to bite its arm. As Dragonite went to shake it off, it collapsed from the poison.

"Dragonite is unable to battle. Umbreon wins!"

I won the round, but I was pissed that I almost let Furret faint for nothing. That opening Lance gave me when I had Dragonite on the ropes felt almost gift wrapped. Return would have hurt, but Iron Tail would have delivered a harder hit with the added weight of her tail so I wanted the knockout blow right there.

"I'd expect nothing less from you; thinking on your feet like that. Let's see how you handle another one," he said nonchalantly. "Dragonite!" Anyone that has a Dragonite could easily be overconfident, especially with two in reserve. Not Lance. He still assumed I was going to sweep him even though that would be nearly impossible.

"Umbreon, return! Let's go Ampharos!" I can't rely on Umbreon to get the job done a second time nor can I let Ampharos take too much damage. It's still too early to risk Gyarados. Now the question is what makes this one different than the last one?

"Dragonite versus Ampharos. Begin!"

He can't substitute so I need to take advantage of that. "Cotton Spore!"

"Use Twister!" The cyclone easily swept the attack to the right while blowing Ampharos off her feet. "Thunder Wave!" What came from its antennas looked more like a Thunderbolt attack than
any Thunder Wave I've used.

"Counter with Discharge!" Both moves collided with Lance's gaining more headway until a small explosion formed and sent Ampharos off her feet again. I was lucky she didn't get hit with any electricity. "Cotton Spore! Keep firing!"

Lance shook his head slowly. "Blow them away with smaller Twisters!" Smaller cyclones formed and blew my attack way to the right. If he went for a bigger one like last time, some spores would've connected eventually. At least she didn't take a hit this time.

"Discharge!"

"Thunder!" Dragonite's Thunder was overpowering Discharge too easily. I also shuddered as what would've happened if Gyarados got hit with that.

"Jump to the side!" She rolled to her left as the electricity zapped the ground to my right and a small amount of smoke came from the ground. I can't do this long-range battle plan.

"Thunderpunch!"

"Fly up and use Hyper Beam!" By the time Ampharos took four steps, it was as high as a two-story house.

"Keep moving and fire off Discharges!" She moved closer to it while also going side to side attempting to dodge the beam. A few weak attacks reached it, but didn't look like they had much effect. I'll take the fact she didn't get hit.

"Dive in and use Thunder Wave! We can't let move freely much longer!" Dragonite tucked in its wings and came straight for her.

"Thunderpu…" No! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! What the hell am I thinking!? Her whole arm will shatter at those speeds! "Discharge!"

Ampharos put more into her attack as Dragonite didn't flinch until the moment it connected. Both our Pokémon ended on the ground struggling to get up. Sparks jumping around her body told me that her electricity wasn't enough to cancel out Dragonite's; she was paralyzed. Unfortunately, there is no ground type on my team to prevent paralysis from electric attacks so it was only a matter of time. If I went back to Furret immediately, she would've been defeated quickly.

Sparks flew from Dragonite's body as well which meant Toxic would be useless; I still tipped the scales in my favor by paralyzing it. I needed to take a massive two-part risk. "Ampharos, return! Furret, get out here!" She looked slightly better compared to the last time I saw her but she wasn't nearly as healthy as I wanted.

"Hyper Beam!" It charged up for the move only to succumb to paralysis.

"Take advantage with Return!" Furret sprinted as fast as her legs would let her and she leveled the grounded dragon. "Now use Dig to get away!" Her body froze as Dragonite finally stood up.

"Use Twister!" Its wings couldn't muster enough power to hurt Furret too much although she slid on the ground and had some distance between them. "Hyper Beam!"

I crossed my fingers. "Dig!" She let out a roar while fighting to dig and popped in the hole to avoid the attack. "Quick Attack!" Furret sprinted faster than I had ever seen her sprint before but Lance was prepared.
"Thunder!" Part one of the risk was there; part two came down to luck.

"Sprint ahead with Iron Tail too!" She slowed down a little, but the speed was enough as the bolt of lightning hit her tail as she slammed it into Dragonite's stomach, covering both of them with the attack. Once it subsided, they lay face to face. Part two was complete. The risk paid off.

"Both Pokémon are unable to battle. The round is a draw!"

The crowd was really getting into it as Dragonite stumbled to its feet yet again while Furret was trying to copy it. Once it got up, it bent down to scoot up Furret. Lance eventually nodded and it slowly made its way in front of me before presenting her to me. She was on the edge of consciousness as I carefully took her in my arms.

"That's my girl," I whispered. "I'm so proud of you for how you battled. Growlithe will be so happy about what you did." Her eyes fluttered as she tried to paw at my face. "Before you go back, let me give you your reward." I scratched under her chin enough for her to purr before calling her back.

"It was talking to Dragonite as they lied next to each other. I didn't understand until it bent over." He welcomed Dragonite back to his side. "There's nothing to be ashamed about. Our opponent is not going to back down. Now it's your turn, Charizard!"

He put me in a bind after that last round. Ampharos is severely weakened and Gyarados needs to be as healthy as possible for as long as possible. I wish Lance's team was better suited for Growlithe, but unfortunately Charizard is his best matchup.

"You're up Growlithe!" Who am I kidding? He could care less about a Charizard staring him down after what he's been through.

"Charizard versus Growlithe. Begin!"

"Wing Attack!"

"Counter with Flame Wheel!" The result was what I expected; Growlithe taking the brunt of the assault while not dishing out much damage. "Charge in with Bite!"

"Slash!"

Growlithe bobbed and weaved his way around Charizard's slashing technique before clamping down on its right arm. It tried to shake him off, but I knew he wouldn't let go so easily. Growlithe even tried to add more to the attack by slamming his paw into the arm. One massive swing finally got him off.

"Flamethrower!"

"Charizard, you too!" It wasn't even a contest as Charizard's flames won out and sent Growlithe back. "Follow up with Slash!"

"Don't give in! Take Down!" He waited until the last possible second to jump at Charizard's upper chest or lower neck instead of its stomach. The hit had some effect as it staggered back. "Keep up the pressure with Flamethrower!"

"Hyper Beam!"

With the shot it delivered, Growlithe's Flamethrower held up much longer but wasn't enough as Hyper Beam overpowered it. The blast sent him skidding out of the lines off to my right. He
howled while getting up but unfortunately the adrenaline rush left as quickly as it came and he collapsed while conscious. He tried to fire another Flamethrower to prove he could still go, but it was horribly inaccurate and the judge looked like he had seen enough when he didn't rise.

"Growlithe is unable to battle. Charizard wins!"

Deep down I wanted him to win, but reality won out. From my box, I could see tears form out of frustration about his body failing to react to his desire to get back up. The judge glared at me as I took a step in his direction.

"Hurry up please. Although you are not entering the field, you may get a warning for stalling not related to the battle." I nodded before jogging over to pick him up.

"You did great buddy. Just a bad matchup, that's all," I whispered encouragingly as he started to go into a full sob. "Nobody is going to think less of you. Get some rest; you paved the way for success." My mind was already made up about what to do as I sprinted to my box. "Gyarados, you're up!"

The look he displayed was more intense than the time we were attacked while going from Blackthorn to New Bark Town. Back then, it was more about primal instinct and about protecting Ampharos from getting hurt. Out here he was just as angry, yet very controlled; he knew what was at stake. Chances are he'd still eat with Lance's Pokémon after the battle if Lance offered, but now was the time to mow down anything that stood in his way.

"Charizard versus Gyarados. Begin!"

I wanted that knockout as soon as possible. "Hydro Pump!"

"Fly up and use Hyper Beam!" Both moves collided in midair with Hydro Pump pushing back harder and I didn't relent when the smoke formed.

"Hydro Pump again!" Too exhausted to dodge, Charizard took the full force of the attack and fell to the ground. A grunt escaped it as it went limp.

"Charizard is unable to battle. Gyarados wins!"

A perfect outcome as he didn't take a single hit. Growlithe's Take Down set the stage and I think Gyarados knew he had the raw power to get the job done. Lance took his time figuring out his next move which I felt was a little odd. His decisions against Allison were quick so I assume I'm making him think twice or faring better than her.

He still no showed no signs of nervousness. "Aerodactyl!" The prehistoric Pokémon hovered menacingly after it let out a battle cry.

"Gyarados, return! Go Espeon!" Ruby hasn't gotten the chance to battle so I think her time is now.

Espeon and Aerodactyl are two Pokémon that have great speed but a limited defense. Umbreon may be too slow to keep up, Gyarados doesn't need to be risked yet, and Ampharos needs to recover. I'm starting to feel the pressure but I can't show it. I'd hate for all our hard work to go to waste because I got a little nervous.

"Aerodactyl versus Espeon. Begin!"

A small grin was on Lance's face. "Go in with a Wing Attack!"
"Hold it with Psychic!" She immediately stopped it in its tracks. "Quick! Use Psybeam!" The combination gave me the upper hand I needed.

"Ancient Power!" Aerodactyl quickly stood up and used its power to toss small boulders at Ruby. She nimbly maneuvered past each one until one came in too fast for her to dodge and nearly flattened her. I could see her wince while on the ground.

"It's on my tail! I can't stand up!"

"Stay calm! Break up the boulder with Swift!"

"Rock Slide! Box it in!"

Ruby didn't let up in her pursuit to free herself as Aerodactyl slammed the ground to send smaller rocks hurling in her direction. She didn't break the large boulder completely, but she broke it enough to free herself.

"Quick Attack!" I could care less that she wasn't lining up to attack; I wanted her out of there. "Psybeam!"

"To the sky!" Firing on the run yielded inaccurate bursts of energy as Aerodactyl expertly dodged each blast. I could feel the frustration within Ruby after missing eight straight times. "Ancient Power!" It landed on the ground and pointed stones rose from the ground all over the field. One appeared underneath Ruby, but she moved away from the sharp point and was still tossed aside by the rest of the protruding rock.

"Swift!" Just getting it to move around would be enough for me. It couldn't escape every one of the pointed stars, but it didn't seem too bothered by being hit.

Lance's facial expression changed for worse; it's like whatever plan he had was finally complete. "Charge in with Wing Attack!"

Ruby didn't look too weakened and her breathing wasn't that labored. "Psychic!"

The prehistoric Pokémon was stopped, but it was still fighting to fly forward. Ruby dug in and roared with the help of adrenaline only to lose her hold on it. Aerodactyl wasn't as fast as last time, yet it still landed the hit and pushed her a few feet in front of me to my left.

"Hyper Beam!"

"Jump!"

Aerodactyl quickly sent the blast Espeon's way but it was too big to jump over. Even with Quick Attack as a boost, it would've been close with the timing. It hit her while she was in the air and was sent flying higher into the air. I've seen everyone take hard falls, but something went off inside my head and I sprinted to where I thought she was going to land outside of the field.

The force of her landing on top of me sent me to the ground… hard. I didn't care; all that mattered was that I caught her. I wasn't going to argue about interfering with the battle since she didn't move at all while she was falling. My guess was that she was unconscious sometime after Hyper Beam hit her.

"Espeon is unable to battle. Aerodactyl wins!" Interesting that the referee didn't call me out but Espeon was in no shape to battle. A quiet groan escaped her as she tried to get comfortable.
"Faster… stronger… because… mystic rocks."

"Shhh. No more talking. Just get some rest," I whispered in her ear. I didn't want her to exert herself any more than that even though I wasn't quite sure what she meant.

"Failed…"

I wanted to shake her awake, look her in the eye, and tell her that it would be okay. Now was not the time to feel sorry. I thought she'd never say that again after the battle with Allison. Just further proof that Sara was never really going to go away even though she told herself she would forget.

I held her a little closer. "Succeeded."

Crowd noise went from roaring to near silence as I trotted back into the box. Usually someone silences a hostile crowd by winning a round in dominating fashion; I couldn't recall any battles I've seen on television where the crowd went silent at all. There were probably so many others before me that did what I just did, but I'd never imagine anything like this. I could've sworn that Ho-Oh's flame got even bigger on my way back to the box.

"Your next Pokémon, please."

"Right. Umbreon!" He knew that his mate was out of the battle and the brightness of his rings indicated he was ready to work.

"Aerodactyl versus Umbreon. Begin!"

"Ancient Power!" Remnants of the large boulders were sent Umbreon's way with visibly more speed than before.

"Toxic!" His mouth opened but his teeth were glowing; not even what I wanted for an alternate move as the rocks collided with him.

"Fly up!"

"Quick Attack!" The glow faded and Dark Pulse came out instead which caught Aerodactyl by surprise. "Keep it up!" His attack continued until it stopped and he started sprinting forward while off-balance.

Lance saw an opening with how he was stumbling. "Hyper Beam!" Umbreon was too focused on not falling over and took the hit. His breathing became labored after he rose.

"Moonlight!" Getting back most of his energy while Aerodactyl was forced to roost. "Now use Dark Pulse!" Fortune favored me as poisonous blobs from its Toxic attack spewed out of his mouth and covered the prehistoric Pokémon from head to toe; it was only a matter of time.

"Wing Attack!"

"Dark Pulse!"

It was moving too fast to get locked on, but obviously I didn't get Dark Pulse this time. Umbreon crouched while his rings became brighter than before and he sprinted ahead with a dark aura around him. Faint Attack hadn't been used in what felt like an eternity. The impact dropped Aerodactyl to the ground immediately and the poison prevented it from getting up. Umbreon casually cracked his neck as the referee made the assessment.
"Aerodactyl is unable to battle. Umbreon wins!"

There was no denying it; I could feel the pressure mounting. A Gyarados and a Dragonite stood between me and the title of the strongest trainer in Johto. Only a fool would assume they'd go down so easily and only a fool trusts the scoreboard alone. Any hit without a defensive maneuver from me would be fatal.

"You've definitely earned the right to be here Mitch," Lance said sincerely. "Remember what I said about Umbreon and why Allison wanted it? What just happened proved how much natural defense it has. I noticed you didn't want to use Thunderpunch on Dragonite when it was coming in at a high speed when Ampharos was out."

He was right. It could be argued that Aerodactyl had more force behind its last attack than Dragonite based on simple math and Umbreon just shook it off like it was nothing. Of course he took a hard hit, but to overtly show that he wasn't hurt that much was something else.

"In all honesty, I'm surprised that he could legally compete."

Lance folded his arms. "The Pokémon League handled everything in the tournament while the five of us dealt with the decision when you challenged us. Will, Koga, Bruno, and Karen had to make that decision on their own. I wasn't going to prevent it from battling against me, but I can't say the same for the others. Maybe they felt like I did or maybe they had to think about that decision until the last minute; we may never know. Honestly, I'm glad I witnessed its potential despite what happened to it."

"He's never gone down easily. Unfortunately, a lot of that potential was brought out from fear."

"Fear didn't consume it to the point of isolation though. How many times does a scared Pokémon willingly approach a human? Whatever circumstances brought you two together, fear didn't play a huge factor. If it did, I could only imagine where it would be right now." I shuddered at the thought of Umbreon still in the wild with a dislocated hip or just plain dead.

"Alright, you got me there. So what's the next move?"

He thought even longer than the last time which prompted the referee to signal him to hurry up.

"Gyarados!" Seeing one on the opposite side of the field was more intimidating than I thought. Regardless of how well-trained they are, their temperament is still very fickle and they can snap at any minute. Even in the hands of a champion.

"Gyarados versus Umbreon. Begin!"

"Rain Dance!"

A loud roar was sent up to the sky as clouds formed over the stadium. Luckily for the spectators, the rain was limited to the battlefield. I was the only one who cared about the sudden change as I immediately was soaked from the drizzle while Lance didn't seem bothered. Gyarados and Umbreon were too busy snarling at each other to notice.

"Faint Attack!" To my surprise, the correct move was charged up and Umbreon delivered a solid hit.

"Surf!" A massive tidal wave formed from the rain and swirled Umbreon around like a twig in a stream.

"Stay calm and use Quick Attack to stabilize yourself!" It was my only hope to have him be steady
and conserve his energy as opposed to random thrashing. Again, the attack was the correct one and he maneuvered himself to ride the current until the water receded.

"Hyper Beam!"

I needed the streak to continue. "Dark Pulse!" Three correct moves in a row as Dark Pulse was on par with Hyper Beam for a few seconds. Lance's move pushed harder and the two attacks exploded with Hyper Beam not quite reaching Umbreon, but the force of the blast was enough for Umbreon to fly back about eight feet and land hard. The Rain stared to let up just a bit.

"After it rises, use Rain Dance again!" A smart move considering Lance can't switch and Umbreon was taking a long time to rise to its feet. When he did, the rain started to fall faster.

"Moonlight!" Umbreon didn't look that much healthier compared to the other times he's used it. "Again!" The rings on his body were going back to a normal glow and he looked slightly better after the second one.

"You haven't figured it out?" Lance mentioned as if he was surprised. "Look up." Smaller rain clouds had been replaced with bigger, darker ones.

"There's no way it can have that much of an effect… can it?" Pure nervousness was all that came out of my mouth.

"Yes it can. Moonlight takes the moon's rays of light and converts it to energy. With all the clouds blocking even the full moon, Umbreon isn't getting much health back as long as the rain is up."

With the clouds blocking the moon, it also isn't much of a factor in my moves being randomized. I'm not sure if Lance knows this, but I can't risk a Toxic because it can easily overpower me with Surf or Hyper Beam. I need to take another risk.

"Umbreon, return! Get out here Ampharos!" She still looked a little tired and the fact that she was still paralyzed from his second Dragonite complicated my plan.

"Gyarados versus Ampharos. Begin!"

"Hyper Beam!" She won't be able to dodge that and counterattack right away; I need to use Lance's power against him.

"Discharge!"

Electricity met the beam as the rain gave it a little boost in power. A few stray sparks flew at Gyarados for some damage, but Hyper Beam won out after she locked up from her paralysis. Ampharos was sent sliding across the now muddy field in front of me unconscious. There would be no sneak attack this time like she had done so many times before.

"Ampharos is unable to battle. Gyarados wins!"

Losing an ace never stung so hard. I'll admit that she did a good job to hang on, but was impossible to walk away from battling a Dragonite without some bruises. Maybe if I had a second electric type then this would've gone differently. She could've easily won against Gyarados but Lance went for the jugular early on. Keeping her healthy until the end just wasn't an option. Eventually she rolled over on her stomach and grabbed my leg; there were tears streaming down her face.

"Oh no don't cry," I said quickly and softly. The struggle to get her up was tough as she grunted every step of the way. When she was up, she wept louder so I rubbed her back as she hugged me.
"It's okay… it's okay. Not many Pokémon can take on a Dragonite and keep going. Get some rest for now; we're not done yet. It's not over until the last Pokémon falls."

When I called her back, I finally noticed how messy I was. Splotches of mud were all over my body as if I was doing the fighting and the crowd was in a frenzy. Not a single person was sitting down in their seat as Ampharos' picture faded to black. An Umbreon that has had to fight for his life since day one and a Gyarados that has unyielding loyalty and the willingness to toss his health aside for a win are the last two Pokémon Lance has to go through. He'll never have two harder rounds in his life.

"You've come so far, Mitch. Eight badges, preliminaries, pool play, single elimination winner, victor over the Elite Four, and now here. How much is left in the tank?" The intensity in his voice was that of a coach pushing his players to the limit. He was motivating me. But why? Opponents usually trash talk.

"Plenty! Umbreon, show him!" The rings went from bright yellow to gold.

"Gyarados versus Umbreon. Begin!"

"Hyper Beam!"

"Faint Attack!" Rainfall was starting to decrease, but the clouds still covered the moon. Umbreon nimbly zig zagged his way around the blast and rammed into Gyarados' chest; the hit definitely left a mark. "Bite!" He looked like he was reverting to when he was in the wild as he dug himself in with his mouth and his claws.

A look of intrigue came over Lance's face. "Flail!" The jerking motion made me cringe as Umbreon held on for dear life. He only became dislodged after Gyarados rammed into the side wall. "Rain Dance!"

He wasn't going to let me heal; the only option is to fight. "Dark Pulse!"

Gyarados slithered backwards for more distance. "Use Hyper Beam!" Another collision only this time Umbreon's attack pushed ahead before an explosion along the edge of the field. "Surf! Clear that smoke!"

"Sprint in with Faint Attack!" With the rain powering up Surf, it was a race to see if Umbreon would connect to weaken the tidal wave.

A significantly smaller wall of water was released as he got in a hit although not as powerful. Umbreon was able to use Quick Attack to jump out of the water and buy himself some time as the swirling waves died down.

"Faint Attack!"

"Flail!"

A feeling of helplessness washed over me. I saw the lunge by Gyarados and Umbreon took the bait by leaving his feet. He never saw Gyarados' tail coming from the side to swat him into the wall. I knew what was happening, but my brain didn't register it fast enough for me to order a command. It's as if the entire sequence was in slow motion for the five of us on the field.

Umbreon squirmed out of the hole, staggered in my direction, and collapsed on the ground. He slammed his scarred paw on the ground and wailed as loud as he could until he was out of breath; it wasn't in agony. Just like Growlithe, his body had failed to react to his will to fight and Moonlight
wasn't going to do much for him. His time was up.

"Umbreon is unable to battle. Gyarados wins!"

Lance immediately motioned over to the referee and gave him a signal to ease up as I ran from the box to Umbreon's side. The rings went from gold all the way back down to their normal yellow as he tried to heave out another attack in their direction.

"Just stop buddy, please," I urged. "It's over. The round is over." He continued to sob as I gently slug him over my shoulder and rubbed his back. "There there, you gave it all you had." Chants of various phrases mixed together rained down from the crowd as I took a slow walk back. "That was the best battling I've ever seen out of you and it came at the best time."

I managed to grab a peek at the luxury suite, only to see my friends watching nervously. My dad was rubbing my mom's shoulder trying to comfort her as they all knew the spot I was in. Jasmine was one box over with the other gym leaders and she had her eyes closed and hands folded. I gave a thumbs-up to all of them before taking my place. Ho-Oh's flame grew even bigger which forced some fans away from their seats until they realized the temperature didn't go up.

"Ho-Oh may as well be perched on the bowl," Lance casually commented. I don't know how he could stay so calm in a tight battle. I'm not showing it, but I could vomit at any second. Squeezing the wing it left behind and the Growlithe doll calmed me down a little.

"Good job with how you handled the water use. Clair showed me that Toxic isn't as effective when you can dilute it and blocking out the moon forced me to go on the offensive." The clouds faded away as the rain stopped; guess he was okay with me taking my time even though he lost his rain.

"Clair mentioned that to me. I was surprised she didn't run you out of town after that since she's been around the Dragon's Den since she was old enough to walk."

"Figured. Now let's get going. Gyarados!" He was as healthy as could be with my back against the wall.

"What will your approach be? Being down 2-1 isn't an easy spot to be in."

"I'll tell you." I cupped my hands around my mouth and yelled to get my Gyarados' attention as the crowd noise got back up. "You told me that you'd fight until you couldn't move, right? Hold nothing back! Let it out!" He nodded and licked his lips in anticipation of what was to come.

Deep down I prayed he wouldn't take too much abuse on his tail. Even at this point, knowing another Gyarados and a Dragonite stood in his way, he was willing to disregard his health to help me out. Me, a guy who couldn't get him to listen until Ampharos was tossed into that deep body of water as a Mareep. All he has wanted to do since then is protect. Protect his teammates, protect me, and protect our reputation as a team. This wasn't about protection though. As I remembered it, this was helping me out when I needed it the most.

"Gyarados versus Gyarados. Begin!"

I wanted this to end quickly. "Hydro Pump!"

"Surf!" An earlier blow left the Surf a little weaker than usual and Hydro Pump broke through the wave for some moderate damage. "Flail!"

Reckless thrashing made it a hard target to hit from afar. "Get ready with Ice Fang!" A few hits were delivered before Gyarados sunk his teeth into the opponent. One quick motion by Lance's
Gyarados resulted in mine jerking awkwardly and letting go; the tail injury was aggravated.

Lance saw the window of opportunity. "Hyper Beam!"

"You have to move!" The beam grazed Gyarados as he slithered around the mess that was the field. I'd honestly have him jump into one of Furret's holes if she made them bigger. "Counter with your own Hyper Beam!"

"Wall it with Surf!" Barrier or not, it didn't do too enough protecting as the beam wasn't weakened enough to stop most of the force. "Now Flail!"

"Hydro Pump!"

The powerful burst of water kept the upper body at bay until its tail swung around and slapped his face. Lance's Gyarados rammed into him immediately which had mine use Ice Fang to control it. After mine pushed forward with his teeth still in its flesh and slammed it to the ground, Lance knew that his Gyarados' rampage was over.

"Lance's Gyarados is unable to battle. The challenger's Gyarados is the winner!"

I got a laugh as the older spectators cheered while the younger children covered their eyes or their parents covered them. It had been a long time since I had seen that ferocity out of Gyarados. It was also the first time I had seen him really exhausted. Tail injury or not, he still took a beating and doesn't have time to recover.

"Mitch, you have earned the respect of so many people and trainers alike around the world. Even my colleagues recognize you as an elite trainer. All that's left is to figure out how elite you are. Just like you, I saved my best for last. Go Dragonite!"

For me, I only heard my own deep breaths. I had blocked out every other noise in the stadium and kept looking straight. In my peripheral vision, the flame grew even more to where people evacuated their seats.

Everything I had done up to this point was replaying in my head. All the hard work, sacrifice, blood, sweat, tears, heart, mind, and soul all seven of us put in was shown in this battle. For it to come down to Lance's final Pokémon and my last Pokémon was a reminder of how relentless the Johto region can be. Growlithe, Furret, Ampharos, Espeon, Umbreon, Gyarados? They could care less.

"Dragonite versus Gyarados. Begin!"

"Safeguard!" A glowing veil surrounded Dragonite and it looked like something out of a fairy tale. "Gyarados don't usually inflict status conditions, but I'm taking no chances Mitch. That is how much respect I have for you."

This is why I didn't save Umbreon for last; I knew one of his Dragonites had it from the battle against Allison. "Ice Fang!"

"Dodge it!" Dragonite zoomed around the field as Gyarados couldn't get a clean look to lunge. "Hyper Beam!"

"Fire back!" The pain for Gyarados was there, but he pushed through to get off a blast of his own. Neither beam was giving an inch which resulted in another explosion. We both waited for our Pokémon to recover using the smoke as a disguise. When it was clear enough to see, I wanted the kill. "Ice Fang!" The lunge was much faster than expected but Lance was prepared.
"Fire Blast!" Before Gyarados could connect, he was hit with a powerful burst of fire. He tried to use his cold mouth to reduce the damage by ducking into the hit.

"Keep up the pressure! Hydro Pump!" Nobody else may have noticed it, but I saw the size of the water attack was significantly smaller than usual.

"Fire Blast again!" Lance's strategy worked as the moves collided to create a giant steam cloud that covered the entire field. I couldn't see a thing, but Lance was confident. "Outrage!" A patch of smoke swirled as Dragonite rammed Gyarados so hard that he flew backwards out of the smoke; not even Jasmine's Steelix could've moved him so far off his position.

A direct, blindside hit would be fatal; I couldn't avoid it any longer. "Thrash!"

He let out a battle cry as the two repeatedly collided near the sideline. From the looks of it through the smoke, Dragonite was overpowering Gyarados with ease. Both Pokémon were panting after the sudden burst of energy but Gyarados breathing was more labored.

Dragonite was stumbling around, but Lance was willing to risk it ramming into the wall from fatigue. "Go for another Fire Blast!" Another burst came from its mouth and I was forced on the defensive again.

"Hydro Pump!" The stream of water didn't come out this time; it was clear to everyone that Gyarados did not have enough water in reserve to attack with. Fire consumed him and he resorted to rolling in the mud to lessen the pain while potentially putting out any small burns.

"Quick Dragonite, Hyper Beam!"

"Defend it with your own Hyper Beam!"

Another tradeoff as neither one was backing down. Playing defensive wasn't going to get me the win, but Lance wasn't going to let it get close enough for an Ice Fang. I already lost Hydro Pump as an option and now I was running out of time. Dragonite didn't look nearly as exhausted from the battle so I know it has a lot of energy left to spare.

"Let up and go in with Outrage!" It barely avoided Gyarados' Hyper Beam once it stopped putting up a front.

"Ice Fang!"

With the two in close quarters, Dragonite was still more agile. Every attempt to bite the arm missed as it alternated its punches, even headbutting it didn't work as Dragonite simply overpowered him. He finally scraped an arm as it was pulling away which forced it to move back. A patch of ice covered its arm.

"Fire Blast!" Out of mental fatigue, it rammed into the side wall and slammed its somewhat frozen arm against it. Ruby left a nice dent in the wall when she hurled Vaporeon and Jolteon at it; Lance's Pokémon may have compromised the structural integrity of it. "Snap out of it!"

"Thrash!"

More body blows were shared as they tried to slam each other into the wall or on the ground. Another jerking motion in the fray forced Gyarados to let out another roar in pain as it pinned Dragonite to the wall. As long as he could still move, he didn't care. Dragonite snapped out of its confusion and Lance was ready.
"Hyper Beam!"

"Get out of there!"

It was no use as he was confused due to fatigue and tried to ram into Dragonite even more. Despite the headbutts, Dragonite got off a point-blank Hyper Beam and sent Gyarados all the way back to midfield. He lay nearly motionless while it hovered back to Lance's side; his head was up to show he was still conscious. He didn't wait for me to call out anything as he fired another Hyper Beam before resting his head on the ground. Everyone was surprised how accurate it was but again, Lance was ready.

"Fly up then dive into an Outrage!"

A corkscrew dodging maneuver was flawlessly executed and the impact by Dragonite ramming into Gyarados created a crater in the middle of the field. Gyarados couldn't defend himself as the pummeling continued for what felt like an eternity. He was still struggling and managed to turn over on his back.

It was now or never. "Hyper Beam!"

"Come on Dragonite, get away!"

It ignored Lance's orders and still went for the body blows. Gyarados did his best to angle his head so the attack would hit, but he couldn't sustain the strength to keep it locked on his target. The beam went straight up to the sky and dissipated.

"Go for Ice Fang!" Desperation in my voice was starting to show although I portrayed it as motivational and Lance responded accordingly.

"To the air, then Safeguard!" It obeyed Lance this time and cloaked itself in light; my guess was that Ice Fang freezing his last Pokémon still worried him.

"Get up Gyarados! You have to get up!" I screamed as loud as I could. There was no motivation in my voice; only pure desperation. He managed to lift the upper half of his body off the ground.

"Let's go Dragonite! Finish this with Hyper Beam!"

A blast of pure energy came from the sky, landed on Gyarados, and sent him flying back to my side. He landed with a thud and let out another roar from the pain. Without waiting, he went to fire one of his own, only for nothing to come out. His body went limp but he was still conscious and snarling. Suddenly I realized that I hadn't gotten a clean shot at it the entire round. The only damage Gyarados dished out was when he was also getting hit.

With no more energy for Hydro Pump or Hyper beam, he couldn't attack from a distance. Unable to move from his spot, he couldn't chase Dragonite. Since Dragonite still looked healthy enough to attack from distance, that's what would happen. Even close quarters attacking favored the nimble dragon. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could only assume he was staring them down with the look of someone who hadn't given up even though his opponent had plenty of energy to spare.

After Gyarados failed to move for an extended period of time, the judge gave him a long look over. When his arm with Lance's flag in it started to move, I went on my knees, put my forehead to the ground, slowly covered my head, and felt the first tear go down my cheek. There was no more denying the inevitable. The proverbial clock had struck midnight. Our Cinderella story was over.

"Gyarados is unable to battle. Dragonite wins! This match goes to Lance of the Elite Four!"
Crowd noise echoed throughout the entire Indigo Plateau as Gyarados' picture went black and the graphic for Lance's victory was displayed proudly. I kept it together long enough to wipe my eyes and stand back up after a few deep breaths. Jogging through the torn-up field to comfort Gyarados was the only thing I wanted to do. When I got next to him, he stopped snarling and just stared off into the distance.

"Just like you told me buddy. You said you'd keep going until you couldn't move and that's what happened." A small grunt was his response; I rubbed his head. "And you didn't even faint. Ampharos will be so proud of you when she sees you again." Lance recalled Dragonite and walked over next to us with his hand extended.

"Congratulations on the battle. I haven't been in too many 1-0 decisions, but this was the toughest win in my tenure by far."

I firmly shook his hand. "How so? Your Dragonite had a lot left in the tank. It could probably take out someone else on my team too."

"True, but I will acknowledge that a well-placed move would have turned the tide. Never in my life have I had to battle so defensively. If we redo that final round 100 times with both at full strength, the results would be split." He let go of my hand. "There will be a letter in your room tomorrow and I suggest giving it a thorough read."

I let out a deep breath. "Will do."

He turned to Gyarados. "That was the best display of raw power from any opponent I've ever faced. Don't hang your head; be proud of how well you held your own." With that, he left to a chorus of cheers while I was still on the field covered in splotches of mud; he stopped and quickly jogged back to me. "Let people believe what they want to believe whether it's right or wrong. All that matters is that you know yourself better than anyone else. We'll keep in touch." When he left the stadium, the crowd stuck around to send me off with applause.

Recalling Gyarados made me realize how big the crater was. Walking back to my tunnel and looking at how the field turned into a war zone made me realize how brutal the battle actually was. A section of the wall was carved out, holes were filled with mud, scorch marks were on both sides, and rubble from the rock attacks littered the field. The maintenance crew is going to earn their pay tonight.

Nurse Joy was at the tunnel entrance with a portable healing machine ready to go so I dropped the six balls in. Her mouth was moving, but I didn't hear a thing she said. I didn't hear the crowd either; just the ringing in my ears. My head stayed down even as I took everyone back and made my back to the lounge. Jasmine was already inside when I opened the door. I could only stare at her feet as I started to focus on her words.

"Mitch… how are you feeling?" She sounded very concerned but I wasn't entirely tuned in. "Mitch… it's okay. You can…" the word "okay" snapped me out of my trance and my knees buckled. The magnitude of what just happened on the field had started to sink in and I fell forward. Jasmine caught me and hugged me tightly as I regained enough strength to stand.

"I lost," I whispered. "I cost us the battle." The tears started to flow.

"It's okay Mitch," she whispered while rubbing my back. "It's going to be alright."

"No… it's not alright. I let so many people down," I sobbed into her shoulder as I gripped her shirt tighter. "I shattered the dreams of my Pokémon! They all wanted to win so bad and I blew it! I'm
an embarrassment!” She didn't care that me, a 21-year-old Silver Conference champion who had gone through so much worse on my journey here, was sobbing uncontrollably like a child.

"Who did you let down?" Her voice still was soft and supportive as ever.

I sniveled while compiling the list. "Tom," I blurted out as he was the first to come to mind. "And Wes, Rui, Carly, Davis, all of Kanto, Espeon's mother, my Pokémon, my family, and you for starters!" She let me sob some more while rubbing my back.

"Let it all out. Just let it out," she whispered. This was the first time in my life I was this mentally broken. All I could think about was how disappointed my team would be next time I saw them or how the small group of friends I had was going to leave me. Jasmine walked me over to the couch and let me lie down on top of her before continuing to rub my back.

"Can I tell you something, Mitch?"

"What?" I sniveled now that I got most of the sadness and rage out of my system.

Jasmine softly kissed my forehead. "You didn't let me down at all," she cooed. "I'm not going to think of you any differently just because you lost. You're still a caring person. You still help others when they need it. I still love you."

Time slowed down as I started to close my eyes now that the adrenaline rush was over. She had brought my coat to the stadium and threw it over me to warm me up. The sniveling stopped and my breathing returned to normal. Her hand tenderly stroked my head while an occasional kiss was given. I remembered Tom's words as I saw Ho-Oh's wing light up in my pocket.

Overcome the bad moments, treasure the good moments, and keep striving for greatness.
Chapter 65- Reaping the Rewards

Only a few minutes of resting was I needed to stabilize my mind. Closed eyes and steady breathing allowed me to remind myself how well we actually did. Not a lot of people expected us to do much once we got to pool play based on the fact I had only six Pokémon; oh how wrong they were. We were essentially playing with house money this entire tournament. Any loss at any point could've been excused, but I didn't want any excuses or pity. People could dissect this battle against Lance forever, but a loss is a loss.

The night was still young, but I was too exhausted to enjoy anything. I'd need a shower as well considering I have dry mud all over me. Another thing I had to do was prepare for tomorrow morning's presser since I ended up delaying it. Media interaction was something I better get used to now that I'm a somewhat popular person after this run. A knock at the door forced me to stand up and be alert while Jasmine opted to sit patiently on the couch.

"Mitch? Can we come in?" It was my parents.

"Yeah. Come on in." They slowly came in with a small bouquet of flowers.

"We just wanted to stop by before you came home," my mom casually stated. "And to give you these." I assumed they were for if I won, but I appreciated the gesture.

"Thanks mom. When I come home, I'll see if I can bring Espeon. She's almost done with rehab."

She slowly hugged me, unsure if she really wanted to do what she wanted to do. "You did great honey! I think you'll get him next time." I forgot about the one thing in all of this; I can apply to battle the Elite Four again. The reminder of the loss didn't sting as much as I had thought as well.

"I haven't seen a battle like that in a long time at any level. The guys from work were texting me throughout the entire battle too," my dad added. I had a little blush going on as he patted me on the back. "We're proud of you for what you've done. We love you so much."

I hugged him back. "I love you guys too. See you soon."

They clearly saw Jasmine on the couch and figured it was best to do the formalities when I returned home. She watched me intently while I slowly paced around the room and let out a few deep breaths. All the memories from tonight won't be going away anytime soon.

"Are they coming down too?"

"No. They all talked about meeting up with you tomorrow after the press conference." She looked sad that she had to tell me that. I understood their position, although I wished they didn't change their attitude.

"Fair enough. Gives me more time to rest up here and wait out the big crowds. If you go back, text me."

Jasmine didn't object to me lying down again as she turned on the television. She left the volume
low as I drifted back to sleep. Dream or not, I definitely heard someone talk about the battle. Positive reinforcement was all that was fed to me as I woke up to the sound of the mini fridge opening; I thought she would've left. Only an hour had passed, but I was more refreshed and headed to the door.

"Are you going back now?"

"Not yet. I want to step out on the field one last time to soak it in. There is no guarantee that we'll get this far again." She got up and held my hand. We've slept in the same bed more than once, but I instantly blushed like a six-year-old getting looked at by his crush across the classroom.

"Ready?" A soft voice doesn't mean a lack of conviction or confidence.

Some security guards were milling around in the tunnel as we made our way back to the field. Voices echoed near the entrance and a small crowd of about 60 people were waiting for me. When they saw me, they went into a frenzy complete with whistling and fist pumps. A wave was met with even louder cheering. When it died down, a few young children ran to the railing.

"Hey! Hey! Can you sign this please!??"

"Can you take my picture?"

I playfully threw my hands up. "Okay okay! One at a time." The pain of the loss dwindled a bit more with the sudden burst of appreciation.

It took about 45 minutes to get through everyone's requests. Most parents put on a fake smile whenever their kid or teenager talked about how awesome Umbreon was or how he was their favorite. The temptation to tell them off was there, but now was not the time or place to do it. Once I gave everyone what they wanted, an usher told them to leave since the stadium was going to close. He turned to me after they left.

"Maintenance opted to wait until the morning to start cleaning this up."

"I thought they did everything in the morning anyway."

"Well after each battle, they do light maintenance like sweep away the larger chunks of rock or patch up small cracks in the side walls. You two ripped the battle area to shreds so they figured it'd be better to take care of it tomorrow when they're rested up and they can call in some extra muscle."

"And finally put out the flame?"

"Yes. Only two things can extinguish the flame: water from deep within the Whirl Islands and Ho-Oh itself. It's funny though… it wouldn't go out after the Silver Conference was over even though we had the water. Guess we'll never know why."

"Can I stay just a bit longer?" He radioed security for confirmation.

"Go for it. Once you leave, you'll be locked out until tomorrow morning though. The lights will automatically go off after a certain time so watch your step." We were soon left alone.

We spent a few minutes walking around the field to survey the damage up close. Rain Dance had made the ground softer which may have saved us from falling into one of Furret's holes or just tripping in general with how loose the ground was from the heavy impacts. Burn marks from electrical attacks still were scattered throughout as well. The gaping hole in the wall was the thing
we stared at the longest.

"Do you think Steelix could hold its own against any of Lance's Dragonites?" Jasmine started to shiver a little bit so I squeezed her hand a bit more and rubbed it with my thumb; it was something my parents did a lot when I was little to calm me down.

"I hope I never have to find out."

Our battle may have changed a lot of people's minds about challenging the Elite Four. She told me that few trainers dare to step up to the plate and I doubt the gym leaders would do the same thing. Amphy is her life outside of work and I imagine Steelix is a big part of her life too. Just because it's a steel-ground type, doesn't mean it's indestructible. I have the confidence that she could get a team of six trained to go the distance, but the pressure on the trainer is immense. Any Pokémon getting slammed into a wall or taking a punch that can break one will end up injured regardless of type and that can be the difference in whether to continue or not.

"Judging by how they battled, I think my Pokémon want a rematch," I said solemnly. "I'm honestly not sure if they'll ever be satisfied with what happened tonight.

"What are you going to do?"

"Weigh my options. I've rushed into a few things on my journey only to be put in a bad situation. I'm not sure if I can put them through that gauntlet again." We walked back to the midfield line near the sideline and stared up at the flame still burning furiously.

She squeezed my hand back. "Loyalty goes a long way. Regardless of what you do, it seems like your Pokémon will stand by you with no regrets." The flame started to expand outside the bowl and Ho-Oh came out of the flames to roost on the edge of the wall in the first row; we were nearly an arm's length away.

"Another tournament has come and gone with you as the winner but not the true champion of Johto." It looked to Jasmine before continuing. "You may be the most soft-spoken gym leader in Johto, but I must ask you to leave because the true extent of your character is not known to me. Do not make me question my decision" it said as it pinned its wings back while leaning forward. I threw up my free arm in front of Jasmine immediately.

"Relax," I replied sternly.

It relaxed its wings but focused on me. It leaned in so we were nearly eye to eye and snorted like a Tauros. The steam from its nose was enough to dry me off five times over. I took deep breaths as it backed off and went to a normal resting position. Jasmine was doing all she could to keep a straight face.

"Very bold and stupid of you to say such a thing without a hand by your belt to call out a Pokémon. Tell me, why did you that just now? That is the second time you or your Pokémon have done such a thing. Do you not value your life?"

I put my arm down and let go of her hand. "Because you looked like you were going to attack her and I'll do my best to back my friends up when I can. You should know that I don't take kindly to threats against people I care about. Why do you think I punched a protester? If you truly want to know what she is like, I can call out Espeon to show you."

"What are the chances Espeon will lie to me?"

"None. If you trusted your servants' word about me since they are Pokémon, then you probably
trust Espeon more than me. Jasmine's guided me through this and I don't think it'd be fair to exclude her when she's done so much for me. She poses no threat and Espeon isn't strong enough to fabricate a lie."

"Call Espeon then wait for my signal to send her back," Ho-Oh sighed.

Ruby looked nervous being sent out next to the legendary bird, but Ho-Oh made it clear what was happening. There was a quick exchange as they stood still in a trance before I had to call her back.

"Was I right?" I put every effort into not making my question sound arrogant.

"Very well. She may stay... this time."

"Thank you."

"The conversation you had with Tom must have went well considering I did not sense any conditions being broken." I nodded slowly. "An event like that may not happen again so I am glad you two could finally meet. Anyway, I want to tell you that the wing you have in your pocket will still alert you to my presence since I have chosen to reveal myself to you."

"And if I don't live up to your standards?"

"It will still work as intended. However, I may never reveal myself to you again. As of now, I will continue to do as I have always done with you; trust my servants' word and watch on my own time."

It's not the end of the world if I never see Ho-Oh again considering the track record it has with humans isn't the greatest. I never expected it to check in for a casual meal either. Being watched for the rest of my life sounds a little creepy to be honest, but I think it should understand I can't be good all the time. Chances are I'll probably forget it's watching me most of the time.

"Fair enough. Is there anything else you have for me?"

"Yes. When the conditions are met, Espeon and Furret will have offspring. I am not permitted to tell you the conditions nor do your Pokémon know them. Be vigilant in their actions from now on as it could happen at any time."

"Not to sound ungrateful, but why can't they mate on their own terms and have an egg? I'm genuinely confused."

"Let me rephrase that: they can mate as much as they want without meeting the conditions and still have offspring. It will be easier to have an egg if the conditions are met as per Arceus' doing. Ampharos and Gyarados cannot produce an egg together, but their desires will be fulfilled if the conditions are met."

"Last question: will they have the egg while inside of their balls?" Ho-Oh looked puzzled.

"Modern technology is something I am unaware of. When the time does come, let them do what they want to do. Be aware that their natural instincts may take over and you may get hurt." I showed it my scarred arm.

"Been there, done that. The reward outweighs the risk by a long shot in this case anyway." It pecked at its left wing before continuing.

"As long as you are aware of it, I have done my part." We stared at each other awkwardly until it
“I have nothing else to say except that the other Espeon in the medical ward is very strong. Perhaps she could assist me in some way…”

“You would have to take it up with her,” I butted in. "She's still not fully rehabilitated."

"Hmmm… I see. So be it. I have nothing else to say. Farewell."

The majestic rainbow Pokémon flew straight up into the sky before anyone could potentially see it. There was something to say about it making a second appearance, but I wish it wouldn't think about attacking anyone it saw unless it was a serious problem. With the night dragging on, it was time to head back.

We held hands the entire way along the quiet dirt road with only the full moon in a clear sky to serve as the light. I wasn't as miserable since it was still warm outside and Ho-Oh evaporated nearly all the water in my shirt. Only the sound of our feet shuffling could be heard all the way back to the hotel; how I missed the peace and quiet of travelling when I was a nobody. A single receptionist was at the front desk typing away at the computer when we got inside.

"Is there a chance I could get two extra rooms on my floor for tonight only?"

"Sure?" The look on the receptionist's face was priceless. "Can I ask what for?"

"My Pokémon," I mentioned casually. I was handed my extra card keys and practically dragged Jasmine to the elevator before going up to my floor first.

"I don't get it Mitch."

"I'm just following through on a promise I made."

I made a pit stop to my room to grab four bags of food before inserting a key into the first new room and called out Ampharos and Gyarados first. They looked much better although I could see a little discomfort in Gyarados' face. They looked confused since it wasn't my room.

"You two did great tonight! So as a present, you two will have your own room!" They still didn't believe what I was saying. "I have to do a lot of things tomorrow so I'm giving you two some alone time until tomorrow afternoon, okay? Relax! Eat as much as you want!" I thought they understood it the second time so I left to the next room.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to leave them alone for that long?"

"Of course. They have food, water, open space, and can call on Espeon to help them if they forget the key," I casually replied. "Espeon! Umbreon! Come on out!" I was relieved to see that they weren't injured for what they went through, especially Umbreon."

"Miitich. It’s laaaaate," Espeon moaned while blinking to adjust to the light. Umbreon shook his head attempting to get awake.

"I know, I know. You both did great tonight so this is your reward! A room just for you two and some food to eat since I'll be busy until tomorrow afternoon."

Her ears perked up. "Just us two in this room?"

"Yup."

The smile on her face slowly grew; now she was awake. "Can we…?"
"We're done battling here so yes, yes you can. I figured everyone would like a mix of privacy, safety, and luxury during their alone time."

Ruby hopped into my arms and starting rubbing against me. "Oh thankyouthankyouthankyou!"

"Just focus on relaxing, okay?"

Espeon hopped down to whisper into Umbreon's ear; his eyes went wide and he started jumping in place. It was nice to see them be happy with no strings attached or anything stressful down the road in the near future. Tonight was a long time coming.

The next stop was my room where I called out the remaining two members of my team. Growlithe was the first Pokémon I had while Furret was the second. Rocky start aside, she trusted me when it mattered most. They both knew what was going on since they probably saw what happened in the other two rooms.

"Now that things are over here, I want you two to have some alone time to decompress. I'll be busy until tomorrow afternoon so relax for me. There's food in the corner and everyone else is in the next two rooms in case anyone wants to meet up." Furret climbed up my leg then wrapped herself around my neck like a scarf. "I know you've waited a long time for tonight so enjoy it, okay?" I said while scratching her neck. As soon as I turned to leave, Growlithe was already licking her cheek.

Going to Jasmine's room without any Pokémon beside me felt odd. I couldn't remember the last time I had no Pokémon by my side and if I did, I was probably too young to remember it. She quickly washed off some dirt while I opted for an immersive hot shower after she was done.

"Hey Mitch, I'm going to leave this in here for when you're done." I didn't bother to look past the curtain since I was too busy enjoying the rush of hot water. It must've been 20 minutes before I finally shut off the water and dried off.

"What the hell?" I mumbled as my clothes weren't by the sink. They were replaced with a long white bathrobe like what I wore after I brought Umbreon back from Mount Silver. "Where did you put my clo… okay then."

She was sitting up in bed with her back against the pillows wearing the same bathrobe while she was waiting patiently. Maybe it was the fatigue setting in. Maybe it had to do with the fact she probably wasn't wearing anything underneath it like me. Maybe it was the fact she was being genuine yet eager about all of this. No matter the reason, she looked more beautiful than when she wore her festival dress.

"You're not sleeping in dirty clothes."

"I can go to my room to get a new pair."

She gave me a sly smile. "Do you really want to?"

"No," I responded shyly. To be fair, I thought about doing something potentially more romantic so I have no room to really play innocent. It feels weird to have the shoe on the other foot in this instance.

"Then take a seat. Relax," she playfully mocked as she dimmed down the lights.

"I'll take you up on that offer."
The room was a little cool from the air conditioning, but she threw the sheets over us in our robes to add warmth. A little moonlight filtered in through the curtains while the flame was smaller compared to when we were outside. Only the sound of us shifting echoed through the room then the sound of her rubbing my shoulder.

"Comfy?" I nuzzled her shoulder; the softness of the robe almost put me to sleep immediately.

"You bet." I hugged her as best I could then I felt a tear roll down my face. "Why are you doing all of this?"

A small sigh escaped her. "Because you helped me when I was at my lowest and I wanted to return the favor. Please… don't feel like you're doing anything wrong. I want to see you happy again, that's all."

She continued to comfort me as I drifted closer to dreamland but couldn't get there. I'm so used to putting up a front whenever something is eating at my mind, but I can't hide this like a lot of other things on my mind or play it off. This loss is going to hurt for a while no matter what anyone says to cheer me up.

"Are you happy now? I feel like I forced you to do this."

"Oh Mitch, of course I am," she reassured me followed by a kiss. "I trust you enough to have both of us wearing only robes. I thought it would ease your mind. The softness, the warmth, the thought of resting your mind in the comfort of this room. You never took advantage of me back then and I won't take advantage of you now. I can stay up with you all night, get you a clean pair of clothes to sleep in, or do anything else I can to make you feel better."

I buried my head in her shoulder and started to fall asleep. "I love you… so very much."

"I love you too. You'll always be a champion to me and nothing will change that. Nothing."

She turned off the lights, shifted herself so that my head fit perfectly on her shoulder, and I thought I saw Ho-Oh's flame go out. With nothing left in the tank mentally, I was vulnerable and weak. Nightmares could easily consume me or I could just spontaneously start screaming or crying in the middle of the night despite how tired I was, but Jasmine wasn't going to let it happen. I had a warm bed, clean robe, and she made sure I knew she was there for me.

Not another word was spoken as she held me in her arms underneath the covers; only happy thoughts ran around in my head as time dragged on. Espeon and Furret becoming mothers, Espeon getting lessons on how to control her power, her mother finally having a home for the rest of her life, and the fact that Jasmine wants to meet my parents makes the pill a little easier to swallow. A small smile formed on my face.

"There you go. I'll be right here beside you all night long," she cooed in my ear.

So this is what it feels like when I do this to my Pokémon. I finally see how this would make them feel better.

Cloud coverage prevented the sun's rays from coming into the bedroom as the clock read 9:30 when I woke up. Both of us looked like we hadn't moved as she rubbed my head with a smile. I know that relationships aren't always this romantic or smooth, but I've learned to treasure every one of these moments. Maybe my parents can tell me what they did when they started out.

"Good morning Mitch. Feeling better?"
I leaned in for a passionate kiss while rubbing her head. "Yes I am. Did you sleep at all last night? Did I do anything unusual?"

"I slept fine; I wasn't awake for too long either. You slept so peacefully last night too." That made me feel much better about myself after I broke down.

"All because of you." I squeezed her tightly. "Thank you for everything last night."

"And I would do it again. Now, I ordered breakfast a few minutes ago so we can eat before you're off to your press conference. Do you know what you're going to do after that? You're not obligated to stay here anymore."

"Scoop up my Pokémon and head home. Would you like to come with me?"

She looked sad. "Too much business to take care of and a lot of battles to schedule. We get a few days off after this whole tournament which was why I could stay. My best bet is that the other leaders went back to get a head start on everything."

We continued the small talk as the breakfast cart arrived outside. Jasmine had ordered a smorgasbord of food ranging from eggs to toast to fruit to stuffed pastries and even a large stack of blueberry pancakes. Eating in bed while watching television with her was a great experience since we were at our most relaxed as the time to my presser grew closer. She gave me back my dry yet dirty clothes and sent me off with a hug.

Entering my room felt weird due to the fact that Furret and Growlithe were cuddled up underneath the comforter, but I desperately needed a change of clothes. It was still warm outside so I went with another shirt and shorts combination. The walk over was peaceful since the only people still at the Indigo Plateau were staff and the media. It was nice to see Ashley waiting for me outside the doors.

"Hello Mitch! Ready for the last formal presser for a long time?"

"Let's do it!"

The media section was packed, albeit not sardine level since I didn't do them any favors by moving it to today instead of having it last night. A murmur went through the crowd as I adjusted to the microphone and waited patiently to take questions. When they were let loose, I was ready.

"Will you challenge the Elite Four again? If so, when?"

Easy question. "I'll have to go over it with my Pokémon. We don't want to rush into anything if we have the opportunity to plan things in advance."

"What about entering the tournament next year? Will you bring more than six Pokémon?"

"Again, we'll have to talk it over. Adding a new member is something that can disrupt chemistry so I would have to run a few tests to see how it would work out. I'm personally leaning more to the 'yes' side at this point."

"At what point did you think the battle against Lance was over?"

"When the judge said my Gyarados was unable to battle." A few eyebrows were raised. "The first rule of battling is that a battle isn't over until a judge says so or one trainer runs out of Pokémon. Everyone thought I would blow through Bruno or Koga with Espeon but we all knew how those turned out."
"Do you have anything to say to people who think Umbreon shouldn't have been allowed to compete or that your title has an asterisk attached?" Almost made it through without that topic coming up. Change "compete" to "live" and I'd go off.

I took a deep sigh. "Umbreon had no control over what happened to him. Besides, Elm gave his opinion earlier in the tournament and he's working with other professors around the world to study this. All I know is that the condition is a disadvantage. The fact is that he could compete and that's that. A certain group of people won't get over it, but they're entitled to their opinion and entitled to jeer me when I battle. Last question from the corner."

"Favorite moment of the tournament?"

Honestly, there were too many to count. Mentioning them with no filter would be a public relations nightmare and I've been Silver Conference champion for only about a week. Just pinpointing one single moment that I could say without a problem and yet…

"Walking out there against Lance with my team beside me. We had a few hiccups along the way, but those six fought until the end every single time."

Getting off that stage for the last time felt amazing. I bid farewell to Ashley now that her work here was done. For a trainer to be only 17 years old and working for the Pokémon League was a better gig than sitting in school like I did. Hopefully the league gives her some Pokémon or at least some time so catch more so Kingler isn't the only option. On the way back, I got a text from Carly.

*Another entertaining press conference Mitch! Come to the cafeteria for one last meal with us.*

True to form, they had a small spread when I arrived and we talked together for one last time. Wes was set to stay in Azalea Town to finish what he started while Rui had planned to return to Orre. Davis opted to take a ferry to Vermilion City since he wanted to relax back home. Carly still wanted to stay to sightsee around Mount Silver. After the hugging and goodbyes, Carly handed me a card key.

"You're more than welcome to visit Kanto and I think this rail pass will help. Just go to Goldenrod City's train station then swipe it for the expressway. It's free for trainers so don't worry about it." I just stared at it knowing my world continued to get bigger. "Kanto would welcome you with open arms!"

"Thanks guys! I'll give you a call before I head over. I just don't know when I'll have the time."

"Our invitation doesn't expire. You're welcome to stay at our place if you want." With no food left and everyone gone, it was time to gather my things.

Gyarados and Ampharos were visited first since I dropped them off first. She was sleeping near the top of his head as they were on the balcony enjoying the warm sun. My presence woke them up before I could recall them.

"Sleep well last night?" They nodded in unison. "We're getting ready to leave for home soon." I made sure to reattach the brace since Gyarados looked like he was in a bit of pain before going back.

Next up was Umbreon and Espeon in the second room. They were in bed underneath the covers except for their heads poking out. A soft smile came across my face as it looked like how I slept last night. I sat next to Umbreon and rubbed his head.

"Hey sleepyhead. How's it going?" A lick to my cheek followed a long yawn. "And how's Ruby?"
Umbreon had a low growl going as I went to pet her before drawing my hand back.

"Mitch? Is that you?" she yawned while rubbing her eyes. "What's going on now?"

"We're going home soon."

"When we get there, can you buy some dark type food? It's so good!"

"I guess I ca… wait, what? Dark type food? I see both bags are empty, but you really ate Umbreon's food?"

"Only about a pound. It smelled too good not to eat." I just looked at her and shrugged my shoulders. A pound is a lot of food; maybe she was really hungry.

"Anyway, we're going to stop in my room one last time. I'll call everyone out then."

From the outside I could hear the bag ruffling and opening the door made Furret stop in her tracks. She was trying to eat some food that spilled out onto the rug while Growlithe trotted over to help her eat it up. The look on her face was a response to me about to strike her as she curled up and started to cry. When I took a step closer, she grabbed onto my leg and wailed. She was begging for mercy.

"Oh no. No, no, no. it's okay girl. I'm not mad at you. Come here," I urged while holding out my arms. Growlithe urged her to at least let go as he continued to clean up as best he could.

Furret managed to slowly work her way off my leg to my arm where she tried to bury her head into my elbow. The reason she may have been upset was that it was Growlithe's food on the floor. When she saw me studying the bag, she jumped on the bed and backed up against the pillows in fear.

"What has gotten into you?" I wasn't mad, just confused. "Growlithe, could you calm her down so I can get everyone else out here?" He managed to bring her somewhat back to normal before everyone else came out again.

"Listen up everybody! I'm going to make this short." I sat down on the bed so that I was a little closer to their eye level. "Last night we lost against a very good opponent. There is a reason that he's the best trainer in Johto and he showed it but let me be honest: he said that was the best battle he's ever had. All of you worked so hard to get here and I had no doubt that any one of you were going down quietly. Each one of you kept going until you couldn't even twitch. I am so proud of everyone."

They all stared at me with no emotion. I'm not sure if I ruined the good vibes or if they wanted to face the reality now rather than later. A solemn nod was all they gave me, but there was a sense realization in their eyes.

"With that out of the way, we're going home soon so do you know what that means?" Growlithe was the only one that happily jumped in place. "That's right! Home cooking!" I hadn't been home in months so nobody on the team except Growlithe knew was in store with how my parents packed the dinner table after a big event.

Gathering everything was bittersweet so I took my time. All my letters from the league were packed carefully into my bag as keepsakes while I kept the Growlithe doll in the front pocket and Ho-Oh's feather in my pant pocket. The trophy would have to be carried in plain sight since it was too awkward for the bag. I almost missed a letter on the desk; it was entirely handwritten as opposed to typed out.
Dear Mitch,

Congratulations once again on your victory at the Silver Conference. There are a few things I would like to say as you head back home. First, I would like to offer you a job within the Pokémon League as a gym leader. The ability to think on your feet constantly throughout this entire tournament with only six Pokémon is something that has not gone unnoticed in my eyes. However, you must go through the process like everyone else with the exception of having a reference. If you want a different job, then you can negotiate with the league office on your role. The league would be honored to have you as an employee.

Second, Umbreon's condition will continue to be studied. Professor Elm and myself have concluded that the condition is more likely to affect him under extreme duress or stress. However, there needs to be more research done on survival battles in the wild versus trainer battles. Elm is unsure if natural instincts overrule the condition, if at all. The odds of his condition acting up are significantly less in an "average" battle. The addition of the full moon in a clear sky results in a 100% chance of the wrong move being used unless the move is Moonlight. Cloud coverage will lower the odds regardless of the situation. Elm is working on finding a way to minimize the effects or eliminate it altogether. Umbreon is still set to live a healthy life otherwise. You may visit him at any time if you have questions.

Third, Will is relaxing like all of the other league staff today and tomorrow. However, he will still offer his services to take care of a "private matter" that he mentioned to you earlier. I trust him enough not to ask, but call the league office first so that he knows.

Fourth, the agent that has submitted most of your concerns will be looked at more once the promotion exams come around. Ashley will still have to work to move up a rank, but the league has taken your word into consideration.

I want to thank you again for not just battling, but for showing me personally what it means to fight until the very end and showing the world not to flinch in the face of adversity. I hope your Pokémon have a speedy recovery and I look forward to hearing about your decisions. Enjoy your title of Silver Conference champion.

Best wishes,

Lance

I opened my bag and slid it in carefully before leaving my room for the final time. A bathrobe or a gift basket would've been nice to take home as well, but I've got enough mementoes to last a lifetime. Before checking out for good, I made a trip to the doctor Harrison's office.

"You're still here Mitch? I thought you would've left by now."

"Well I want to leave, but there are a few things that are bothering me. Can you look at Gyarados again? I think he took a hard shot to the tail but he can still move it."

"Let's get him set up." The process was nearly streamlined as the results came in and she was busy analyzing the images once they were done. She left before coming back with a needle.

"A needle?"

"Gyarados has a severe bone bruise and severe inflammation. With rest, the brace, and this shot, he should feel better in the short term. That means no battling at all for a few weeks. I still advise moving around to stay loose. Regardless, it was close to being paralyzed for life after being
slammed like that. The thing that may have saved him was loosening his body before impact."

My hands went up. "Fine, fine. What's in the needle?"

"Some athletes are given cortisone shots to numb pain. This is essentially a cortisone shot for Pokémon. The results will make the pain go away while it is resting. Outside of the common ones like injection site pain, there is a side effect that concerns me. It is rare, but the bones around the site can thin which make them weaker. The pain now will subside, but the future will be uncertain. It's still your call." He sighed deeply and offered his tail knowing that the risk didn't outweigh the reward.

"Remember buddy, no battling. At all. For a few weeks." When the injection was administered, he winced before she ran out to grab medication.

"Here are some painkillers to use as necessary." More medical jargon to remember, but I understood the bottom line.

"My next question is about Espeon's therapy. Is she done so I can transport her to Violet City's Pokémon Center?"

She escorted me across the hall to pull up her data. "Not quite. Maybe two more days to wrap up. I can tell someone to send her over." Damn; I wanted her back today. "Is there anything else before you head out?"

"My Furret and Espeon were acting funny this morning. Umbreon too."

"One at a time."

"Espeon loved Umbreon's food which I found unusual; she ate a pound of it in one sitting to boot. Umbreon growled at me as I tried to pet her which is odd considering it hasn't happened in a long time. Furret was eating fire type food and became emotional when she spilled some of it on the floor. She thought I was going to strike her for making a mess and had a look of pure fear in her eyes even though I clearly wasn't upset."

Doctor Harrison tried to hide a smile as she silently led me to a smaller intimate room. The smell was unusual although not overpowering. A few machines were in the corner away from the padded table.

"Call out Furret for me please." Without Growlithe out, she panicked again and sprinted behind the machines. "I think it would be better if you waited outside for this. Leave Espeon with me as well." It broke my heart again to see her like this. Did I really make her feel that bad while we were here?

I waited patiently for the process to be done even though I was anxious. There wasn't a lot of noise which surprised me considering I thought Furret would be breaking everything in sight out of fear. When it was done, I was let back in to the sight of the two lazily stretched out on the table.

"So I ran a few tests to see why they might be acting this way. This smell doesn't affect us, but it helps relax every Pokémon so this room feels like a safe environment which made the results easier to understand."

"What did you find?"

X-rays were shown on a screen. "These two have a little bump right there," she said while pointing to their stomachs.
"Can you take care of it?"

"Nature will take care of it," she said with a smile.

"I don't follow."

"You're going to have to figure out which two Pokémon you want to deposit into the storage system." I felt like I was blindsided.

"They're actually…."

"That's right Mitch… an egg is on the way for each of them. Congratulations!"

With the diagnosis out in the open, they sat up and called me by their side. Both of them aggressively rubbed their heads all over my hands as I went to pet them. Effects from the room or not, they looked so happy. I carefully sat down next to them before they climbed into my lap.

"You two will make great mothers."
Chapter 66- Coming Home

I didn't care that the room may have been dulling Espeon or Furret's senses while they purred in my lap. Leaving them with their mates like the way I did was bound to yield these results regardless of Ho-Oh's conditions that it mentioned. All those pent-up feelings needed to be let out after the ride everyone has been on but I didn't know how quick our lives would change. There's a point where humans find out they're pregnant and the signs are obvious. With any Pokémon carrying an egg, I should've known that severe mood swings or being overprotective was a dead giveaway.

"Hey doc? Is this normal? It seems like this happened so fast."

"Pokémon can have different rates for egg growth. Yours were quick because they've probably been wanting offspring for quite some time. Environment plays a role as well. It's clear that you left them in a safe place with no stress so their mental state was stable and they could let their instincts take over with no worries," she mentioned casually while organizing the room.

"I guess. But still, a few hours after they're done? Really?"

"A lot of trainers ask this so don't feel like you're the only one. Wild Pokémon take a little longer to show signs or develop an egg due to their environment; most notably their food supply. A stressed out and/or a malnourished female is less likely to notice they are carrying an egg until it's very developed. Under a good trainer's care or in a stable environment, they are more keen to changes in their body." I tried to dissect everything but ended up shrugging it off.

"What about their individual timetables? What if they're ready and they're inside their balls?"

"Let's go back to my office and I'll help you out."

Using the puppy-dog eyes on me wasn't enough to stop me from calling them back to their balls. Over the course of the walk I figured that they would return to normal which would've created more chaos. A few minutes of typing led to multiple tabs of data.

"I want to know Espeon's timetable first."

"Look for yourself." Various pie charts, graphs, and even a bell curve were plastered in the page as I scrolled down to find the most helpful information. Eventually I started to get overwhelmed with data and my face reflected it. I figured taking a shot would be better than assuming anything.

"So she'll be ready in a week?"

"Close to it. Most Espeon hold an egg for about a week before it comes out; a month is about the normal time for a wild one. However, don't expect it will be exactly a week from now. It's best to let nature run its course.

"And yet humans carry their baby for nine months."

"It's a cruel world out there and Pokémon need to breed often to keep the bloodline going."
Scientists have been trying to figure it out for decades but can come up with no real answer as to why their pregnancy term is shorter other than it's breed or die out. Some species are even faster when it comes to breeding." We talked some more as I pulled up Furret's data and saw her timetable was similar although her expecting date was about 11 days out instead of a week.

"What about the ball scenario?" She pulled up a schematics tab and got a pen to show me the finer points among the cluttered diagram.

"Any ball will keep a Pokémon's condition from deteriorating, right? As much as we celebrate our Pokémon having an egg, carrying one takes a toll on the Pokémon's health similar to what human mothers go through. Both of them will be fine for now, but the obvious signs like exhaustion or morning sickness will show up later. They won't be able to stay locked in or even be called back until nature runs its course thanks to these mechanisms."

I just looked at the ground and took a deep breath. "They'll be able to break out on their own right before?"

"Not right before. Maybe a few hours or even days before. You'll be able to call them back after the egg is out and they have recovered. Until that point, you have to move with them outside the ball. That's the main reason why trainers would rather not have an egg while travelling."

"I see."

"Keep in mind that taking them to a Pokémon Center with a doctor is the ideal choice. Nurses are fine, but a doctor generally has more experience; the choice is yours. If you find yourself on the road when it's time, make a shelter and get water at the very least. Food is a plus if it's available. Call out their mate because they'll be ready to protect and comfort them. The egg will hatch in a few days if taken care of properly."

"That's a lot to take in." She led me to the door.

"One last thing that I'll say again: protect them no matter where you are until they get back to full strength. I mean it. Other Pokémon know they are vulnerable but a wild one is more aggressive than a trainer owned one."

"They'll get the rest they need before then." I lowered my head again. "Is there anything I can do to repay you for all you've done for me?"

"Oh no," she laughed. "I'm all set. You've done more than enough for me. Consider us even. Just go home and take some time off. You'll be busy again before you know it!"

Leaving the facility for the final time was a surreal experience. I went from nearly losing my trainer's license here to a near happy ending. Beating Lance wouldn't have had it perfect anyway; one look into Espeon's therapy room as she was working was a reminder of the dark side of this tournament. For Wes, Carly, and Davis, there was Sara, Cory, and Allison. I may never see the three abusers again to get my personal revenge although humiliating them on live television was a good start.

The trek back through Victory Road was much easier than coming to the Indigo Plateau. Every Pokémon was back to hiding since there weren't hordes of trainers rolling through making noise. Ruby helped me last time while the official signs guided me out. Had I gone with the signs the first time, I probably would've run into angry Pokémon or trainers looking to battle.

I saw a ferry was sitting at the docks as I moved south; just because the tournament is over, doesn't
mean the whole place shuts down. Two workers were in the ticket booth at the time I requested a trainer's ticket and their faces changed when they saw my name next to my picture.

"You're really Mitch?"

My trophy also caught their eyes when they looked back at me. "In the flesh."

"Wouldn't you just get teleported back to Johto? That's what most tournament participants do."

Shit… should've asked for that. Better lie I guess. "A little time to enjoy the view would be nice before going back to the city."

"Can we get a picture?"

"Yeah, fire up the camera." A hybrid of serious and goofy pictures lined their photo reel as the ferry blew the horn. "Don't worry about people on that thing. Not a lot of people came off and not a lot of people got a ticket. Safe travels!" A quick call home was in order so that my parents wouldn't have to worry.

Riding back was a peaceful experience because only older tourists were on the ferry. Some stared at the trophy the entire way unsure to say anything while I pretended not to notice. A few of them did congratulate me when the ferry docked. New Bark Town was as peaceful as ever which was a nice reprieve from fans.

As I started to walk west, I thought about going to Elm's lab but I didn't go. There was a chance he wouldn't be there and even if he was, Umbreon is fine for now. I know all there is to know about his condition so unless there's something I need from him, it'd be mindless talking and I know he's a busy man. When the town met the dirt path into route 29, I figured I could use some help.

"Come out Growlithe!" He stretched before pawing at Furret's ball. "As much as I want to, she needs to stay in there until we get home."

"Growwwwwwl" he moaned in disappointment.

"Don't worry. Besides, mom's cooking a lot of food for us." His tail started wagging furiously as the prospect of stuffing his face entered his mind. "It'll be a trip down memory lane along the way back. I remember how inexperienced we were thinking New Bark Town had a gym. Let's get going."

Cherrygrove City was only about half an hour away as the sun was getting closer to the horizon. Shades of pink lit up the sky as we headed north on route 30 until we were near Dark Cave. Dusk eventually came upon us as we carefully maneuvered closer to home. Wild Pokémon hid at the sight of us faster than I've ever seen; probably had to do with the fact that Growlithe was a champion Pokémon and they could sense it. As soon as sun was down, we were only 15 minutes away from the city limits and I had Growlithe let loose some weak flames in the air for light. I recalled him once I could see Sprout Tower clearly in the night.

Violet City was well-lit as usual although there was more noise. It took one step into the city to see it had been set up like a festival was going on which was odd; the Bellsprout Festival wasn't scheduled for another seven months. Lights strung up, kids playing carnival games, food vendors all over the place, and a stage that was placed in the heart of the city were decked out in streamers. My sightseeing was a pleasant experience as street performers were juggling balls that were set on fire by their Magmar partners.

I stood in the back of the crowd quietly hiding my trophy while waiting for the act to end and
realized how much fun I missed out on in my travels. Everything on my journey had some serious undertone, especially the Olivine Market Festival. I should've spent more time playing carnival games there instead of dealing with what I had to deal with. When the performance was over, it became eerily quiet as someone in a tuxedo stepped up to the microphone; they had a Pokémon School patch on the chest pocket.

"Thank you all for coming out tonight! We're just getting started on the main stage and we hope you enjoy what the rest of the festival has to offer! We'll let you know when the man of the hour has arrived but until then, enjoy our next act in the heart of downtown!"

Musicians went up one by one playing their songs while occasionally using their Pokémon as a part of the act. The occasional talent piece dazzled audiences as the night dragged on. I got a few looks as people shuffled about although nobody said anything to me probably because they weren't sure it was me. A feeling of nervousness came over the large crowd as clock turned to 9:30.

"Where is he?"

"We only have an hour left to see him before the festival is over!"

"You said Mitch would show!"

Wait… they threw an entire city-wide party just for me? Makes sense as to why it's so lively. Wonder who set it up?

"He was supposed to come back today," a young trainer murmured in front of me. "I hope he's okay."

"Oh he's fine," I whispered in her ear.

"How do you kn…" her mouth hung open when she turned to look at me.

"Excuse me for a second." I made my way through the crowd and it became clear that anyone who saw me earlier was happy to know it was me. "Nobody told me about this, otherwise I would've gotten here sooner," I yelled to the stage. Everyone was silent until Falkner stepped up.

"The man of the hour has finally arrived. Mitch… it is with great pleasure that we welcome you home. You've come a long way after having only a Growlithe by your side." I carefully climbed up on stage to meet him face to face.

"It's good to be back. Sorry to keep everyone waiting."

Falkner handed me the microphone. "Got anything you want to say?" I walked around the stage to compose myself before speaking.

"It has been an honor to represent the city that taught me everything I needed to know to get started as a trainer. However, there are some things that cannot be taught in school or by others. Some things you can only experience for yourself. My Pokémon and I have been through so many highs and lows on our journey, yet one thing was constant: the will to move ahead. For now, we need to recover so that we can come back stronger than ever. Thank you all for coming out tonight. This one's for you!" I raised the trophy high for everyone to see.

Loud applause echoed throughout the city as I went behind the stage. Falkner personally congratulated me with an honorary plaque from the city, letters of congratulations from the league which were sent to every participant's hometown gym leader or authority figure, and a replica statue of the trophy that my parents mentioned earlier. He told me that if I wanted to have my own
formal ceremony at a better time then he'd take care of it. With hardware in hand, I made my way to my house even though I wanted to party. Guess I was too tired to really enjoy everything after all.

My parents left the light on for me although they clearly weren't home. The sweet sound of the door clicking shut and the smell of home forced a deep breath. I was finally back where I was wanted. No amount of fame or money could replace the feeling of walking around your house knowing that it was safe to let your mind rest. When I got to the kitchen, there was a tray on the stovetop and a note on the table.

_We weren't sure if you were coming home right away, staying at the party all night or some other plan. Coming home at about midnight because we have to help clean up around the tower. There's some homemade pepperoni pizza for you. See you tomorrow. Sleep in as much as you want._

They must've have something else for dinner because there were no slices missing when I went to heat it up. One bite in turned me into a maniac and I devoured the whole pizza in one sitting while I watched television. Grabbing a drink was hard since the fridge was filled to the brim with containers of Pokémon food on one side labeled according to who was on my team. The food coma started to take effect so I went upstairs to get a quick shower in.

Nothing looked out of place in my room, especially my bed. Soft cotton sheets, a light comforter since it was still warm out, two pillows, and a fan right by my face. As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out cold. I hope my Pokémon can understand that it's okay to rest and they're not on standby. They've earned every bit of pampering.

Leaves rustling in the wind woke me up in the afternoon the next day since the sunlight couldn't go through the curtains. A few thumps from downstairs made sure I stayed awake until I got out of bed. Dad was working in the backyard while mom was rearranging furniture with Aipom's help. It happily greeted me with a "tailshake" as usual.

"You're up! Did you enjoy the festival last night?"

"Sure did. I wish you told me it was for me though. I took the scenic route home," I laughed.

Her facial expression went from happy to embarrassed. "We wanted to surprise you."

"Well I was still surprised. You and dad took off today?"

"Yes. We're working tomorrow though." The room was more open since they moved the couches to the sides. "We'd really like to meet your Pokémon now that we're all home and you're not forced to go anywhere. Let me call back Aipom." She made her way to the kitchen window. "Honey! He's up and is going to show us his Pokémon!"

"I'll be right in!"

I carefully figured out how I wanted to do this. Gyarados clearly isn't going to fit and two pregnant Pokémon that are emotionally unpredictable could be a handful if I pick the wrong order. Starting with Growlithe is the best option considering he lived here for years. When they saw him, mom grabbed some food in a bowl. Furret was next since her mate could keep her in check.

"Look at this cutie!" Furret's body language told me she was very mellow and her stomach was still normal size. It was nice to see her warm up to my parents.

"She is. She's also never had your food."
"Here you go sweetie. Eat up!" Unlike Growlithe's food, she carefully ate what was in front of her.

"Next up is Umbreon."

The long yawn he let out reflected how everyone else probably felt after the long trek back and the fact that they were used to being outside frequently. He sniffed around before rubbing up against my mom carefully. He then fell at her feet and started to purr.

"You said this Umbreon was different last time?"

I was hoping they would forget. "Only when it comes to battling. As far as I'm concerned, he's fine otherwise. His condition may act up under extreme pressure."

"Define 'extreme' for us. We want to know what to expect if he's going to stay outside his ball."

"He knows six moves because of Team Rocket. All that happens is that he can't control what move he uses when a lot is on the line. It hasn't really happened too much in gym battles, but it amped up big time during the tournament." My dad pieced together what it would be like in his head before shrugging his shoulders.

"Not really a problem in the house I guess. Who's next?" he asked while he waited by the fridge.

"Espeon. Not the one I showed you; my own."

Ruby materialized looking very groggy but her ears perked up at her new environment. She carefully maneuvered around the living room then moved to the kitchen to steal a bite of Umbreon's food. Eventually she curled up in a sunny spot on the floor.

"What's with that scar? People kept mentioning it like you cut her or something." I didn't get a lot of crap for it from other trainers or fans because their own Pokémon probably had battle scars, but I think the subject was too taboo to talk about during the broadcasts. Maybe they did talk about it; I didn't sit in front of the television all day. The scar looks not as bad with all the time that has passed and the frequency of times I plopped her ball in a healing machine.

I took a long breath to gather myself. "That other Espeon was this one's mother. They were both owned by the same trainer, both let go because they were too weak in her eyes. Both were beaten up before being sent into the wild. I could care less if she let them go, but the way she did it was terrible. Her biggest mistake was that I found them. Nobody will know how much that 6-0 really meant."

"So your scars on your arm are from… what, again?" my dad asked as he brought over the food.

"An accident. I'm going to leave it at that. Next up is the electric sheep."

Ampharos opted to stay in her spot instead of roam around to pick up the scent of the house. The couch looked inviting to her so she plopped on it and started to roll around. No pillow was safe from being squeezed as she kept rolling. My parents just looked at each other.

"Is our couch really that soft?"

"Guess so."

I went to grab the food for the least two members of my team. "Be thankful she didn't poke anything fragile." She dug in with everyone else as I brought my parents outside. "Last one is Gyarados. He's like the rock of the team so don't expect too much emotion. Don't worry about the
brace either. It's just a precautionary thing."

True to form, he was relaxed while surveying around the outside. He ate slowly in what looked like an attempt to savor every bite. I made a guess that if I called him inside the house and he curled up a little bit, he'd easily fit in the living room. My bedroom would be a tighter fit, but I'd rather not force him to contort his body.

"Even for a Gyarados he's pretty calm."

I let out a small laugh. "He prefers to save his energy for battles... or being a slide for little kids to ride. Let's go back inside; I need to tell you two something." I turned to Gyarados. "You want to go relax in the town lake later?" He flashed a big smile. "Good! I'll call you back later." All my Pokémon had finished their meals and were sleeping in the living room; we sat down on the other couch.

"Is there something wrong Mitch?"

"Nothing wrong. I just want to tell you that Furret and Espeon are going to be mothers in a week or so. Before that, I want to go to Olivine to see Jasmine and maybe look for an apartment or even a house down there." Regardless is Jasmine and I stay together, Olivine is still a very nice place to live.

They looked surprised, but didn't overreact. "Sweetie... that's... wonderful! But what about after that? What are your plans?" I pulled out Lance's letter and showed it to them.

"Work for the league. They've given me an interesting offer. Anyway, I need to take Gyarados to the lake and get a few things. Do you want me to take them along or let them sleep?"

"Aipom should meet them when they wake up. I think Growlithe will hold down the fort. See you later!"

Sprout Tower loomed large as usual while the breeze rippled the lake's water. Gyarados looked happy to be back in some water since the pool at the hotel. A few onlookers were initially startled until they realized he was lazily moving about. Nobody really noticed us until a group of trainers a few years younger than me came up asking for autographs. We stayed for about an hour before heading back home. On the way back, I got a phone call.

"Mitch? This is Nurse Joy from the Indigo Plateau. Espeon is done a little earlier than expected. Would you like me to transfer her to you?"

"Give me a few hours to prepare. I'll call you back." Finally done with physical therapy. She'll have a place to call home and live without a care in the world.

A trip to the mart was in order so I could get some food along with a bed for our new resident. It was a short walk from the mart to home and allowed me to explain what was going to happen. Recalling everyone was the best option so that she wouldn't be overwhelmed on arrival. Nurse joy called again to start the transfer process and hung up when I saw the ball in the machine. I thought about releasing her but waited until I went back to the mart to pick up one last item.

"Come on out!" Espeon blinked a few times to adjust to the light even though it was closer to dusk.

"Where am I?"

"On a side street only a few minutes from your new home. First, I have something to take care of." I placed her ball on the ground and stomped on it before snapping it in two.
"What are you doing!?" A look of fear quickly came across her face and I realized my dramatic stunt was a dumb idea in hindsight.

"That ball is worthless." I pulled out the Luxury Ball. "This is the ball you'll be staying in from now on. Only the best for my Pokémon. Tap the center and I'll call you back out."

"You're not going to toss it at me?"

"Considering you were previously owned and a wild Pokémon at different points, I figured I would give you a last chance to return to the wild if you had any doubts. I did the same thing with your daughter." She didn't hesitate to allow herself to get sucked in before I let her out.

"Is she ready to see me again?"

I hesitated. "Yes, but I think it would be better if you got to know the surroundings first. When you're comfortable around my parents, then I'll let you see her. You have to understand that she's not going to be there as much as you want."

"Fine," she moaned. "That ball could help me. It's very cozy in there."

"Glad to know you like it. Now let's go home."

Carrying her across the last busy stretch of the city felt right so she could get a feeling of what it would be like if she were to leave the house. She hopped down to walk the last ten minutes in the city before we were out of the downtown area. Neither of us spoke a word until we reached the front door.

"Looks like a pretty big house."

"To you, yes. This is average, but I like it. My parents did a lot to get this." I opened the door and ushered her in. They were sitting where Ampharos previously was and were watching their favorite show. "She's here!" Dad peeked over his shoulder to get a better look as Espeon trotted over to his side affectionately.

"Good girl! Let me get you some food."

Espeon looked at mom for a fraction of a second before roaming the house. Her bed was near the coffee table in the corner with a blanket for another layer, a spare water bowl was beside her while the two main bowls were in the kitchen. She just stared at her food with dad next to her.

"Um dad? I think we should let her eat alone for now," I whispered. "She may like you, but she probably doesn't trust you that much."

The sun had gone down and the three of us were enjoying the game show hour. We played along as usual while Espeon still stayed in the kitchen. During the commercials, I texted Jasmine to see if she wanted to come up tomorrow to meet everyone after they got back from work. The Pokémon League had a 24-hour call line so I put in a call to have Will stop by tomorrow when it was convenient for him. I figured Ruby should at least start her training before her body drastically changes; she won't have time or energy when the Eevee comes along.

My parents went to bed early so that they could get up for work while I stayed up later. Espeon had left the kitchen a few minutes prior to them going upstairs and hopped into her bed. She watched some shows with me until I was tired; Espeon was still wide awake.

"You'll need some sleep eventually."
"Can I turn it off when I'm done?"

"Just don't stay up too late. Goodnight!"

For the second consecutive night, I fell asleep almost instantly. Footsteps echoed throughout the house until there was silence. It didn't last long as I felt the mattress sink next to me and the quiet whimpering.

"I'm scared that something will happen to me here. I don't belong here." My eyes didn't open, but I went to pet her. She buried her head in my chest so I held her.

"Nothing will happen to you tonight. Anything bad that used to happen out there won't happen in here. My dad won't let it happen. My mom won't let it. I won't let it. She pulled the covers up and I could feel her breathing become much slower.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." I gave her a kiss on the head and she immediately fell asleep. All the stress she had before went away and her muscles loosened.

Welcome home Espeon.
Rain poured down in the early hours of the morning as my parents walked out the door. The two of us were sleeping soundly until some loose twigs were picked up by the wind and tossed against my window. Espeon stayed asleep through that plus me waking up a few hours later so I poured her food and water for when she did want to get up. The couch was still as soft as ever when I sat down on it to watch television. Today was the day to be a bum with no responsibilities.

A two-hour period to myself was enough so I called out everyone except Gyarados to roam around. They explored the entire downstairs portion but were hesitant to go near my room. I couldn't tell if they wanted to not disturb Espeon or that they were scared of her considering she could flat-out beat Will in the battle of minds. If she was raised under my care, I honestly think she wouldn't have to move a muscle when she battled. Regardless, they scattered around the house to explore until they settled down. Soft footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs.

"Good morning Mitch. Can I have some fo…" Espeon saw Furret and Growlithe near me and slowly backed up. "You... you let them out?"

"Don't worry about them. They won't bother you and neither will everyone else."

"Everyone else?" she whispered out of fear.

"Look on the bright side; your daughter is out so you can finally talk to her. I think Umbreon would be okay with you talking to her. They went into the kitchen." If he was so protective of her before, I can only imagine what he'd be like now. Ruby should keep him in check though.

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"I think you'll figure it out when you see her. Eat first though." I poked my head up from behind the couch to get whatever view I could.

They lay sleeping on the floor together with Umbreon draping a paw over her stomach. Espeon's presence was enough to wake him but not cause him to spring up and get defensive. A small conversation took place and Umbreon eventually moved aside so that she could see her daughter. One lick in and she came sprinting back to me after they talked some more.

"She's already carrying an egg!?"

"Yup." I knew her instincts were still keen. "I don't know what you three said, but I can assure you she'll be fine. I have access to the best care around and all the time in the world to stick by her. The same goes for these two by me." Furret was on her back softly snoring while Growlithe was sprawled out on the floor as she walked over to observe them.

"I can tell that they're not too far along which is normal for now. In a few more days, they'll start to get plump." She walked around to greet Ampharos then came back to me. "Love has been out of my life for so long. I'm glad that I'm seeing it on display."

I got up to scoop her on the couch and throw a fleece blanked over us. "When you finally trust my
parents, every night could be like this. Snuggling up when the weather is awful or when it's cold outside is better when you know you're willing to let your mind go."

"That day will come eventually. For now, I'll stick with this."

The afternoon rolled on with the rain stopping and the sun making an appearance to lighten the mood. My parents came home in the afternoon to everyone still milling around lazily or still on the ground napping except for me. They tiptoed upstairs to shower before coming back down.

"Good first day back honey? Feel good to just lie down and not have to worry about anything?"

"Great first day. It feels good to do nothing although cabin fever is probably around the corner. Distractions were everywhere at the Indigo Plateau so I didn't notice how much I stayed cooped up in the hotel." Espeon slowly approached both of them in the kitchen and lowered her head slowly. I could see her breathing becoming faster.

"Does she want something?"

"Pet her you guys. She did that to me when we first met." I silently cheered for her effort to get out of her shell.

Dad opted to scratch behind her ears. Mom waited for her to make eye contact. When she lowered her hand, Espeon crouched down to the ground still looking up until she couldn't look. Her eyes stayed closed until the top of her head was touched. It wasn't being pet aggressively, but she opened her eyes long enough to see that mom wasn't that bad. She got off the floor and sprinted back to my room.

"Still has a way to go. At least she likes you a lot, honey. Why don't you take her to work sometime?" Dad surprised us by immediately not going over the pros and cons. Machoke was fine, but he figured Espeon could move things along faster with minimal drawbacks.

"Maybe that's not a good idea" I warned while getting up. "She doesn't do well around strangers being wild for most of her recent life and all. One panic attack and she's got enough power to send a Snorlax from the ground floor of Sprout Tower to the top." It felt weird playing "dad" in front of him.

"You always liked to exaggerate things when it came to Pokémon, Mitch," my dad chuckled.

"I'm not kidding. I can swing by tomorrow to show everyone then call her back immediately. Concrete slabs, an army of Machoke, a Snorlax, she'll pick them up and move them effortlessly when she's calm. Until she shows that she can handle being around large groups of people regularly, she should stay at home because she's starting to love it."

My parents looked at each other and sighed. "How long will it take for her to not feel scared? We can't just keep her cooped up in a castle like some princess. We also can't control her if she does snap."

I instantly remembered how I stayed away from it all before my biggest battles. No contact with anyone else except my own Pokémon and even that was limited. Part of it was to stay focused while the other part was due to my own insecurities. I didn't want anything negative being thrown my way to dwell on when the stakes were high. It wasn't fun when I did it and I don't want to know what it could do to a Pokémon if it stayed isolated for long periods of time.

"Honestly, I don't know. That doesn't mean I'll dump her to you when I leave to go somewhere. All I need is some time since she's willing to improve. When I get her over that hump, I think she'll be
fine for the most part. There's probably a chance that she'll talk to you with telepathy to tell you if something's bothering her too. She wants you guys to love her at the end of the day."

Mom started to take out some items for dinner. "We'll be patient with her, but I'm not sure how smooth this process will be."

"As long as you don't berate her or abuse her, the transition will be smooth."

All three of us prepared a huge dinner for our first night eating together in months, if not a year. Salad, bread, mashed potatoes, corn, an a few different types of meat just fit on the table while I poured everyone's food with a bit of our food sprinkled in as a treat. We all ate quietly at the start before I opened up on about the moments the cameras didn't capture. It got a little rough when my dad chastised me for repeatedly swearing in my press conferences, but I let him continue and didn't attempt to defend myself until the end. My only response was that I meant every word. We abandoned the topic and went back to the good times until we were full.

"I'm going to bring some food up to Espeon." They went back to cleaning up as I calmly walked up the stairs. Espeon was back in my bed sleeping with one distinct mark under each eye. One step into the room was all it took for her ears to flinch before falling back down.

"One day... one day is all..." she mumbled in her sleep. "Just... need... time. Eventually. Love. Yes! Love. Home. Loving home." The gibberish continued even when I went to go back downstairs. A knock at the door got everyone downstairs out of their food coma while my mom answered the door.

"Mitch! Some people are here to see you!"

Jasmine and Will stood inside the door waiting patiently. She eventually took off her shoes and looked relaxed while Will looked like he was all business. With one look at Ruby, she got up and walked over to us.

"Both of you travelled together? Didn't you come from different directions?"

Will casually sat down at the kitchen table. "Olivine was my vacation destination after your battle with Lance. I got the call yesterday in my hotel room about you wanting my help and came over as soon as possible. Jasmine was trailing me for a bit before she caught up."

"Vacation? I could use one, especially after that battle. That night could've been far worse in a number of ways." I realized I should've kept that to myself since Xatu wasn't out. "Anyway, not a lot of time to rest before I'm on the move again. So, what will we be doing?"

He gave me a serious look. "There is no 'we' for this. Your Espeon has to do this on her own. The sun is still out so I think I can be done with her in a couple of hours."

"You expect me to believe that you can hone her skills in a few hours?"

"Nobody does at first. Look, wild psychic Pokémon like Natu are born with the basic understanding of how their powers work. Espeon in general take some time, but they get it down relatively fast. I'm here to make up for lost time. Don't get me wrong; you did a good job of getting her psychic endurance up just enough. Now's the time to unlock even more."

"And where will you be doing this?"

"Backyard. I don't care if it's a little wet."
"Then why is Jasmine here?"

She moved to the couch. "Because I wanted to meet your parents. We can talk while your Espeon does the training." Ruby went upstairs for a minute while I settled in next to her. "If anything goes wrong, we're all right here."

"Just stop it. She'll be fine," Will snapped back. "I'll be outside. We don't need too much room to work."

He worked his way around back as my parents got Jasmine a glass of water. Furret remembered her from the lighthouse and curled up on her lap. Ruby slowly made her way over to the door and was let out to start her training. The rest of us were relaxed as the warm sunlight filtered in from the outside.

"Welcome, Jasmine! Thank you for coming! We've heard a lot about you."

Mitch's home had an aura of peace and welcoming the moment he let us out. No sense of hustle and bustle despite being on the outskirts of the city, no threat of any wild Pokémon, no trainers lurking around the corner, no worrying about where to go next or if we'll make it there with our sanity, just a safe place to be. He's mentioned his home life on occasion, but this explains everything more than his words could.

Seeing my mother in the same area as me at her healthiest was something I never thought I'd see again. Everyone's parents were probably captured at one point so maybe they didn't have the connection that I did, but I can't believe I went from wanting to forget about them to being glad at least she's here. Father is a lost cause although I sense deep down she still loves him. It was an interesting sight to see her walk over to Shade and myself.

"Am I in a dream? Are you two really mates?" she mumbled as Shade started to rise.

"We are, mom. And I've never been happier. Well… a few things made me pretty happy along the way."

Shade sat in front of me obediently as if he felt my mother was going to harm me or the egg I had inside of me. This thing hasn't affected me too much aside from getting easily tired and craving dark type food but she did say that I'll know when it'll be on the way. He still was a little cautious as she stared past him.

"I honestly don't know what to think of you right now. On one hand, you couldn't convince your mate to protect her when it mattered most," he said with no emotion.

"Shade, that's enough!" I hissed at him; he didn't look back at me.

"On the other hand, you never stopped worrying about her after all this time. You also didn't fight her when you were sent out to battler her. I always ignored everything else and did my own thing until I started travelling. I don't care that you're her mother. Prove to me that I can trust you around her because I'm not letting anything else happen that doesn't need to happen." Mother took a step back.

"You can think what you want about me; I'm not going to fight you on that. I've made my mistakes and I know how bad they were. Unfortunately I wasn't strong enough to fix them back then so I've had to live with guilt ever since. You would be a fool to assume I think everything's fine just because we're literally out of the woods. I can't change the past, but I can let the future progress without me interfering. At the end of the day, she's still my daughter and I would never hurt her."
"And what if something horrible happens? Will you be prepared to live without her? She seems to be your only reason to live," he replied emotionlessly yet again.

I was starting to lose it. "Shade! What are you saying!?"

"You're right. Or should I say that you were right?" She met him nose to nose. "Do you know badly I wanted to curl up and die after our battle? Did you know that I wanted Mitch to put me out of my misery on the spot? Did you know that I still wanted to die even after I was brought in and healed? Mitch gave me another reason to live: to enjoy a life where people love me for what I am now. He delivered his end of the bargain and now I have to work on holding up my end. It will be a long road to get comfortable, but I will make progress each and every day."

The tension increased with passing second as I felt like one of them was going to snap. Shade could easily overpower her, but she wouldn't go down so easily. Their tails started wagging furiously until Shade took a deep breath and relaxed his muscles.

"Every word you said… I believe it." He slowly went to hug her. "You can stop worrying about her. Let me take care of her now. You can finally rest knowing that it would take an army to get through five other Pokémon and Mitch himself before anything would happen to her." He moved aside to let her through.

She had a relaxed look on her face as the sun worked its way in. We stared at each other while basking in the strip of warmth until she slowly knelt down next to me. Her face went from relaxed to curious and she started sniffing around furiously.

"No way you're already…" I nodded with a huge grin.

"Can I tell you what to expect? Or would you like to find out on your own?"

"Tell me mom. I want to know as much about my child as I can."

She carefully looked me over and closed her eyes. "You will have one egg. The Eevee will be smaller than usual although not as small as you when you came into this world. Lastly, it will be a healthy girl. I sense nothing wrong with her."

She licked me then sprinted over to tell Mitch. I thought she'd come back, but he scooped her up and was comforting her on the couch. Both of us remained silent, trying to digest what our future would be like with a healthy baby girl. I needed to address something else first.

"Why did you go after her like that? All she wanted to do was see me," I sternly asked my mate who was still staring at the cupboard in front of him.

Shade sighed before turning around. "Because I feel like we're back in the wild again, okay!? I don't care that we're in the safety of Mitch's house! I'm just… I'm just… scared again. I feel like I can't make a mistake with you now that there's an egg involved even though it was your mother."

The look on his face was that of internal pain. He didn't want to do what he did but based on our past together in the wild, his mindset of protecting me from any perceived threat is back even though I can handle myself. I sat up then pinned him to the ground; he didn't fight it at all. It felt odd being in control of a situation with the knowledge to back it up.

"Am I still your queen?" He nodded slowly. I gave him a long kiss like one of the many ones we shared when Mitch left us alone in the hotel room. When I was done, he was blushing furiously. "My king needs to relax. Let me show you how it's done."
I kissed him again while adjusting my body to a more comfortable position. When he tried to move, I pinned down his legs and never took my mouth off his. Only the presence of everyone else prevented us from a repeat performance of that long night together. By the time I was done, I was on top of his stomach and wrapped my front paws around his neck while resting my head on it.

"I love you Shade. When the egg hatches, we'll teach our daughter everything that Mitch taught us about how to handle life."

He slowly stroked my head and then rolled me over on my back. "And I'll tell her that her mom is the most beautiful Pokémon in the world" he whispered in my ear before softly nibbling on my neck. I returned the favor when he stopped and he let me stay on top.

"Her father is the man I will always love." We stayed like that for the rest of the afternoon until Mitch's parents came home and started to cook dinner.

Mother didn't come to dinner with us and I couldn't get inside of her head to figure out why. Maybe she was still figuring this all out considering Mitch was the only person that had no intention of turning his back on her. Should I tell her that anyone that Mitch trusts, she could trust or just let her work it out? I know she's going through a huge change and want to help, but I can't do anything if she shuts me out. A knock on the door after dinner was a surprise.

"Mitch! Some people are here to see you!" his mom yelled up.

Jasmine was looking like her usual self and Will being next to her surprised me. One look in my direction commanded my attention; he wasn't here to relax. When he didn't let up with his stare, I trotted over to join Mitch as he was talking to them. They had mentioned some training for me. What was that supposed to me? I'm carrying an egg for Arceus' sake! Will left and I was ushered out to go see him.

The backyard was a little damp from the earlier rainfall while the sun was low in the sky. Pink and orange lit up the sky as Xatu was called out to probably translate. I don't like this man for what he did during our battle, but there has to be a reason he has to train me. My mother was looking down on me from a room before turning away. Now I know that I'm in this for the long run.

"Now let's get started while the sun is still out. I told Mitch that I could help you control and potentially unlock your powers after our battle and he thought it would be a good idea for me to help. You were hell-bent on protecting his mind even though you were clearly outmatched. I'm surprised you took the abuse so well; Xatu usually can get weaker Pokémon to back off before they get injured."

"Injured?"

"Messing with the physical brain and the mind. Acute headaches, throbbing for days, disorientation, partial memory loss, permanent memory loss, just to name a few."

"Memory loss!? That's what you were going to do to me!?"

He threw his hands up. "Oh Arcues no! That's reserved for official 1-A league business only. No trainer or Pokémon in any league battle is worth that punishment. You would've been disoriented at worst. Xatu knows what to do. Anyway, I can help you protect yourself from the average psychic user and even help you get inside the opponent's head by working with you."

My head tilted in confusion. "You do I know that I'm pregnant, right? I'm not doing anything that will hurt my unborn daughter."
"What we're doing won't hurt your kit. Start by grabbing a drop of water off a leaf then bring it over to me. Consider it a warm up drill." I did as I was told and held it in front of his face. "Good. Now take another drop and combine it with this one. Do not let either one touch the ground." I sent the first drop high up while I grabbed another drop to combine with it before they hit the ground. "Definitely have the problem solving down. Good job."

"Just keep doing this?" He told me to do it until I had a decent size ball of water. I wasn't tired as he was ready to move on.

"Show the next drop to Xatu and then myself before grabbing the ball. Remember, don't let anything hit the ground. Pay attention to my cues as you continue." It felt like hours passed as I mindlessly repeated the process with each extra drop.

"Faster! Don't you dare grab more than one drop! Don't cheat on me here!" Picking up the pace didn't get me tired so Will tried a different approach. "Now hold it for a bit then split the ball into two to Xatu and I can see it."

The tempo threw me off and I started to feel weakness kick in. "What now?"

"Combine it together, grab another drop, add it to the blob, split the blob in two, hold it until my cue, and repeat. Still can't have either of them hit the ground."

I internally groaned as I could feel myself getting exhausted. Each time I threw the ball up, it started to lose its form and the height on my throw decreased. The last good attempt was when the deformed piles were at their feet before it hit the ground.

"For a Pokémon that's never done this, that was good. Next up is the main event."

"W-wait," I huffed. "Don't I get a break?"

"No. Xatu, use your left eye to bring us to the past." The world around us became distorted as we were brought back to a grassland in the dead of night with a full moon in a clear sky. "Xatu has shown me that you have shown visions of your past to him on occasion. On your own will, it's fine. When you can't control it, you're wasting energy and could force Mitch into horrible nightmares where he only sees pain and suffering from your past or anyone's past. You do this because you think Mitch can make everything better."

"But I stepped in and calmed him down! And he can make everything better!"

"That will work less as time goes on. He'll start hallucinating even when he's awake. He'll be driven to madness. Mitch is a phenomenal trainer but if he owned you the moment you evolved or if your previous trainer cared about you at least one-tenth as much as Mitch, I wouldn't have to be here."

"Then why did it only happen a few times on our journey?"

"Quiet! You'll see why." A small breeze came in the area but we didn't feel it. In fact, it was just as warm as the backyard. I saw my mother and father walk into the clearing and started to pace themselves equally apart from one another.

Mother looked very nervous about the situation. "There has to be another way. We can't leave anyone behind!" No response from my father as he started to crouch into a battle position. "You helped raise all of them and you're not willing to fight for them!? At least I am!" A grunt was his response the second time. "Then I guess I have no other choice. I'll show you how wrong you were!"
They charged in closer to the center and the went from my loving parents to feral Pokémon. Mom did her best to bite or scratch dad while he used his superior battling skills to overpower her. She couldn't even hold him with Confusion because he was too fast to lock on to. He hadn't even broken a sweat by the time the battle was reaching the end.

"No more! I don't want to see this," I huffed while trying to force myself out of Xatu's vision; I had no energy left to do anything about it. Neither of my parents heard me either. My theory about our place in this world was confirmed. We were observers with no presence.

"This is why I had you do that drill to tire you out. You are not going to ignore this. Xatu will force you to keep your eyes open if necessary." Unable to force his hand, I resigned myself to watch the rest with a knot in my stomach.

"Stay down, admit defeat, and I won't have to hurt you any more than I already have. You'll need the strength to run to a safer place," father droned with no empathy in his voice.

"I will never admit defeat when our child's lives are on the line!"

She tried to hold him in place, but Pin Missile was fired before she could gain control over the situation. Mom fell again and my loving father that tolerated my inability to win in playfights kept firing when she couldn't even roll around. He managed to place her on his back and carry her back to a berry stash.

"Eat. You won't be at full strength, but we have to get out of here." She ate silently knowing that the loss would affect the family for the rest of their lives. They walked out of sight and the world collapsed into blackness.

"Now that the first memory is taken care of, you can be at peace if you acknowledge that this is the truth. That memory was given to Xatu and myself by your mother since you didn't know what really happened until she told you. Even then, you had doubts about the validity of it."

Deep down, I was relieved that I saw this. That didn't mean I liked it. "Why would you put me through that?"

"Because if you accept this event as fact, it will help you to control your visions. Once you accept this vision, you must then accept that you cannot change the past. After that, you will no longer project this to anyone on accident. You've done well keeping it in since you learned Psychic, but one unplanned projection is one too many." I sighed as Will laid it out. He's right about me not changing the past.

"But that memory will still haunt me at times."

"As do all memories, good or bad. They will come back when certain situations occur. The thing is that you're honest about what happened and can tell others instead of hiding it or projecting it by accident. At the very least, you can talk yourself out of self-destructive behavior knowing the facts of the past and relating it to your current situation. Now… do you accept this memory as fact?"

"Yes," I noted sternly. The background faded from a black nothingness to a calming white.

"Excellent. The first memory that has been the cause of this has been dealt with. Let's move on to the second memory that is the root of the problem. Xatu!"

It wasn't shy about making his presence known in my mind as it probed away. Our background went from the white to a dimly lit room with a dirt floor. The sound of rippling water confirmed I had been brought back to my personal Hell. Only the girl that made my life a living nightmare and
I were alone in the Blackthorn Gym after my first loss. The story has been retold a number of times throughout the journey, so I was more comfortable witnessing it here.

"You stupid ball of fur! Why did you decide to evolve now of all times!?"

Those words had far less of an impact considering I wiped the floor with Sara. I even snickered at the sight of her swollen hand from slapping me. No bruises were added to my body from her abuse; she wasn't strong enough for anything I guess. Will ordered it to stop after Shade took me back to his den after killing the Noctowl.

"What did you think about that one?"

"It means less to me since I got a chance at redemption. Wiping the floor with her was validation that I was strong enough in battle."

Will shook his head. "But it means a lot because deep down, you still wish it hadn't happened. Although this memory was easier to deal with since you have worked on moving on." We were transported back to the darkness.

"Just curious; why didn't you show me the memory of Ariados?"

"Even though that memory was horrible, you accepted the fact that it happened. What's even better was that you had Umbreon to guide you through that time. The memories I showed you were when you had nobody to lean on and you still couldn't believe they happened. After you found Umbreon and then Mitch, you entered a state of mental stability that psychic Pokémon need to reach."

"How do you explain the time when I showed Mitch the rest of his team's past the night we arrived in Kanto?"

He sighed heavily. "You were a mouthpiece for them so you doubted their stories when you spoke their words to Mitch. You projected them to Mitch in an attempt to have him tell you everything was all right. Now you know more about the team, that won't be the case moving forward since you accepted those facts. Your training has one more part: questions. Do you have any?" The calming white filled the void before we returned to the present; the sun had finally gone down.

"Let me clarify: no more dangerous use of my powers at random? I will be in complete control on and off the field?"

"Complete control and you can use it to get into other people's heads or defend yours. You may not like the results of these two memories or any other ones, but you are at peace with yourself. That was the goal I wanted to achieve. The key to your previous problems was that you were fooling yourself in some manner. Psychic Pokémon aren't omnipotent, but a simple trick like pretending to forget something happened rarely works. If you do project to Mitch or anyone else, you will always be there to give a reason."

I got down on all fours and lowered my head. "Thank you. Thank you so much. I can raise my daughter without the fear of hurting her in any way. I can live my life with no worries about the past. I can only get stronger from this point on."

"Right! You can practice our drill on your own to build up endurance. Time to go inside now that you know the key to controlling your power. Mitch is the only person who can make you stronger from now on. Let's go inside to get warm."

We carefully walked to the front door to avoid mud patches with the kitchen light to guide us most of the way. The family was gathered in the living room still casually talking and the rest of the
team lay sleeping peacefully on the floor. Our presence interrupted their conversation, but they didn't seem to mind it. I hopped into Mitch's lap and embraced him by rolling around until he started to gently rub my stomach. My eyes started to close as he threw a blanket over me.

He never fails to show how much he cares about us.
Chapter 68- Family Additions

My parents were a little surprised when Will and Jasmine showed up unannounced. She made it easy on them by asking for just a glass of water although walking for hours could've warranted a meal. When asked about it, she said she wanted to enjoy the scenic route and that she wasn't in any rush. Furret was excited to see her as usual and she carefully shifted in her lap. Ruby going outside was our cue to start.

"We've heard a lot about you! How's Olivine?" Furret purred loudly as Jasmine scratched her chin.

"Good! It's actually gorgeous this time of year. More people will start to show up now that the league tournament is over. Hopefully everyone decides to go to the beach instead of the gym," she joked. "So what do you two do?"

"I work at Spout Tower as a maintenance worker. A lot of repairs to make, yet the tower is never in any real danger unless a natural disaster is involved. Some of the visitors have told me stories about how a giant Bellsprout used to be at the center centuries ago."

"And I work for the tower as well, but in an office. My Aipom helps me out." I was nervous about her releasing it in front of Furret or any of my other Pokémon until I saw it paid them no mind. It extended its tail for a shake. "Not really a battler since it prefers helping out, but that's fine with me. My husband's Machoke stays at the tower most of the time. So, tell us more about yourself."

Jasmine dominated the conversation as she went into the life of a gym leader. Between the check-ins with the league office, training classes, leader meetings, and her personal life, I was amazed she had any time for me in the first place. A small break after the Silver Conference was something every leader needed. I jumped in only when I wasn't trying to read my parents' facial expressions. The consensus was that they liked her, but weren't overly-ecstatic about her. Better that than them not liking her.

Ruby and Will returned just after the sun went down. Espeon trotted over and hopped in my lap to get comfortable. She was exhausted, yet had a huge smile on her face while I rubbed her stomach. If she was this happy now, I could only imagine how happy she was when I took her in or that night alone with Umbreon. I turned to Will with a grin on my face.

"Looks like you did do it in a few hours."

"Told you," Will said while casually shrugging his shoulders. "Now that she's up to speed, everything from this point is on you. The way I see it, you're the only one holding her back. Her future looks bright with the newborn as well. I'm honestly happy for you."

An idea popped into my head. "Can Xatu show me the future or at least see it? I know it can work with the past." Will gave me an evil stare.

"That is something that no person should ever mess with. I did it only once when I was young and the results weren't good."

"What happened?" He was conflicted on how to answer, but mumbled to himself until he was
"I could show you the future and three likely outcomes will occur. You'll hate your future and do everything to avoid it, you'll love it and do anything to achieve it, or in a foolish attempt to balance pros and cons, want to change the path to a different future. In all three cases, you will change your future more than you think because you'll fail to consider the variety of other factors from making one decision."

"I don't follow."

"You don't follow!? Are you that dense?" Will stopped himself and took deep breaths. "Sorry about that outburst. It's been a long day. Anyway, let's hypothetically say that I told you that you were going to lose your winnings in two days. How much would your routine change? A lot I bet. Think about what would happen in your life as a result of me telling you this as a fact."

He's right. I'd be more likely to stay home or leave the house with zero motive to spend any money. Then I'd start to lose sleep because I'd like to keep that money and do everything to prevent losing it. Losing sleep would lead to me being tired and angry which leads to me taking it out on my Pokémon or Jasmine. Oh Arceus… a domino effect that gets exponentially worse.

"Now I regret asking."

"That was my goal. Xatu doesn't need to tell me that your future is leaning to the brighter side. Have you thought about Lance's job offer? We all had a say in whether or not you'd get the offer. But until then, you'll probably be busy with promotions and some other league business."

I looked down at Ruby in my lap and Furret in Jasmine's lap. "Maybe after these two have had some time to raise their kits."

"Lance will make time for you whenever you're ready to talk to him." He snuck a peek at the clock but opted to rest as we continued talking. When the clock hit 9:30, he got up to leave. "My work here is done and I'm rested up. Hopefully I'll see you around."

"You need a place to stay tonight?" my mom asked remembering he walked from Olivine.

"No thank you ma'am. I'm all set with lodging." The door closed and we realized how tired we were.

My parents went to their room for the night leaving us to watch television until we were starting to fall asleep. Espeon had curled up in the bed I bought her while I took Ruby and Furret up to my room. Umbreon came up shortly while Growlithe and Ampharos were long gone. The realization that they're getting time off is finally setting in; not sure if they'll be mentally ready to battle when the time comes. Another spare blanket was grabbed on the way down in addition to a soft set of pajamas for her.

"Comfy, Jasmine? Need anything else?"

She let out a long yawn and shut off the television. "I'm all set. Now I see where you got some of your kindness from. Glad to know it runs in the family down to the Pokémon too."

"The swearing and hot-headedness is something I figured out on my own. Don't forget the fact that I prefer a more brutal battling style when anyone tries to injure someone I really care about." She closed her eyes after adjusting herself.

"You're not the only trainer that acts like that. By the way, would you like to come to Olivine
tomorrow? I do owe you a date at my favorite café and I keep my promises."

I kissed her forehead. "I don't see why not. Then I can meet your parents."

A small smile formed on her face. "Dad's a little… rough around the edges. You'll be fine with my mom because I told her a lot more about you minus the times we slept together."

"What do you mean by 'rough around the edges' when it comes to your dad?"

"He's been sailor for 25 years and has no plans to retire anytime soon. I'm still 'daddy's little girl' to him."

"Meh, I'll keep an open mind. Goodnight, see you tomorrow morning. Help yourself to anything if my parents don't make you breakfast first."

Jasmine quickly fell asleep after I turned the lights off downstairs. The rain picked up again as I got ready for bed. Furret scampered back downstairs to push Growlithe closer to the couch before falling asleep for good at her feet. Ever since I let her sit in Jasmine's lap during the night Cory almost stole Amphy, Furret has seen Jasmine more as her mother than just another person. Maybe she'll gravitate to her instead of me over the next week or so.

Umbreon rubbed against my leg while I dug through my closet for an extra pillow to give to Ruby. She was sleeping, but I quickly slid it under her head for support. He gave me a head tilt in response.

"Well buddy, another day in the books. We're heading out again tomorrow but that doesn't mean you can't rest." I scratched behind his ears. "Hope you're ready to be a dad soon. Come to think of it, I need to make room for the two eggs somehow. Maybe I'll deal with that another time. Get some sleep."

The entire house slept peacefully as the rain picked up throughout the night. Clouds covered the sky the next morning when I woke up even through the rain had stopped. Being the last one up in a house full of Pokémon and people made me laugh internally. How did none of my Pokémon wake me up? Jasmine or my parents could've done it too but they figured I wanted to sleep in. Jasmine was still in my pajamas when I made my way downstairs.

"Your parents left some pancakes on the table after we ate. I also told them that you may be coming back with me."

"Yes! Pancakes!" They added berries to a few of them and I had no problem scarfing them down. After everyone else was fed, the older Espeon pawed at me.

"I overheard your dad about taking me to work. Can we go today?" An unusual request considering she wasn't even comfortable at home. Keeping busy might distract her from the fact that she'll be around strangers on the way over and inside the tower. It was only 9:00am so most of the rush hour traffic and foot traffic was over. Exploring the city would be good for her confidence too.

"Only for a visit. Just stay by my side."

"But I want to work. It sounds like fun!"

"We'll see when we get there. Let me get your ball before we head out." Jasmine opted to stay behind until I came back.
Violet City's north side was more crowded as usual with a class field trip going on for those who were going to register as trainers in the next few weeks. A few younger students were sprinkled in and they were taking notes while the teachers were going over the history of Sprout Tower. For anyone applying under the age limit, every bit of information helps for the written portion of the test.

Finding my dad would be simple because his department worked on the lower two floors and they were out in the open behind some caution tape. Established workers had the perk of working in a somewhat stable environment and most of the rookies or slackers worked higher up where the battles took place. More frequent upkeep was needed so they wouldn't have too much time to rest. Espeon wouldn't see it that way considering she wanted to stay busy. We spotted him preparing to swap a broken Bellsprout statue for a new one.

"Hey dad! Got a minute?" He wasn't the foreman in the group of green vest workers, but his veteran status gave him some leeway to take a quick break without getting teased.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were going to Olivine." Espeon stared at him before turning to the statue. "Didn't you say that bringing her here was a bad idea?"

I scratched behind her ear. "She coaxed me into it. I'm willing to bet she can easily carry the broken statue to its new spot."

"My boss needs to know about this. Wait right here." Espeon continued to look around before pawing at my leg.

"Should I talk to your dad?"

"Not to rag on him, but I don't think he knows how well Pokémon understand human speech. Do whatever is comfortable for you but I recommend that you do it at home first so if he starts freaking out, it's just limited to the house." A man in an orange vest game back with him looking intrigued.

"Son, this is my boss. Mister Peterson, this is what I was talking about last week."

"Ah yes, the Espeon," he hummed while looking over her. "This Pokémon can carry our broken statue behind that sliding door across the room without causing any more damage? We've already had to bring out four new ones this week and the floors had to be repaired twice as a result." The labeled door was big enough to fit a normal-sized statue and the crew carrying it.

"Battling isn't really her thing but she could probably throw a Snorlax to the top." We attracted the attention of the rest of the crew and they came over after someone spread the claim to everyone else.

"While that may be true, the statues here vary in size and weight. The broken one over there weighs just over 1,000 pounds," Peterson noted while Espeon slowly walked over to the statue to size it up. "Fine. Your dad wouldn't give me an idea if he thought if it would fail so quickly. If this goes wrong, you're on the hook for the repair bill. We save the statues as long as we can so another department can fix 'em up. Alrighty guys, clear the way!"

Espeon circled the statue one last time before getting behind it. She slowly lifted it off the ground and started to adjust it in midair so it wouldn't bump into anything. True to Will's assessment back at the Indigo Plateau, carrying the statue looked nearly effortless for her. A few jaws dropped as she slowly walked past the crew into the storage area and placed it in an empty spot where it could be worked on later. She caught her breath before turning to me.
"Did I do that right?" I didn't want to risk knowing I could clearly understand her in front of everyone so I had her lie down so I could rub her stomach.

"Good job Espeon!"

Whistling and clapping came from anyone who saw the display. Even dad couldn't believe how easy she handled the workload of an entire crew with no safety or supporting equipment. Machoke or Machamp can move heavy objects easily with some help except they lack the finesse that Espeon could provide so the workers act as support. If she could stay happy while working, a lot more could get done in a day.

"That was ridiculous," someone muttered. "Anyone else think that thing's not a normal Pokémon?"

"Back to work now that the show is over!" Peterson barked. "You two, my office, now."

We followed him back to a small room with a desk, two chairs that had seen better days, a storage closet, and a computer that was arguably older than me. Espeon looked at me as he went digging around for something.

"Someone didn't like what I did? They thought I wasn't a normal Pokémon?"

"That's actually a compliment," I mentally relayed back. "It means you're stronger than what they thought. I think you'll be getting something from the boss." A hard hat was given to me.

"I still don't believe what I just saw. That can't be a fluke either; no Pokémon can fake lifting that much weight without getting injured. Hell, she doesn't even look that tired. Put this on Espeon's head and leave her with your dad for the rest of the day. Let me do the paperwork and order her a custom vest. Welcome to the team!"

We made our way back to the public area where the crew was getting ready to set up the new statue. Espeon got another round of applause with the hard hat on. Dad was excited to see that the pitch to his boss worked out. I told him the instructions for how she would work and handed him her ball so that if things got too rough for her, he could force her to take a break.

"This hat is annoying. Do I really need it?"

"Accidents happen when you least expect them. Besides, your new family wouldn't like it if you got hit on the head."

Her head sharply tilted. "My new family? I thought your family was my family."

"It's a figure of speech; you can have more than one 'family'. The point is that these guys will help you when you need it and no matter how mean they sound, they won't stay mad at you for too long. Now that has been taken care of, I have to get going."

"Well… I guess this is goodbye for now. One day I'll be comfortable enough at home and at work so that I don't have to act shy or be scared. Today was a good start. Thank you for everything." I left her with dad and took off for home.

After explaining everything to Jasmine, I rounded up my Pokémon and repacked my bag for the shorter journey to Olivine. Carrying a backpack not bursting at the seams was more satisfying the longer we walked. It was mid-afternoon by the time we reached Ecruteak City and based on our current pace, getting to Olivine by sundown wasn't looking too good. I called a cab to pick us up outside the west entrance after she looked up it would take only half an hour to get there by car.
We dozed off together with her using me as a pillow as the cab whizzed by the seemingly endless row of trees. The sight of the ranch while heading south indicated we were just outside the city limits. Our driver had to wait for some Miltank to cross the road along with their farmhand trying to catch up in the distance before we were dropped off at the gym.

"Home sweet home," Jasmine said with a smile on her face. "I'm going to drop my things off and then we can walk to the café I was talking about." She changed into a light jacket and jeans before coming back out with a pocket map of the city. "I'll tell you more about Olivine after we get to the Stowaway Café."

Roaming the city holding hands caught a lot of the locals by surprise. I wasn't sure if it was one of those situations where it felt like the city was rooting for her to be in a relationship but the number of double takes led me to believe that. An elegant sign for the Stowaway Café was atop the light blue building. Even the young hostess gave us a long look over while Jasmine took out her gym ID badge.

"Captain's quarters for two please if it's available."

"Right this way. Nobody has had a reservation for that room in months."

We were led to an enclosed elevated patio room with a glass windows on three sides that allowed us to face the ocean, the beach, and the inside of the café. A brick wall was on the left and a sliding glass door on the right; it was open and a screen was in place so that bugs wouldn't make their way in. A private dock slightly jutted out on the right side and there were stairs to go to a fenced off part of the beach to that dock giving our area a sense of privacy. The only people that could potentially see us on the patio would be from ships, beachgoers until a certain point, or patrons from behind the sliding doors. Only one circular table with an umbrella overhead and two cushioned chairs graced the intimate space aside from the traditional table setup. A small salty breeze complimented the nice weather.

"Stowaway Café is gorgeous, isn't it?"

"Even without the private balcony it looks nice. And you just come here whenever you want?"

"Only when things get rough." She looked down and twiddled her thumbs. "After you left the lighthouse the morning after our gym battle, I started to come here more often than I liked and it wasn't for food," she mumbled.

I wasn't touching that topic since it sounded like she accidently let that out. "How did you hear about this place?"

"My parents met here when the company ship that my dad worked on was forced to stay in port. It was a stormy day so everyone was huddled inside but there were a few open seats at the counter. They pretended not to notice each other for the first few minutes until he made the first move. When the storm was over, she gave him her address and here we are now."

That sounded much better than the time we met. "What did you tell them about the time we met?"

"We met up after the Olivine tournament and it was by chance. He was upset about what happened in the finals but he understood why you did what you did." Thank Arceus she was smart enough to omit the rest of the story and do a good job of dodging any more questions all this time. "Panini or wrap? Those are made better than the sandwiches if you ask me; more filling too."

"Panini. Scratch that, three cheese panini. Soup for a side is a good idea too."
"Order whatever you want. My treat!"

The rest of the meal went smoothly as we stayed away from heavy topics. Her map of the city was marked with shortcuts and scribbles that only she could decipher. From what I gathered, the docks were always busy with businesses shipping items or people taking their boats out for an afternoon. Anyone going west of the Pokémon Center would see the beach until a cliff met the ocean. If I were to stay in the city on my own, the northeast side would be ideal. It's the quieter part of town and that's where she lived.

"You think your parents are home now? It's almost 5 o'clock." She paid the bill and got up.

"They should be. We can go see them now or wait until tomorrow when you're rested up." No turning back now. "Let's go meet them."

The sky turned orange on the way to her parent's house. More people saw us near the lighthouse but disregarded our hand holding in favor of an autograph. It was the first time I mindlessly scribbled my name on everything shoved in my face because I wanted to get there as soon as possible. A few stragglers followed us out of the crowd but Jasmine took me down roads that I would've doubted until we ended up at their front door.

"Mom! Dad! I'm home," she yelled over her knocking. Heavy footsteps approached the door; not what I wanted to hear.

"There's my baby! How are you doing sweetheart?" her dad asked enthusiastically.

Being on a ship moving cargo around is bound to make a person strong. This man was toned to say the least. Add in the fact that he's roughly 6'2", 230 pounds give or take and anyone could see that he wasn't someone to mess with.

"Great! This is my boyfriend I was talking to you about." His cold eyes looked me over then he stepped outside.

"Him? I thought he'd look… tougher. He doesn't look strong." I was tempted to tell him that he didn't look like a sailor because he wasn't wearing a uniform from a Saturday morning cartoon.

"Pleasure to meet you," I said while extending my arm for a handshake. His grip almost crushed my hand but I didn't show any outward signs of discomfort.

"At least you know how to shake someone's hand. Follow me," Jasmine rubbed her forehead in frustration as he started to walk down the street. We silently followed him to the gym where it was getting ready to be locked up for the night. A video board indicated that there were no challenges scheduled for tomorrow either so I didn't feel too bad about potentially tearing up the field. He told her to go back home and stay there until he came back. The scoreboard came to life with the snap of his fingers.

"Why didn't you ask me for a battle back at the house? I would've accepted it."

"Because this is only place in the city I can battle anyone that might think about causing my daughter problems."

What an utter load of crap. "Is that so?" What are the rules?"

"You're the Silver Conference champion; big deal. Must've been nice having the world at your fingertips the entire time. I've been on the seas long enough to know that if you're weak, you're
dead. If you're not resourceful with your items, you're dead. Show me how you do against a person who doesn't fear the ocean. We'll use one Pokémon each. Go Gyarados!

My own Gyarados was still recovering from his injection so he was out. Ampharos could demolish it in one hit, but that'd be too easy so I think Umbreon would be the best choice since it's about brute force. I get the whole protective father routine, but this is bordering on ridiculous. I feel sorry for anyone else that went through this and want to beat the very first guy that caused her dad to act like this.

"Come on! Where's your Gyarados? Send it out," he snarled.

"Gyarados is recovering. Umbreon will be your opponent." It materialized looking loose after a few days off.

"Don't mock me with this thing! I don't think it could swim a meter away from the shoreline."

Umbreon went from loose to putting its game face on; big mistake on her dad's part to insult it so openly.

"Brute force is the name of the game, right? Umbreon can dish out some punishment and take it. I'm not some pretty boy either. What I experienced on my journey gave me the tools to protect anything or anyone I want. Not all strength is physical."

I looked to the judge's area and a robot came from underneath the field. An older assistant came from the back office and entered the settings for our battle before going into the stands to formally register out battle in the scoreboard's memory for later. The robot came to life and signaled the start of the battle.

"Start with Hydro Pump!" How long it took to fire off the attack told me all I needed to know about my opponent; it inhaled a lot slower than mine did.

"Easy dodge Umbreon!" Gyarados took a lot longer to stop the flow of water and adjust as well. Umbreon was so used to our opponents being fast that he dodged and looked at me with his head tilted wondering if it was worth it to put in all his effort. "Faint Attack into Bite. Just keep doing that until it faints. It's just a normal battle," I calmly explained to him. No need to accelerate his condition by telling him that if I lose, I'll be hated by him for the entire time I'm with Jasmine or he'll run me out of town.

"Use your own Bite!"

Umbreon hadn't skipped a beat and easily outmaneuvered Gyarados at every turn. The hits he landed weren't as hard as the ones in the tournament, but he sent a message that making fun of him was a bad move. Her dad was scrambling to get a solid hit off every time Umbreon rushed in. Gyarados' breathing was labored as it tried to keep up or fire off powerful Hydro Pumps while moving; its conditioning wasn't great compared to any of my Pokémon.

"Wrap it up with Quick Attack!" Umbreon rammed into its chest for the final blow and sent it toppling to the ground.

"Gyarados is unable to battle. Umbreon is the victor," the robot droned. "Upload to server complete. Powering down."

"Oh no you don't!" The sudden outburst made the assistant jump in her seat. "You're not getting off that easy." He continued to argue with the assistant about rebooting it up when she wanted to go home.
I wanted to tell him off, but I had to take it if I wanted any chance of being accepted or at least have a neutral relationship with him. I recalled Umbreon and came up with a way to weasel my way out of the situation.

"Do you have any more Pokémon?"

"Of course I do! Employed sailors are required to have at least four when we're working. One of them has to be able to handle the ocean currents if something happens to us."

"Is Gyarados your strongest Pokémon?"

He was starting to see what I was getting at. "Yes," he said intriguingly. Not the tone I was looking for; I wanted a hint of defeat in his response.

"If your Gyarados can't beat my Umbreon, what hope do your other Pokémon have against the rest of my team?"

It took every ounce of effort to not tip my hand because I can't even use half my team. I don't even know if he's being honest by saying Gyarados is his strongest. Luckily for me, he didn't decide to push his luck and had me follow him home. Some people wanted a quick photo but I told them I wasn't Mitch to get everyone that was downtown off my back for tonight. Jasmine was ready to go back out after I quickly talked with her mom. She apologized for her husband's behavior after he went upstairs although that didn't make me feel any better.

Olivine's beaches started to lose lifeguards and beachgoers left with the sun going down so we decided to take a stroll on the beach starting from the Pokémon Center. Just the two of us holding hands walking along the shoreline felt right after not being able to do it the first time. Back then I was a Mareep among the flock so I had no pressure to be myself. How quick a person's life could turn around with one event.

Walking to the lighthouse was the next on the list after the sun had gone down. The city felt even more inviting with the streetlights on and the occasional warm ocean breeze. Pidgey lined the telephone poles when we got closer so Magnemite had to be called out if one of them didn't appreciate our company; they figured it wasn't worth the effort to bother us. Amphy was enjoying his last minutes of being lazy as the emergency beacon was already going after we arrived at the top.

"Come here Amphy! I brought back a friend." Its ears perked up.

"No Amphy. Be a bum for as long as you can," I joked. It tackled me to the ground and licked me until I sat back up. "Long time no see!" Furret's ball was being poked at after Jasmine got things ready for his shift.

"Amphy wants to see the Pokémon that saved him last time. He'll know not to be rough with her."

Furret enjoyed being back inside the large room with everyone. True to form, she walked to Jasmine and motioned to be held; Amphy patted her head as a sign of thanks. Jasmine let her down to set up two beanbag chairs on the balcony above the light in addition to a radio.

"Want to stargaze?"

"Sure. Seems like a beautiful night for it."

She found a good music station to listen to before sitting down to look beyond the horizon. Clouds occasionally rolled in as the night went on although they were thin. I stared to doze off when she
"Thanks for coming down here for the day. Sorry about my dad dragging you through that. Unfortunately, he's a little too protective of our family."

"You weren't kidding when you said he was rough around the edges. His battling was rough compared to a lot of trainers at the tournament too."

Her head thumped against the back of the chair in frustration. "Who did he use?"

"Gyarados. I think he hoped I would use mine."

"He was being generous with you; Starmie was the first Pokémon he ever had. Maybe it was tired from work today or something."

"Planned option or not, I beat him."

"I don't want you to worry about him too much," she said while rubbing my hand. "But I think you should stay here tonight while I go to my apartment. Wouldn't surprise me one bit if he stopped by tomorrow morning to see if you stayed with me. None of that changes how much I love you."

"And I love you too. Maybe his attitude will change over time." I hope that time comes sooner rather than later.

It was past midnight when we decided to call it a night. She declined my offer to walk her home to my surprise but I didn't fight her on it. Her bed was as comfortable as last time and I fell asleep instantly. I quietly left the city in the morning to head home.

Violet City school administrators worked with the Pokémon League to get me involved with a clinic at the trainer's school the day after I returned. The hiatus needed to come to an end at some point and now my obligations as champion begin. Most of it will probably be community service with a sponsorship or two thrown in so it's not anything I won't like. If I wanted so schedule something on my own, I'd think the league would be fine with it.

It was spread out over two days and I started in the auditorium to share my experience of travelling. Keeping out the rough parts was for the best as I didn't want to discourage the younger kids. A healthy dose of reality was dished out though; nobody deserves to think the trainer life is entirely sunshine and rainbows. Each grade level got their own personalized lesson plan that I helped the teachers design when I got the call.

Growlithe and Ampharos were the stars of the school over the two days, especially among the younger kids. I was the first time I wasn't worried about letting Ampharos poke them because every kid enjoyed it. Ampharos looked like she wanted to be the class Pokémon by the time we were done with all the attention thrown at her.

Sages from Sprout Tower from the school invited me to a meditation session after the clinic to give me a glimpse into their lifestyle. The experience was odd considering I had a hard time clearing my mind from all distractions. I left the tower feeling rejuvenated with the prospect of an unknown future ahead. My phone rang on the way home.

"Hello?"

"Hey Mitch! Would you like to come to Olivine for a speech tomorrow? My dad figured it would be good if you talked to everyone that works in the shipyard." Three days later he's good with me?
"I'm not buying it until I see him again. Although, I don't mind motivational speaking."

"Sure. Is there a chance I can stay overnight tonight?"

"Of course! We can talk more when you get here. Goodbye!" Nobody was home when I got back so I waited for everyone to get off work. Espeon sprinted over to me as soon as my dad cracked the door open.

"Hey girl! Have a good day at work?"

"Yeah! I got to move another statue and help build another one. My nickname is 'utility belt' or something like that." That's a huge compliment. She would be so much happier there if she understood colloquial workplace language or at least started relaying those things to mom and dad.

"She's already a company favorite," my dad chimed in. "Just to be safe, we're putting her in an office environment one day a week to give her some rest until she's used to the constant workload."

"Makes sense. Just a heads up, I'm going to Olivine now; it's for a gig." He wrote a note for mom and wished me well before going to take a nap.

I took the quiet walk to Ecruteak before calling a cab for the rest of the journey. About halfway to Olivine, Espeon materialized in the back seat. Our driver slammed on the breaks when he saw the light fading from her body; I had to clench her neck to keep her from flying forward.

"What the hell man!? You can't just call out a Pokémon like that!"

"But I didn't! It was…" I saw her stomach had gotten bigger compared to when I last called her out. "Oh shit. Sir, my Espeon…"

"Call it back or you'll have to get out," he calmly yet sternly requested.

"I can't call her back bec…"

"Then get out!" His yelling escalated the situation and Ruby started to jump all over the place. I did my best to wrangle her while yelling over the noise she was making.

"If you just listen…"

"Nope!" He got out and threw my door open. "Get out or I'll make you two get out!"

Cab driver or not, he threatened Ruby and I was willing to give him a piece of my mind. Luckily for him, she ran back the way we came so my attention shifted to her. My luck balanced out because he left; guess he figured the money wasn't worth it. Umbreon caught up to her after I let him out since I was left in the dust. All of us regrouped at the skid marks. Tears streamed down her eyes.

"What was that about?"

"Nothing. He was just being an asshole." Umbreon got her emotions back in check enough so she wouldn't become disoriented. She also looked like she was going to fall asleep any second. "We're probably closer to Olivine than Ecruteak. It's going to get dark before we know it. Umbreon, you stay out. Espeon, you're not walking; I'm carrying you. Even if I called for an ambulance, I don't know how to describe our location. My phone isn't even getting a signal so let's move."

"I'm carrying her," Umbreon spat back. "That's not up for debate."

"Fine. If we have to fight, I'll use Ampharos to paralyze everything. Berries are around to fix that,
"Don't know, don't care. Give her to me so we can get going."

Afternoon turned to dusk on the lonely road to Olivine. A few wild Pokémon were intrigued at our predicament along the way. Glowing rings were enough to send them scampering almost every time. A pack of Meowth didn't budge when the rings forced them to shield their eyes. The sight of Ampharos' body crackling with electricity was enough for them to retreat slowly. Espeon was starting to moan in pain a lot more than usual and Umbreon couldn't keep her steady on his back. Giving her up was something he didn't want to do and he snarled when he handed her to me.

We spotted a few lights in the distance after the sun had gone completely down with the smell of manure throughout the cool night air. Espeon rolled around in my arms and was only taking deep breaths from the time we saw it to the time I knocked on the front door.

"Is anyone in there? Hello? Please! We need some help!" I kept pounding the door until my knuckles turned bright red. "No! No! No! Fuck! Come on! The lights are on dammit!" I pounded until both hands were numb. Footsteps thumped to the door and it swung open after I dropped to my knees.

"Quit your yapping! I was… Mitch? That you?"

"Nick… help, please," I sobbed. "My Espeon's going into labor and I don't know what to do. How much pain is she really in? Is everything alright?" The look on his face changed from confused to serious in a heartbeat.

"Calm down son; this isn't the first time someone came to us for this. Laura! Marybeth! Get some blankets and meet me in the shed!" he yelled upstairs.

"Another Miltank is ready?"

"Just get the usual stuff!"

He led me to a large shed that looked something like a hospital room on the inside when he adjusted the light so it wasn't too bright. A padded bed was neatly organized and next to a medical monitor. The interior was insulated although not entirely climate controlled. Nick switched everything on while Espeon thrashed around trying to find a position that didn't cause her pain.

"Now son, I'm going to give her a shot to help her relax. It'll take some time to kick in but don't worry. This machine will keep us in the loop over time and it's hooked up to a generator. She's gonna be just fine."

Laura and Marybeth walked in with blankets, food, water, a small fan, a tiny space heater, and a spare power strip. Umbreon looked like he was going to blow the place up with all the commotion until Espeon begged him to come over by her side.

My mate ran pretty fast for being pregnant after the idiot cab driver kicked us out. Mitch sending me to chase her was the best thing he could've done since he'd probably make it worse. Just when I thought he had the situation under control, he said he was going to carry her. No; he's not screwing anything else up.

Pokémon came out from the trees to get a glimpse of what was going on with Ruby. Brightening my rings was more than enough for them to scram. Ampharos needed to remind a pack of Meowth that this wasn't the time to pick a fight with us and for her, I am grateful.
Our trek became harder with Ruby becoming more uncomfortable. She nearly fell after every five steps I took and I was forced to hand her over to Mitch where he would give her more support; I wasn't happy about giving her up. I almost went after him when her condition started to get worse but we found a place to ask for help. Him pleading at the door wasn't making the situation better and I wanted to slap him across the face to get him to shut up. The familiar old man answering the door made me sigh in relief; he knew how to make things right.

"Shade. Shade! Please… come here," she strained. "It hurts Shade. It hurts so much even after the shot. Make it stop!" The only thing I could think of was to kiss her and rub her head softly.

"You're doing great Ruby. I'm right here. Drink some water." She lapped up as much water as possible and started to doze off a few minutes later. "Looks like the shot is working. How are you feeling?"

"Better, but it still hurts."

Mitch and I watched the older farmers wire her up with sensors. She looked more comfortable on her side as the little girl gently rubbed her swollen stomach; I reluctantly gave her a pass since Ruby didn't seemed bothered.

"Alrighty Marybeth, we gotta leave. Let them have their privacy," the old woman sternly ordered.

"Do you think I could stay here?" Mitch nervously asked. I know it's a little cramped, but I'll be fine.

"You okay with that? We have a guest room or could at least get you a chair."

"I'm fine. I can use my bag as a pillow while on the floor or sleep against the wall."

"Well if you feel like changing your mind, we'll give you a house key so you can come in at any time."

Ruby was in a stable condition although the discomfort was obvious at this point. Her machine had a clock and allowed Mitch to remind her to eat or drink every so often. It got to the point where I started to get nervous at the sound of the leaves blowing in the wind. Then the paranoia that she was in danger consumed me even though I was next to her. My eyes frequently darted from her to the door to look for wild Pokémon. Mitch didn't even try to comfort her after I lashed out at him the first time he went to pet her.

The process continued long into the night as she tried to sneak in a few minutes of sleep. Mitch never left his spot against the wall and constantly moved his arms and legs to stay awake. All of us were running on fumes until she let out a loud scream.

"Come on Ruby," I whispered. "You're almost there." I massaged her head in an attempt to take her mind off the pain; she flailed the other way then back again.

"Hurt… it hurts." She threw her front legs at me and wrapped around mine for dear life. "No more," she squeaked." Her claws dug into my flesh as the pain amplified.

"Keep your breathing steady. Deep breaths."

"Get Mitch. I want Mitch."

As much as I didn't like him in the shed with us, she needs him. Mitch looked like he had no intention of falling asleep despite his eyes looking heavy. He scratched her chin while she
squeezed the life out of his arm. He scratched behind my ears with his free hand.

"Holding up buddy? You've been busy all night keeping her calm." A switch inside of me flipped when he opened his mouth. He was as stressed as I was, yet he still found at least a drop of empathy for my situation. I don't think he knew how close I was to attacking everyone else.

Ruby soon let out a long scream followed by short breaths; her claws dug into Mitch's skin until the egg was out. She collapsed on her side and didn't move until Mitch pushed over her food and water. Even then, he had to feed her.

"Egg… Shade… our egg. Our daughter," she whispered with a smile. "I want to hold her." Moving the egg a few inches to her stomach was probably the most stressful thing I've ever done up to this point. "Mama's right here with daddy," she said while cradling it.

I gave her a passionate kiss. "I love you Ruby."

"And I love you too."

Mitch softly stroked her from head to tail. "You did great, Espeon. Such a good girl," he cooed. "Umbreon's such a good mate too."

He grabbed the clean blankets and covered her up to the neck. He also plugged in the space heater since the temperature had dropped a lot since our arrival. Rain started to fall outside but it didn't matter because we were protected from the elements. Hell, we were protected from everything in this shed. She fell asleep almost instantly holding a smile while I moved in front of her. I was upset that I was falling asleep but I embraced the blanket Mitch threw on me. The last thing I saw before he dimmed the lights was him sitting in front of us facing the door.

I knew nothing bad was going to happen to us for the rest of the night.
Chapter 69- Moving Forward

The night went by a lot faster after Umbreon helped cradle the egg against Espeon's side at 4:30 in the morning. After that, any tension vanished. Sure, the rain was coming down, the wind was howling, and the threat of wild Pokémon coming through the door still existed but I had a clear head knowing the hard part was over. Our makeshift hospital room was safe from the elements and I was facing the door ready to react. Anyone or anything coming through it wouldn't be given much time to leave except the family. Nick walked in at 6:30 to check on us before starting his work for the day. He brought me a large canteen filled with water to drink.

"She doin' okay? Looks like they're both sleeping fine too." Espeon still had a smile on her face despite Umbreon's hind leg pressed up against her cheek and sleeping on his back.

"Yeah, it's all good. Thanks again for taking us in."

"Oh stop," he teased. "Not a problem. Laura's gonna come by with more stuff soon. Need anything else from me?"

"Actually…” I felt bad thinking about it, but he urged me. "My Furret's in the same boat. She's expecting an egg in a few days but she's not out of her ball yet. I think I can make it to town and keep her in the Pokémon Center." He looked down in thought unsure what to say until he figured it out.

"You can come back here if you want. We wouldn't mind helping you when the time comes either. I'm sure some people all the way up at the league could handle a day or two of farm work while we help."

"You can call for help? Why don't you do it more often?" He let out a long laugh.

"Our family's been on this farm for generations so we know how to do it better than anyone! The fella you sent sure has a lot to learn. We still love him though; nice guy with a good work ethic. He wanted to tell you that his name was Tony since he never introduced himself to you." I'm surprised that he actually took my offer and even more surprised that they took him in. That must've been an interesting job interview.

"I see. Well, we're going to Olivine later today so until then, I'll stay out of your way."

Nick put his hand on my shoulder. "I'll have Tony and my wife drive you to Olivine. No more walking for a bit, okay? The rain stopped, but the terrain isn't looking that smooth." He stared at the two sleeping before looking back at me. "Now that everyone's movin' around, no wild Pokémon should be comin' in here. Umbreon could probably handle anything that is dumb enough to stick around." He left the room after picking up a pair of work gloves.

Laura came in an hour later with food, water, fresh blankets, and an incubator for the egg for when it's time to travel again. It sucked to nudge them awake, but the smell was starting to become intolerable. Even the fan wasn't working well enough. Espeon looked like she was in a trance the entire time she was awake before going back to sleep. I don't think she even knew it was Laura that fed her.
"I'm glad to see everyone is doing well," she whispered.

"Me too. It wasn't easy, but she's a tough cookie."

"Just like her, you need some rest."

"I'm fine, really."

"Do you know how long you've been up, hon?" I did the math internally.

I woke up around 9:00 am yesterday and the machine said 7:30 am; 22 hours and 30 minutes of being awake. Not necessarily focused, but awake nonetheless. Adrenaline once again proving why it's the best substance known to mankind.

"Okay, fine. You got me there. Can I use your phone to make a call? I'm not sure mine has service on the ranch but I haven't checked."

"Hon, just go inside," she pleaded. "Make the call then go to bed. Leave your Pokémon here if you don't want to bring them in the house. You need to sleep too and we'll check in on them. Trust us." A look over my shoulder to them sleeping was enough to convince me to cave in.

Their house was small yet cozy with a living room, small kitchen, dining room, basement, and four bedrooms upstairs. I managed to get one bar on my phone, but figured it would be better to call from the landline instead of risking the call dropping or the text not going through. I had second thoughts when I saw the old rotary phone on the kitchen wall. I'd like to think the league can do better for them even though the family won't take their help without putting up a front. While their phone was ringing, mine blew up with texts and missed calls from the same number after it confirmed I had a stable connection.

"Hello, you've reached Jasmine. I'm unable to come to the phone so leave a message at the tone." I hung up, dug out their phone book, and called the gym's number thinking her assistant would take a message at the very least.

"Olivine Gym, Janina speaking. How can I help?" she nearly yawned into the phone.

"Yes, hi. Could you tell Jasmine that I'm at the Moomoo Milk farm and will be in town later this afternoon? Or if she wants, she can call the ranch to see if I'm still here and she can see me. I don't trust my phone to keep a signal all over the farm."

"What's your name?"

"Mitch." She was scribbling away until I heard the pen drop.

"You mean you're the guy she's seeing?"


"She's got two early challenges and an early afternoon challenge but I'll pass that along. Between you and me, she was mad and worried all of last night and this morning."

Oh, I bet she was. "We'll talk about it when we meet up."

Any doubts about leaving the two Eeveelutions outside were gone when my body hit the guest bed. Once I got into a comfortable spot, the next six hours breezed by. It wasn't raining when I woke up but there were a few puddles scattered around the farm and a few small dark clouds were
on the horizon. Miltank were being ushered into a barn by Laura and Marybeth when I stepped on
the porch.

"Hey sleepyhead!" the young farmhand yelled across the yard. "Meet us in the big barn!"
Growlithe moved away from the herd a little bit to usher me to the front door.

The barn was large enough to hold every Miltank on the farm and was divided up into areas.
Grooming, milking, feeding, and medical sections were the bigger of the sections in addition to
individual stables. Laura told me that there was also a more private section for birthing in case any
Miltank didn't like the shed or preferred a more natural feel. I have a feeling that if anything were
to happen to Pokémon related items being damaged or if the land was too torn up, they would take
the help from the league.

"Come over here! We wanna give you something mister Mitch!" Mister Mitch… rolls off the
tongue pretty well.

"What do you have for me?" I playfully asked as I walked to a seemingly empty stable. Marybeth
pulled a fast one and moved to the next one over containing a very happy Miltank licking
Marybeth through the gate.

"This is Daisy! She's my favorite Miltank and she can help you."

"How?"

"She's one of the oldest here," Laura started to explain. "She's also good at calmin' everyone down
when they get too riled up. Take her to the shed along with these." I was handed two pints of
Moomoo Milk. "Have your Pokémon drink some milk and then Daisy will do her thing. Don't
worry, she's done this a lot." They handed me the leash and sent me off.

Both of my Pokémon were awake and nuzzling each other when I poked my head in the shed door.
Their egg was still next to Ruby's stomach and Umbreon was still jumpy as he sniffed around.
Miltank stared at him absentmindedly until he went back to his spot. He let me get close but glared
at Miltank to keep it at bay. Espeon offered her head and I pet it.

"Hey Ruby!" I whispered. "How are you feeling?"

"A little tired, but I'm okay now." She crawled into my lap after pushing the egg to Umbreon and
looked up at me. "What would've happened if we didn't make it here?"

I kept stroking her head. "We would've been fine."

"Then why were you scared?"

I was surprised she remembered me wailing at their front door. "I can't explain it other than my
emotions took over. We were only a short drive away from a Pokémon Center before the cab driver
lost his mind." I kissed her forehead. "But it worked out in the end. Here, I brought you this."

"Moomoo Milk?"

"Drink up. You too Umbreon. Water may be good for you, but you need a little more than that in
your system, especially at this point."

Umbreon lapped it from his empty water dish while Espeon floated the bottle over to me. She tried
to force it all down at once and I had to fight to make her take smaller sips. Now I know how my
parents probably felt when I was really thirsty as a kid.
Daisy waited until they were done drinking before starting to moo softly. When it saw the two being lulled to sleep, the bell on its collar started to ring and an overwhelming sense of calm reverberated in the shed. A blanket was thrown over Umbreon while Ruby pawed at my chest. This was the kind of sleep they deserved.

"Let me sleep in your lap. It's so warm and comfy," she purred. "And safe."

Daisy curled up at the entrance until Laura came back for her a few minutes later. I heard a vehicle pull up to the shed and two different voices were exchanging some friendly dialogue. Two pairs of footsteps left while the third pair sloshed through the mud to open the door. Knowing that I was at a farm, Jasmine still wore a white sundress with her rainboots.

"Mitch! What happened!? I was worried about you!"

"Shhh! They're sleeping. Pull up Umbreon's blanket to see why I didn't show up." She did so and held back an excited squeal.

"Is that really an Eevee egg?"

"It is. Out of the womb around 4:30 this morning." She walked back over and scratched her head with one finger.

"Why didn't you leave that in the message?"

I let out a sigh and smiled. "I was up for nearly 23 straight hours; pretty sure that fact slipped between the cracks. As long as you knew that I was okay, that's all that mattered." Jasmine sat on a blanket next to us and kept petting her.

"Let me call dad and tell him that you're here. He won't be happy at first, but he really does appreciate anyone who prefers to spend time with their family when they need it. He always visited his coworkers when their families had a baby."

I looked over to the egg. "Maybe trying to figure out your dad isn't a good idea. The headaches probably aren't worth it."

"Oh, stop. Once you two know each other more, you'll both be fine," she moaned. "I'll be back in a minute."

Jasmine left to make the call while I cradled Espeon. I'm not sure if Espeon or anyone else realize how far they've come since the introductions in Mahogany Town. Everyone is more confident in themselves despite losing against Lance and are more sociable when they're out and it's all thanks to Ruby. Being a middleman isn't fun at times, but it has helped me get a better understanding of what I need to do as a trainer. Umbreon has been a massive help by taking some of the pressure off Gyarados and giving off an aura of determination. Aside from Espeon, it rubbed off on Ampharos the most. She's faked running out of electricity at least twice to get in the last hit of the round; she never would've thought about doing that back in the early stages of our journey.

"Whether you want her to or not, that Eevee will know all about you too Tom," I mumbled while looking at the door half expecting him to stop in. "I think you'll be a little happier next time I come to visit." I sat in silence until she came back in.

"That Tony guy is really nice for helping me find my way around here. He looks like he could be a bodyguard instead of a farmer though." I cringed internally. "He's actually outside and was wondering if he could come in. Oh yeah, dad says you can stop by whenever you want tomorrow."
When he confessed everything back at the Indigo Plateau, Tony went from a threatening man to a giant teddy bear with muscles. Being wary is okay, but to completely alienate him would be hard to do after doctor Harrison herself forgave him in front of me although I'm not sure if she should have been. Desperate people do desperate things to get by and he was no exception.

"Okay. I don't see why not."

Jasmine waved him in and he sat down in front of me with a solemn look on his face. His clothes told me he was getting humbled every day with the amount of work he did. It's not like he was some spoiled man dragging his feet so I think he took the transition better than most people considering he's trying to have a child and live an honest life.

"First off, let me say how grateful I am that you told me about this place," Tony whispered. "They politely turned me away at the door but I told them you sent me and they changed their mind over coffee. It also may have helped that I'm a 26-year-old man in great shape. Nobody in my circle knows where I am and I love it. My wife knows I work here while she's trying to get a job as a waitress in town. Life's looking up."

Figures they'd be stubborn with him too. "Good! Good! Keeping up here?"

"Getting there. They won't let me use my Pokémon yet because they want to see if I can do the work myself."

My jaw dropped. "You had Pokémon this whole time!?"

"I couldn't bring myself to have them on me when I was doing Cory's dirty work. The night after you ran me out of the room with your Growlithe was one of the toughest gut checks I ever did. They can't talk back, but I could tell my Pokémon finally realized that the life we were living wasn't a good one even though it put food on the table."

"How many do you have?"

He took off his belt and hung it up. "Four. A Feraligatr, Marowak, Skarmory, and a Porygon2." I nearly rolled over.

"Porygon2!? How the hell did you even get a Porygon!? I don't even know where they come from." His demeanor changed to a nervous one as he turned to Jasmine.

"I don't want to be rude… but I think you should leave, miss. I'm feeling confident enough to do something I should've done last time I saw Mitch but I'd prefer if we were the only people in the room."

"Oh… of course. I understand." He waited until she closed the shed door.

"Back when I first started out in my life as a bodyguard, I saved my first boss after a midnight exchange went bad because the other person thought we were undercover agents. I ran in front of him and took a Karate Chop to the chest from a Machoke. It happened in a flash, but I gave the boys enough time to step in without anyone on our side getting hurt after that."

"What was the damage?" I said as I looked at my arm before looking back at him.

Tony looked at the floor. "Both forearms were broken since I threw them up in an 'x' to protect myself, minor shoulder pain from hitting the ground, and eight bruised ribs. The doctor said if I didn't brace myself, my ribcage would've been severely damaged and I probably would've died from a punctured lung. Even professional bodybuilders wouldn't have been much better off than
me in that spot. Pokémon are a lot stronger than what we give them credit for."

Ruby rolled over in her sleep so I rode out the silence a little longer. "Very true. She nearly turned my arm into a wet noodle but I got clawed instead. These scars aren't going away."

"So you've felt it too. Anyway, my boss was just as kind as he was cruel as long as you didn't cross him. He paid all the expenses before giving me a Porygon2 as a reward for saving his life. I don't know where it came from, but it acted neutral around me all the time. Not an ounce of emotion until recently; it was creepy for the longest time. Everyone else was acquired on my own time before and after that incident."

"How did you get out? I don't think they would let you leave if you were that good."

"That's not entirely true," he sighed. "I was doing other projects for him on the side and then I met my wife; my boss was upset that my attention was divided or that my heart wasn't fully invested in my work. We had a long talk about our best interests before we agreed on me becoming someone for hire. Nothing overly dangerous like a hitman, but I've gotten my hands dirty and he's even called me back for a few jobs which was a nice change of pace from my other one-time bosses who were mostly incompetent. The underground is a decent sized network yet it's still tightly knit. Power struggles happen occasionally, but it rarely affects anyone living an honest life." I wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or uneasy.

"Cory found you through the underground, right? We've had our problems but it's not like he's a threat to me or the other way around. We both hate each other and that's all there really is to it."

He let out a quiet laugh. "Game corners are a hot spot for people like me so I visited them a lot. Cory was a 'feast or famine' type of trainer. He'd get a lot of money and win a lot of battles only to blow his money shortly after. Then he'd hit a few rough patches where he'd have no money or he'd constantly lose battles. At least he came to me when he had money." After she started to roll around more, I got up and put Ruby back in the bed.

"What do you know about Allison?" I asked while getting her settled in.

"Not much other than she's a former champion or the fact that she's very smart. She's kept a low profile with the underground since getting involved in battles with our members. That's all she cares about; money means nothing to her now." Damn… I thought I'd get something on her.

"Did you know she wanted Umbreon just so she could beat Lance?"

"No. It also wouldn't surprise me based on the stories I've heard about her. Her battles against the Elite Four last time out were about the same as yours in terms of the score so it's not like Lance is the only person can keep her in check. There's more to the world than just Johto too."

"Guess you're right. Not much I can do since they've gone their separate ways and chasing them down would only cause me more stress."

He stood up to leave. "I don't know how deep your problems run so I won't bother with it. However, I have one last request."

"Shoot."

Tony showed me his phone. "Here's my number. I may be retired as a man for hire, but that doesn't mean I can't help you for free if you need a favor. I'm willing to be active in the underground again if you're in trouble. I think tonight is the night I tell my wife the whole truth. She knows enough, but not enough in my eyes."
"You do you." He left the shed and let Jasmine back in.

We both sat in the shed for the rest of the afternoon whispering to each other while my Pokémon continued to sleep. I eventually fell asleep against the wall and woke up to a blanket on me and a note saying that the lighthouse was open for me if I wanted to take the short walk into town later in the night. Nick invited me for supper after the farm work was done for the day. I carried the egg while the new parents walked alongside me until the living room where Laura had food waiting for them in bowls.

Tony was putting the finishing touches on some meatloaf when we sat down to eat. Having a home-cooked meal after all we went through was a welcoming sign. The rain picked up again as we started to eat but it didn't matter. Warm food, warm house, a supporting group of people, this was something I have never experienced all at the same time. Sure, I had those things at the Indigo Plateau, but even that had its drawbacks like the fact that I eliminated my friends. This was genuine hospitality with no catch. Making Tony drive me into town seemed like a bother so I opted to stay the night.

Umbreon woke me up the next morning after everyone else went to work. Marybeth had already given them breakfast while Laura left a note saying I could stay as long as I wanted. Fresh berries were left on the counter along with a blender so I made a smoothie before going to the living room. Espeon was cradling the egg when I went in.

"How are you this morning?"

"Rested. You?"

"Still tired. I think my body needs one more day and I'll be moving fine."

"Don't push yourself. Anyway, I'm going to Olivine today to follow through on a promise. Are you okay staying here with everyone?"

"When will you come back?"

"Later today. Have you thought about communicating with me from a distance?"

"Not really. I'm too tired to do anything now so I won't try it. Just have fun while you're there."

I found Tony moving bales of hay and asked if he would mind driving me into town like Nick said earlier. He was eager to do it knowing he would have an excuse to take a break and pick up some stuff for the farm. Nick gave him a list before we took the short drive into town. Tony couldn't stay long so I'd have to take the 15-minute walk back when I was done.

Going straight to the docks was the best option since I didn't want to delay the speech any longer than I already have. Even though it wasn't close to lunch, they were bustling with ships from across the world. Crates of giant statues, tiny bags with gems, new league uniforms, it was a cornucopia of items being run from the ships to trucks or private storage lockers deeper in.

"Hey kid! You lost?" a supervisor barked as a forklift was driving past us.

"I'm supposed to speak to a group of people!"

A surprised look was on his face. "Oh shit! He wasn't kidding when he said you would show up being champion and all! Follow me!"

The supervisor led me to the end of the docks where a podium was waiting for me. A microphone
kit was still being hooked up as well. The entire area was made as if I was going to be there yesterday.

"So everybody's going to stand and listen?"

"Pretty much."

"What about the people that can't make it? There's hundreds of you guys."

He pulled out a camcorder and a tiny tripod. "We're going to record this and show it to any of the workers who wants to watch later. Is that a problem?"

"I guess it's okay seeing as not everyone can make it. I don't think I'll take too long." Jasmine's dad came out from a truck and saw us around the podium.

"Glad to see you made it today! How's the new mother?" A complete 180 compared to our first meeting with him being more relaxed. What did Jasmine and his wife say to him since the last time we met?

"Looking healthy. She's resting back at the ranch with Umbreon."

"Oh! How about that? Anyway, we'll get started when I get the okay from the guys here."

Not too long after he left, everything was in place. The speakers were fiddled with extensively and different cords were being ran to an office power strip. Within an hour, the area in front of the podium started to fill with people taking their break. It felt similar to the tournament in Olivine where I had people at field level as we battled.

"Check check check," Jasmine's dad droned. "This thing working? Yup. I'd like to thank everyone for coming to support our guest speaker. He's the new Silver Conference champion so give Mitch a round of applause."

Had this have been a group of trainers, the response would've been much more responsive. It probably didn't help that they didn't identify with me or the other way around. Dad taught me one trick to get people listening to you from the start in situations like this. It paid off whenever I visited him at work and it should hopefully pay off here.

"Thank you. Let me start by saying thank you to the entire staff for doing what you do. Without you guys, the mart shelves would be empty and trainers like me wouldn't be able to travel around Johto safely." A few of them took notice. "Could you imagine getting hurt on the job and have no access to a medical kit? Me neither… which is why I wanted to tell you that you guys mean a lot to me. I didn't get to where I am today on my own. I used to think I did everything on my own and everything was at my fingertips; I'm glad I got my ass handed to me when I did."

The mood went from mostly apathetic to somewhat intriguing. More workers started to "take a break" and focus on the speakers if they were close enough. Some people sprinted to the back of the crowd as I finished.

"There is nothing more humbling to a trainer than getting your ass handed to you even though you accounted for everything. Has anyone been to the gym in Mahogany Town? Believe me when I say that you'll be humbled in a heartbeat after you walk through those doors. Since that day, I've taken nothing for granted since that point. Not even my own Pokémon's trust."

"Does that explain the scars?" one worker about my age asked. "My girlfriend was wondering about that. Nobody really knew what happened or really asked you to go deeper into it." His friend
punched him in the shoulder for interrupting to which I laughed a little.

"Sort of." I did my best to show my arm to as many people as possible. "This was a result of me not doing my homework. Trust is something that takes an eternity to build yet takes seconds to break. One Pokémon on my team will never completely trust me all the time due to its past and I have to accept that. There are also no guarantees that the trust you built will be there again after the apologies." A few shouts of "yeah!" echoed until the group started clapping.

I opted to take a few questions from a few of the workers before they would have to go back to their posts. Most of them were based on my time at the Indigo Plateau with a few about travelling sprinkled in. As a bonus, I called out Gyarados in the water to show everyone how it was doing after surviving Lance's strongest Dragonite. Jasmine's dad, who had 25 years of experience being around the ocean, looked at him and figured that his Gyarados wouldn't have lasted too long against mine. When I felt like leaving, I gave them a closing thought.

"Most of you are older than me so you know that waltzing through life isn't going to happen. A good friend of mine told me this to add a different perspective that you may not know: overcome the bad moments, treasure the good moments, and keep striving for greatness." Based on how loud they were or how long they clapped, it was safe to say that it went well.

Visiting the Pokémon Center before going back felt like a good idea after letting Gyarados out even though he didn't battle. An automatic healing machine was more than enough to get the job done. Nurse Joy stared at me the entire time as if she wasn't sure of something. I asked her if everything was okay and she said nothing was wrong although someone had mailed a manila envelope to every Pokémon Center containing a note and a smaller envelope; the return address was to the league office. I sat down in the corner and read it.

Dear Mitch,

Congrats on making it all the way to Lance. There's a reason he's undefeated and you're just another tally mark in his win column. Still, that performance will get you some respect in the near future or maybe the rest of your life if you play your cards right. Now that I've buttered you up, it's time to get serious.

That little group of protesters were some former members of Team Rocket trying to bring it back to its former glory. Getting Umbreon back in Team Rocket's hands won't bring them back overnight; Giovanni is long-gone and nobody knows where he is. There are rumors that some executives are still in hiding, but nobody knows if that's true or if the last sliver of hope for Team Rocket is truly gone. They're the ones with the know-how and money to revive the organization. I'll tell you that the more competent members are still "on the clock" so they can rake in the money under the table.

Then there's Cory and Sara still running around freely. Just like you, they're just continuing their journey by getting ready for next year or exploring another region. I know you're not satisfied with just crushing them in a battle as a way to take out your anger for what they did. It'd be amusing for me to hear about you chasing them like poachers chase their prey.

You now have legions of fans and the Pokémon League on your side while I have almost nothing since the word is out that I'm wanted by the authorities. Well, I guess my streak as an undetected trainer had to come to an end at some point. As a result, I am no longer in Johto. Don't forget a lot of people are wary of you after what you did during this tournament too. I still have the money from my side bets to live comfortably where I am so don't expect me to come back anytime soon. I also have no desire to interact with you again. Even if you knew exactly where I was, I can leave at the drop of a hat because I still have connections to people in high places and they owe me a favor or two.
Let me make this very clear because you're a straightforward type of person: it would be in our best interests if we didn't go after each other. If I get word that you're putting in a lot of effort to look for me on top of what has already been done, you'll be sleeping with one eye open for the rest of your life. Farewell... or should I say "Alola" for now.

-Allison

An open table was in the corner and I sat down to reread it until it all set in. My fist slammed against the table after reading it the fifth time through. Every word stung knowing there was nothing I could reasonably do about it. I'd essentially be battling the entire underground network and that war would take decades to win if a win was even possible. Cramming it into my pocket was all I could do on the way out.

When I left the city limits, Furret materialized on her own, sensed I was upset, and started to rub against my leg. I was surprised that she broke out until I saw her stomach. It was about that time just like doctor Harrison predicted although she wasn't showing any signs of discomfort. She slowly climbed me like a tree and rested on my shoulder.

"Looks like someone's tired of their ball," I said while scratching her chin. "Let's go back to the Pokémon Center so you can get a room." She furiously shook her head, hopped down, and pointed north. "You want the ranch over the center?" A nod with a smile was her response.

Furret didn't want to be picked up again and Growlithe was called out to be our bodyguard on the way back. He knew her time was close and nuzzled her while walking along the dirt road. It sucked that Allison got away and it's worse that I can't do anything about it without everyone I know getting dragged into the mix. Seeing two Pokémon grow up, building a relationship with Jasmine, and continuing to get stronger are things I should be focusing on now that I'm the Silver Conference champion.

We arrived back at the farm with Umbreon sleeping on the porch in a rocking chair. His ears twitched before waking up to look at us coming down the path. Growlithe stared him down until Umbreon casually walked into the house knowing Growlithe was in protection mode. Espeon looked at us through the window and waited for us to get to the porch before coming out. Her presence made Growlithe relax enough for her to get close and share a hug. Furret then threw her front legs in the air while facing me.

"Up?" She nodded. "Up you go. How about we go so sit on one of the rocking chairs?" Furret fell asleep in my arms over time and Growlithe rocked himself to sleep in another chair.

It was at that point where I decided to put as much of my relationship with Allison, Cory, and Sara behind me as I could. Outrunning the past entirely is a dumb idea because it's impossible; a small fraction will still exist unless I undergo complete memory loss. However, I can't let it consume me. All my time would be better spent focused on looking ahead or at least living in the present.

With two eggs, a happy team, money in the bank, a girlfriend that loves you for who you are, and a job offer lined up, I'd say the future is looking bright.
Chapter 70- Eternally Grateful

We all stayed the night on the farm since I didn't want to risk anything happening to Furret. She whined from the pain that the egg was causing her despite Growlithe's best attempts to calm her down throughout the night. When it became evident that she would have a hard time all night, she wedged her way underneath my arm and dragged my hand over her stomach to which I woke up to give her some attention. It felt weird cradling her because I didn't think I'd have the soft touch like my mom had when she held me.

"It's okay girl. We're all right here. You're doing good," I whispered as she started to fall asleep. When she was out cold, I sat her next to Growlithe. The guest room was silent for the rest of the night.

If the sunlight didn't wake me up, Furret crawling over me would've done the job. She looked more relaxed after we made our way to the kitchen table for breakfast. The family left a note to tell me that I could cook what I needed. I kept my breakfast modest by eating one bowl of cereal while everyone else had their fill. I felt bad that Gyarados couldn't be in the kitchen but with Ampharos going outside to eat with him and having the window open for him to peek through helped. In the middle of it all, Furret went to door to calmly paw at it.

"Need some air?" She continued to paw at it until I let her out. She then started walking away from the house. "Hey! Where are you going?"

Furret wandered around slowly while Growlithe and I followed her. She stopped to scout the land until she confidently walked through a field that was next to the shed. Nick saw her walking in and sent a Miltank to get Laura. He already hooked her up when I walked in. Unlike Ruby, Furret looked like she was at peace with the start of the process.

"She's calm for now but that'll change. These types of beginnings lead to unpredictable endings so you'd best watch out."

"Guess I have to play it by the second." Laura walked in with fresh milk and a bowl.

"Another one, huh? Well my husband told me but I didn't believe him," she playfully said while setting everything up. Furret pinned her ears back and had a low growl going on until she snapped at Laura's hand. "Oh my!"

"I'm so sorry! I didn't know she would do that!"

"Here, let me finish setting it up," Nick whispered. "Have Marybeth get more blankets too. It'll get cooler tonight."

Furret continued to look around the shed while trying to get as comfortable as possible. The funny part was that she remained affectionate to Nick well after he was done getting everything in place. Marybeth walked in and she started to growl again.
"Here are the blankets!" She stepped closer and Furret pinned her ears back again. "I remember you! How about a tummy rub? Espeon liked it!"

Nick threw up his arm. "No Marybeth. Don't bother her while she's like this. You're gonna get hurt. Go back outside now." Marybeth pouted before exiting and Furret stopped growling. However, she kept looking at the door as if either of them would come back.

"There's no reason she would be doing this," I started to explain to Nick. "I can't remember the last time she was this aggressive outside of a battle. I know that carrying an egg has given her mood swings, but this is ridiculous by those standards. I'm sorry that she's like this." Nick stood up.

"Go get Ampharos and Umbreon. I think I have an idea for why she's all screwy." I left to go get the two and came back to the entrance. "Come in with only Umbreon first." Umbreon stared at her wondering what the fuss was about while Furret tilted her head in confusion from the random appearance. Nick nodded before having me swap Umbreon for Ampharos.

The moment she walked in was the moment Furret stood up and got in a defensive stance. Poor Ampharos tried to talk her way out of trouble only for Furret to snarl at her until I escorted her out. Those two had been the best of friends ever since I introduced them to each other and Ampharos didn't take it well; I had to remind her how much we all love each other on the walk back to the house. Her brought in Daisy to whom she also growled at. Carrying the egg was really messing Furret up.

"Do you have a better idea of what's going on?"

"Yup. I've seen this here a few times."

"And?"

Nick leaned in. "Women," he whispered. "She doesn't like women right now."

Could she really hate every single female on the face of the earth at this point? Jasmine might as well have been her adoptive mother and she's never been hostile outside of battle. Marybeth petting her the first time wasn't a problem even though they didn't know each other and small children are more careless.

"Explain."

"Pretty easy, son. She's afraid that another female would take the egg from her after its out and raise whatever's in it instead of her; boils down to jealousy. Male Pokémon aren't really good with raising newborns by themselves so she doesn't see 'em as a threat. Some Miltank on the farm have acted like that in the past." It's probably more complex than that, but at least I know what was going on.

"How long until that wears off?"

"Depends. Some of 'em calm down once the egg is out or they can act like that until the new Pokémon is a few weeks old. No way to tell."

"Figures. Hey, do you have anything for me to do? I feel like I'm mooching a lot."

He hummed as he thought of something for me to do. "Go work with Tony. It's almost that time where he can work with his Pokémon so why not add you for today? He should be near the front." I rubbed Furret's stomach before leaving Growlithe with her and going to work.
Tony was operating a tractor carrying hay bales when I walked to the work site. He told me to start stacking them in a storage barn near the front gate. They were roughly 50 pounds each so it didn't feel bad at first. Over the course of two hours, my arms turned to noodles. I still had about 20 bales left by the time he was done with his pile. Glad to know I wouldn't cut it as a farm worker early in my farming experience.

We rode the tractor back to the main barn where the milking machines were housed. There were roughly 100 of them and it was time to check for any issues. Laura had the know-how to fix them up but needed someone to remove old parts that were stuck or get into tight spaces. Even though we only did minor repairs on 30 of them, it felt like an eternity. Beads of sweat constantly rolled down my face even though I wasn't moving.

"I'm surprised you asked to help," Tony causally stated while on the ground screwing in a nail on the last machine. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to stay with your Pokémon or go in the city for a bit."

"City wandering is going to be a little harder now. I know the publicity comes with the territory, but I don't mind helping here in exchange for housing and medical care for my Pokémon. My parents raised me too well to just let something like this be completely free."

"I feel you on that." The family's Growlithe ran in barking as loud as it could when we were ready to move on to the next job. "What's wrong?" It scurried to the door and started going to the shed where Furret was.

"The egg is coming!" I happily yelled. "Hold on Furret!"

I only made it halfway before my happiness turned to fear. A group of Meowth were mingling around the shed with some of the males fighting among themselves. It was probably the group that we saw after we got kicked out of the cab. Doctor Harrison mentioned that wild Pokémon could be drawn in because she was vulnerable; we got lucky with Espeon. My Growlithe stood in front of the closed door unsure if he should torch them now or wait until one of them move. Even if he did get off a Flamethrower or two, it was still one versus an army. Nick or Laura had to have a Pokémon with a water attack, but that might not be enough if he were to keep attacking.

A Meowth spotted me running and met me a few feet from the shed; everyone's attention was on me now. It stood in front of me with its claws unsheathed and cut in front of me when I went to go to the house. My team was on the other side so unless they peeked past the side, they didn't know what was going on. When I tried to yell to the house, it swiped at my leg but missed on purpose. I took a more creative approach by backing up while still moving laterally to the house. The plan seemed to work until a different Meowth caught on and made sure I backed away from the house.

"Growlithe, no fire attacks. Go," I ordered calmly.

Mass chaos erupted as Growlithe rammed into anything in his way. He rammed Meowths into other Meowths, bit as many as he could, and even used one's head as a trampoline. For not using fire, he was holding his own pretty well. The Meowth in front of me didn't take its eyes off me before pouncing at me seeing me as more of a threat after I ordered the attack; I backpedaled while it swung wildly. When it tried to go at my chest, I threw a punch and nailed it square in the face. Despite the solid hit, it probably took harder hits in the wild and got up almost immediately. A thin line of blood ran down my arm since it grazed it as I threw the punch. Fighting it with my bare hands for an extended period was my only option. If I used Growlithe's full power, I ran the risk of starting a fire since outmuscling the group wasn't going to last long. I don't know if my yells would reach my team or if I would get cut up trying to make a break for it. The shed would be unguarded.
if he came to my side. My fists balled up for round two.

"Bone Rush!" A Marowak came from behind me and knocked out my problem. "Get in the mix and use Bone Club! Drop the hammer on every Meowth!" Tony ordered while running closer to the scene.

His Marowak moved nimbly among the crowd while delivering powerful blows with its trusty bone. Even when surrounded and having little room to freely swing its bone, it had enough torque to land solid hits. Growlithe sent a few scurrying with his continued ramming until Marowak stepped in front of him to deal with the four that were dumb enough to stay. All four charged it at once only to be beat back with another Bone Rush.

Three of them ran to the forest and as the last one charged, Marowak treated his bone like a baseball bat. When it was an ideal distance away, it swung the bone like a batter waiting on a specific pitch and sent the Meowth flying into the forest. It put its hand on its forehead pretending to look for it in the sky and then doing a bat flip with the bone like it hit a walk-off home run.

"Forgot to mention that I was a huge Fighting Electabuzz baseball fan growing up," Tony noted while smiling. "Excellent job Marowak. How does it feel to be a hero with no strings attached?" It happily jumped in place as the family Growlithe escorted Laura to the scene. "I thought so."

"How did you know there would be a problem?"

"Growlithe doesn't act like that unless there's a problem," Laura explained. "Go in the shed, hon. We'll take care of things out here."

Furret was in tears and hysterical the moment we walked in the shed. I assume she heard the commotion but her breathing was also labored. Growlithe did his best to calm her down by licking her head and hugging her. He even tried to softly hum in her ear.

"It's okay girl. We're right here. You're alright. You're alright. Shhhh," I whispered while I scratched her favorite spot. She leveled out emotionally although the tears kept flowing when she saw the streak of blood. "It's just a scratch. You're such a good girl."

Her calm demeanor didn't last long as she rolled over in pain followed by screaming. She threw one paw out to each of us to grab on to since the egg was about to come out. When it did, she cried on Growlithe's side while he kissed the top of her forehead. He rolled it next to her so she could cradle it while I fed her and pet her to calm her down again. It took some time for the emotional rollercoaster to stop, but she stayed relaxed after I let them have some space. Marybeth snuck in to see the egg and Furret allowed herself to be pet thinking everyone else was guarding the egg for her.

The egg had a large amount of surface area dedicated to cream coloring except the top third. A few lines of black contrasted the cream and dark red. The only thing left in question was if it was going to be a male or female. Regardless, we'd all raise it to the best of our ability. Laura put Tony in charge of guarding the shed so I could go to the house.

Everyone was taking a nap although Espeon was the only one stirring in her sleep. Her egg was moving a little bit along with it flashing at times. I was unsure of the flashing so I put in a call to doctor Harrison in the hopes she was still at work this late in the afternoon.

"Hello?"

"Doctor Harrison? It's Mitch. Hey, I have a question. Why do eggs flash?"
"Oh! Did both of them have eggs already?"

"Yes. Furret had her egg minutes ago while Espeon's egg has been out for a few days."

"Congratulations! What is Furret's egg going to hatch into?" Dammit, just answer the question.

"A Growlithe."

"Ah! Anyway, flashing simply means that the egg is ready to hatch soon. As for the Growlithe egg, it would hatch a lot faster considering it is a fire type. The natural heat from inside helps in the hatching process just like the parents covering it on the outside. Any more questions?"

"Nope. Thanks for the help." I went back to the shed to spend some time with the two as they were curled up together. The egg was pretty hot to the touch so the time it would take for it to hatch wouldn't be too long.

When it got to be dinner time, I was ready to go back home. I made the decision to deposit Ampharos and Gyarados in Bill's storage system to make room for the two eggs; Furret and Espeon were recalled to get some quality rest. Tony offered to drive me back home to which I accepted. The ride was quiet since I stayed asleep the entire time. Mom and dad welcomed me home along with Ruby's mother. She took an interest in the eggs before realizing that it would be better to stay out of the picture until they hatched.

They both were glowing constantly as the night dragged on and I eventually took them into my room before letting everyone out. All four of them stared intently while I relaxed in my bed, fading in and out on consciousness. Light from one egg covered the whole room until it subsided and a newborn Growlithe appeared in front of us crying out like any newborn would. The Eeveelutions moved behind the bed so that it would only see its parents when it opened its eyes; I brought their egg over.

It stared at its parents with its head tilted after the crying stopped unsure of what to do. Furret took initiative by urging it to come over to her side. When it did, she slowly hugged it while talking to it. The newborn yawned in its mother's embrace with my Growlithe gave it a bath. Eventually they fell asleep after cuddling up on a spare blanket.

"It won't take long before he starts taking after his father," Espeon relayed. "Mother will still know best in the end," she joked.

"Are you sure it's a boy?" She took a pillow from my bed and started to get it ready for Eevee.

"Absolutely." It didn't take much longer for the Eevee egg to hatch in the same manner. The newborn normal type cried out longer than Growlithe even after the three settled in as best they could even after I gave them a spare throw pillow. When it opened its eyes, Eevee pawed at Ruby's face and giggled.

"My baby girl," she squeaked as tears streaked down her face. "I love you so much. Mama will always be here with daddy. With Mitch helping, all you'll ever know is love."

Those three stayed up as long as their child did and then a few minutes after it fell asleep. Umbreon then hopped on the bed before laying his head on my chest. He purred like he was trying to win a contest.

"I'm so happy for you buddy," I whispered while rubbing his head. "It's been a long road to get here, but you did it. You're going to make a great dad." A tear streaked down his face before he
hopped back down to curl up with Eevee. Espeon didn't wait to let it out after throwing herself at me.

"Thank you! Thank you for everything you've done! I don't deserve any of this!"

I let her ramble until she ran out of steam. She listed nearly every bad thing that happened to her as to why she shouldn't have been able to live in the present. Her eyes grew heavier as I continued to pet her.

"You do deserve this. And if you think you don't... just look around. Ask Growlithe, Furret, Ampharos, Gyarados, your mate, your mother when we visit, and me if you ever have doubts. Don't let that stop you from crying; it's okay to cry. You've come a long way too."

She sat up and wiped her eyes. "I still don't know how much I want to tell my daughter because she will ask about us."

"Baby steps. Take baby steps. Both of you will be comfortable to have that talk one day. In the meantime, focus on raising her with Umbreon. Take things one day at a time" She looked down and saw Eevee sprawled out on the pillow.

"I guess you're right." I scooped her up and placed her next to the newborn.

"We learned in school that when an Eevee is exposed to a certain region's climate and is raised with love, it can evolve into something else over there."

"Something else?"

"I can't remember the name now, but the possibility exists. I'm focused on living life one day at a time. Now let's get some sleep in our own beds for a change."

The next four days went by slowly as I did my best to juggle my team after I purchased two more Luxury Balls. I found out that I could leave everyone at home and still carry Gyarados and Ampharos on me. If I had more than six teammates on me, the Pokédex would beam any extra balls into the storage system as soon as I put them on my belt. Professor Elm explained that a person can own as many Pokémon as they wanted but could only carry six when I called for clarification. For the most part, I let the Pokémon raise them and get used to battling.

Violet City officials had me running around town doing public appearances once a day and people hired me as a speaker for a private event through the league on the fourth day. The checks were handed to me after everyone cleared the area so I got an understanding how much I was worth to people. It wasn't a huge chunk of change, but it was more money than I had before. On the way home from the private event, I was ready to make a big call.

Lance's offer was something that I should've taken as soon as I got home with the newborns but it wasn't a big deal since he offered it to me himself. I still was unsure about which job to ask for until I remembered the fact that I made everyone on my team happy despite their pasts. Battling for a living would be tough with the current state of my team so I think being a field agent would be a better fit for me in the long run. The goal was to work my way up so that I could take on abuse cases confidently; no Pokémon was going to go through what mine did if I could help it.

"This is Lance," he said bluntly.

"Lance, it's Mitch. I've thought about your offer and I want to work for the league."
"Excellent!" The change in tone made me jump. "I'll send someone to get you so we can talk soon in my office. Where are you?"

"I'll be by Sprout Tower. No rush."

It should have come as no surprise that my escort was the same woman from when I was still battling at the league. She looked more relaxed since the tournament was over and it was nice to have a casual conversation before her Alakazam teleported us back to the main offices. The hallway to Lance's office had every champion's picture on the wall for as long as the league had been taking pictures. I felt disgusted seeing Allison's face next to mine, but history can't simply be erased by taking a picture down.

His office looked like an executive suite with the lavish furniture and figurines of dragon Pokémon scattered about. He looked up from his large stack of papers and waved me in while dismissing his assistant. Even he looked relaxed despite the workload.

"Tell me what you want to do and we'll go from there."

The knot in my stomach tightened. "I want to be a field agent. More specifically, cases with Pokémon abuse. You know the reason why."

"Alright," he sternly replied. "Do you have any idea about process for that to happen?"

"All I know is that I'll have to work my way up because that's not a position anyone can fill."

Lance softened up a little bit. "Glad to hear that you have a realistic view on this. However, you didn't say the one thing that I thought you would."

"What were you hoping to hear?"

He sat back and sighed. "It took years before I could work on my own even though I had the discipline to raise three Dratinis. You must always keep your composure and never let anger get in the way of the job. You may have to do some unethical things along the way, but you cannot get carried away. There's a fine line between justice and vengeance in this line of work. Can you handle yourself off the clock?"

Hearing him say that made me look at the job in a different light. I still have no intention of going out of my way to find Allison, Cory, or Sara so that's not the problem. Whatever happens at work has the potential to leak into my personal life and then it has the potential to spiral out of control in a heartbeat.

"I see."

"I mean it Mitch. You will see, hear, read, or even smell some of the worst things imaginable. The difference is how you take out your aggression because you will get upset. I can help you find an outlet if you don't have one yet." We sat in silence as he tried to read my body language until he reached into his desk to pull out a few pieces of paper. "Here is a list for every league job. I'll let you look at them to see if anything else catches your eye."

Most of the jobs were either out of my league or something I had no interest in although I couldn't shake the prospect of being a gym leader. Deep down, I knew my team couldn't handle that lifestyle for too long with injuries or raising an egg. Jasmine enjoys it despite the rigorous schedule at times and maybe that might not work for me either. Being a field agent at least gives me a little more freedom with what I can do with my time.
"Field agent and that's final. The league should be able to work around my duties as reigning champion," I firmly stated.

"Very well. I need you to fill out these forms so you'll be set. You have two weeks to relax before you'll be called back for training. Take these." He reached into his pocket and gave me two business cards. "One is a number you can call to have my assistant help you with getting around the region; please don't abuse it. The other is a pass that allows you to visit Mount Silver without having to present your badges every time. Most agents train near the bottom although a few have climbed higher."

"Higher? It gets exponentially dangerous after a certain point."

"Some can handle it. Only my assistant has climbed with the intention to battle Red; she couldn't make it past the halfway point."

My heart skipped a beat. "Red? Is he even up there? Nobody's seen or heard of him hanging around Mount Silver in years."

"Correct. Were you looking to battle him if he was closer to the bottom?" I let out a sarcastic laugh.

"Battle him!? His Pikachu would wipe the floor with me! I may be the current champion, but I know my limits."

"It was just a suggestion," he said shrugging his shoulders. "Anyway, enjoy some quality time with your Pokémon, family, anyone else you want to hang out with. Bring the completed application when we call you back."

"Thank you again for the offer."

"Oh! I almost forgot! You mentioned Ashley getting a promotion, correct?" he mentioned as I was nearly out the door.

"That was a few weeks ago. Did it happen already?"

"We ran a performance review and she didn't qualify at this time. However, my assistant sat down with her and gave her some Pokémon trained by the league to supplement her Kingler. Until she catches her own, she'll have a diverse team if she's chosen for a job."

"Glad to hear that! See you soon!"

I was teleported back to Sprout Tower with a renewed sense of purpose. The knot in my stomach came back on the walk home thinking about what I would be doing or how nervous I already was about the whole thing but it went away when Eevee and the younger Growlithe sprinted to the door to greet me when I walked in.

My last two weeks of freedom were spent preparing for the immediate future. Jasmine helped me pick out my apartment in Olivine so we could be near each other and I could be near the farm if I ever needed to go back. Before I signed on the dotted line, she thought that it would make more sense to move in with me so we could split rent and there would be more room for our Pokémon if they were called out for except Steelix and Gyarados.

I was reluctant at first, but realized I would hate to come home to an empty place every night. I love my team as much as the next guy, but sometimes it would be better to have just the two of us. Her parents were on board with it although they were reluctant to completely trust me living with
her; I could feel them visiting a lot in the first few months.

The hatched Pokémon became more social with me which was a goal I had in mind before going back for training. Growlithe preferred to run around outside while Eevee had taken a liking to sliding down Gyarados' body and he was surprisingly fine with it. He didn't look like he was in pain although that could change with one bad movement.

Filling out my application was an emotional roller coaster, especially since I did it the day before I had to go back. When I saw that I was not allowed to have any Pokémon on me, I needed to leave the table and look at it again. The league would provide them for exercises and if an applicant passed, each applicant's Pokémon would have to be registered in a separate process. My team wasn't happy about the prospect of me working as an agent but I explained my reasoning. The fact was that I would be on the bottom of the totem pole for a long time and the league would keep me away from danger until I was ready. With the application done and nothing left to do in the afternoon, I wanted to take a walk.

"Jasmine! I'm going out for a walk," I yelled into the bedroom from the front door. I heard her footsteps go to the window.

"It looks like it's going to rain! Are you sure?" she replied before coming out to meet me.

"I just need to clear my head for a few hours before I head up before training tomorrow." She looked like she wanted to go too, but saw the clouds roll in.

"Just give me a call when you're close to Olivine on the way back." She handed me the jacket she gave me after our night in the lighthouse with a smile. "I love you. Stay safe."

We shared a quick kiss. "Love you too."

Gyarados was the only Pokémon I had on me when I walked out the door. I figured everyone else would prefer to play with each other in the apartment while I went for my walk. From the street, I could see Espeon in the window.

"You forgot something," she relayed while opening the window. "Wait there." A few minutes passed before she floated my replica championship trophy down.

"Thanks," I mumbled with my head down. "This is the best time to do it considering my life is about to get busier but at the same time I didn't want to drag anyone else into this." Espeon nodded and went back inside.

Rain poured down from the moment I left the city and went north. Mother nature added some wind as I passed the ranch house. The storm eventually lightened up as I continued to trek east in silence. Holding a replica of the most sought-after piece of hardware among trainers started to get annoying since the air cooled the trophy; Ecruteak's gate was a welcoming site. Most of the people were inside of homes or businesses waiting out the storm. A few people willing to get wet came out in the street for an autograph but there wasn't a mad rush like if the weather was nicer. When everyone was satisfied, I made my way to the north side of the city.

The rain stopped as I made my way through the cemetery although it remained miserable. I methodically walked past each headstone until I found the one for Tom. A rose had recently been placed there based on how vibrant its color was. I stared at it in silence before sitting in front of it.

"Hey Tom, how's it going? I didn't want to bring Umbreon today although if he asks me to come here in the future, I'll bring him." The stillness of the cemetery got to me so I forced myself to
continue. "You saw that we didn’t win against Lance and it stung… hard; still does at times. Everything we worked for was practically gone with just a few short sentences from the judge. If I didn't have the support I did that night, I would've been a broken man for a long time." The tears start to well up so I took a deep breath to reset myself.

"But it's funny, really. Umbreon didn't faint when he lost against Lance. You and I both know why he kept going as long as he did. His effort was broadcasted and noticed by people across the world so everyone watching knew he could fight far beyond a judge's decision if he had to. Unfortunately, I don't have it in me to tell everyone that he initially wasn't my Pokémon and I don't want to drag you into this when you can't defend yourself from those who don't know anything. You deserve to rest in peace." I pulled out the replica trophy and set in on the headstone.

"Hopefully this will help with that. This is a reminder that you gave him the start he needed to succeed with me. Our road to this point wasn't an easy one but we stood tall when it mattered the most. You're the Silver Conference co-champion to me. Consider your dream fulfilled." The clouds started to give way to the sun as I observed the newly decorated headstone.

"Umbreon is finally at peace despite all that has happened to him. He's the proud father of an Eevee and has a beautiful mate that loves him more than anything in this world. Even though it may hurt at first, he'll tell his daughter all about you. Don't think for a second that you'll be truly forgotten." I could see a faint light from Ho-Oh's feather in my pocket while the clouds completely disappeared. Again, I sat in silence until I felt ready to leave.

"When my time is up, we can talk about anything for as long as we want. Farewell for now."

Walking through the city brought back waves of nostalgia now that my life was about to drastically change. My first time here was for a gym battle that was sloppy despite me getting the win. My second time was to console a broken Pokémon that had only an Espeon by his side. Having been wild for so long, I could understand if they left me after I brought them to the Mahogany Town Pokémon Center or even after I consoled them at the grave site. Following me into the unknown was a new start in their eyes and I'm glad I could deliver on my promise to give them that new start.

Then there was everyone else on my team. I had no idea how bad everyone had it until that night Espeon acted as a medium near Tohjo Falls. My team worked through their problems along the way and they're only looking ahead in life with everything that has happened since the Indigo Plateau.

On my way to the west gate, a rainbow was on the horizon despite it being a long time after the rain stopped. The warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze was at my back. I took a deep breath as I stood in place to enjoy the scenery. I was eternally grateful for everything I had experienced in my journey.

Sometimes, all someone needs in life is one thing: a second chance.

Chapter End Notes

This story was a blast to write. Yes it was tough finding time to write, yes I posted most of my chapters between 3am and 4am local time (sometimes even later), yes I realized that the process of making all of these characters and connecting everything together was hard, but man oh man... there was a certain feeling I got when I posted a
new chapter or got in a groove. It was a mix of me feeling good that people liked my work and me hoping that I made someone's day.

Again, I thank you, the reader, for taking the time to understand how the story was developing as it went along and how everything was connected. Heck, I am always surprised to hear how people even found this because there are thousands upon thousands of Pokémon stories floating around on here, even with a filtered search. Although it is finished, I will do my best to respond to any PMs and/or reviews regarding the story. What matters to me is that I sincerely hope you enjoyed the story from start to finish.

And as always... have a great day :)

-W4f aka Just_1_Man_Writing_A_Story_For_You

End Notes

You may be thinking "I thought I've seen this on Fanficiton dot net" and you'd be right. When I signed up for Ao3, I thought Writer4fun was taken; it wasn't, but I typed too fast and had a character off here or there a few times I tried to sign up. Because I wanted to get to posting as soon as possible, I took the name "Just_1_Man_Writing_A_Story_For_You" so Writer4fun (case sensitive) on Fanficiton dot net and Just_1_Man_Writing_A_Story_For_You are the same person. I decided to post with the Just_1_Man profile since my first work was under this name. The good news is that I do write for fun and I am a guy writing a story for you to enjoy :). Have a good day!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!