Summary

Hello there! My name is FURY. People affectionately refer to me as the S.H.I.E.L.D. DIRECTOR.

Now tell me. Are you a boy? Or are you a girl?

Wherein Phil Coulson is a pokemon trainer, and the Avengers are his pokemon.

Notes

So I’ve been playing a lot of Pokemon lately, and then this happened. Based primarily on the game ’verse, with Marvel characters (some trainers, some pokemon). The rating is pretty much for language. Unbeta'd. Enjoy!
Hello there! My name is FURY. People affectionately refer to me as the S.H.I.E.L.D. DIRECTOR.

Now tell me. Are you a boy? Or are you a girl?

► BOY

Let's begin with your name. What is it?

► COULSON

Right... so your name is COULSON.

► YES

This is my second in command. ...Erm, what was her name again?

► DOUCHE

...Er, was it DOUCHE?

► NO

► HILL

So it was HILL?

► YES

That's right! I remember now! Her name is HILL!

COULSON! Your very own S.H.I.E.L.D. mission is about to begin! Let's go!

Phil Coulson woke up with a confused frown.

It… wasn’t the strangest dream he’d ever had. At the very least it was somewhat based on actual events, because today was the day – the day his new mission began. What time was it? Was it daylight savings time? He wasn’t late, was he?

He quickly changed and hurried downstairs. As if on cue, the second his foot hit the ground floor, the device on his wrist buzzed with an incoming call from his mother. He lifted his arm and clicked a button, bringing forth a projected screen.

“Phil! So your S.H.I.E.L.D. Comm Device is working again, I see?”

“It never stopped, Mom, I just had to download the upgrade,” he replied with a helpless smile.
“Oh, you mean for the map feature, right? Do you know how to use it?” she asked, her expression turning thoughtful. “Don’t you just click the map icon in the corner to open the interface?”

“Oh, yeah. Mom I don’t mean to be rude.”

“Oh! That’s right! Director Fury was looking for you. How exciting! Well, I won’t keep you. Bye!”

Phil frowned and wanted to ask how she knew about that, but she’d already disconnected so he just lowered his arm and considered the news himself. Today was the day, and he was going to get his very own pokemon.

It wasn’t as though he hadn’t commanded pokemon before – or worked with them for that matter – but they were all S.H.I.E.L.D.’s. As an agent, most of his assignments were human focused. While he had been perfectly content with that, you couldn’t just say no when someone as big of a deal as Doctor Strange said you had great potential as a trainer instead. Correction: Fury wouldn’t let you. Not after he’d lined up the top trainers S.H.I.E.L.D. had to offer and they were all dismissed in favor of the guy waiting to file a report.

That was yesterday, and now Phil was going to become a trainer. His inner ten-year-old screamed with glee at the chance to go on a pokemon journey, even if it was around two decades too late, but his current self was a bit uncertain. Still, orders were orders, so he would reserve judgment. One way or another, it was sure to be interesting.

As usual, the moment Phil stepped onto the Helicarrier he became Agent Coulson, professionalism personified. He made his way to Fury’s office, mindful of some of the other S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel as he passed by. The trainers in particular regarded him with disdain when they thought he wasn’t looking, but it was easy to ignore.

Reaching Fury’s office, he raised a hand to knock, but was interrupted by a familiar face.

“Hey, Coulson!” called Agent Sitwell, Coulson’s partner on the field. “You’re getting your first pokemon today, right?”

“Hey Sitwell; yeah,” he said, somewhat sheepishly. “Sorry, it looks like you’re going to need a different partner here on out.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s not your fault Fury called in a favor from Doctor Strange – or that you were singled out. Anyway, who knows? Maybe I’ll be reassigned too,” he mused before chuckling. “You’re looking for Fury, right? He’s down in the lab with the pokemon.”

“Oh- really?” said Coulson, frowning and checking his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech. “Thanks. I had better get going, then,” he said, and turned to leave.

“Wait a sec,” said Sitwell, reaching into his pocket. When Coulson turned back around, Sitwell was holding up a uniquely shaped white and purple bottle. “This is a potion. Use it in case your new pokemon gets hurt,” he smiled.

“That much I already knew,” Coulson smiled back as he accepted the gift, sliding it carefully into his pocket. “Thank you,” he said earnestly, and bade his fellow agent farewell.

Fury was down in the lab, back turned to Coulson as the agent stood in the door frame, preoccupied with something on the corner table. That was just fine, because Coulson found himself preoccupied with the table on the right; the one that held three pokeballs.
His curiosity piqued as he wondered what sort of pokemon were inside. Would there be a fire type pokemon, like Growlithe, or maybe a fighting type like Tyrogue? Would he even recognize any, or instead have no idea what he was choosing between? There were reportedly over seven hundred different known pokemon, and... well, he knew the first 150 like the back of his hand? Kind of. Maybe.

“You can come in,” Fury called, without bothering to turn.

“Sir,” Coulson acknowledged, walking into the lab.

Fury took another moment to finish up whatever he was working on at the table before turning around and walking over to Coulson and the pokeball table.

“Do you know why you’re here, Agent Coulson?” the director asked casually.

“Because Doctor Strange singled me out among S.H.I.E.L.D. as the trainer with the greatest potential,” he replied factually. Fury only nodded, so Coulson took the opportunity to continue. “What I don’t know is why the sudden interest in pokemon trainers, and why you called Strange down here in the first place to identify the ones with most promise. What is this new mission, Sir?”

Rather than responding immediately Fury strode over to the PC, typing up quick commands. Suddenly the wall lit up with a projected map of the Marvel region – it matched the upgraded one Fury had given him the download for. It wasn’t so much an upgrade as it was a S.H.I.E.L.D. modification that included useful annotations, designations for various safe houses across the region, and a few small icons of a yellow skull against a green circle dispersed throughout different locations.

“What is this?” Coulson asked.

“Have you heard of Team Hydra?”

Coulson blinked. “The pokemon crime syndicate? I thought they were only a minor threat, Sir.”

“‘Were’ being the key word here,” said Fury. “With more appearances and still an irritatingly limited knowledge of their operations, our intelligence has reason to believe that Team Hydra could become a more serious threat. If it ever does come to that, S.H.I.E.L.D. will need more elite trainers. Trainers who could bring together a team of remarkable pokemon, to fight the battles that we alone can’t.”

Coulson went quiet for a moment. “So you’re not just giving me a pokemon to compete in the Marvel League,” he joked lightly, in place of a direct response. Everything Fury had said… Coulson didn’t doubt his skills as an agent, not in the least, but as a trainer? Just because some guy wearing a cape of all things said so? It was a lot of pressure, and he had no experience.

“I’d encourage that, actually,” said Fury. “The more league badges you have, the more respect you command – not just from pokemon, but people; too. Trust me Coulson, you wouldn’t believe the number of people who try to keep you from going on ‘this bridge’ or ‘that route’ because the ‘pokemon are dangerous’ and they don’t think you have enough badges,” he seethed. “The motherfucking audacity…”

“Speaking from experience, Sir?” Coulson raised an eyebrow.

Fury didn’t respond. “Besides,” he went on instead, “gym battles are good practice for the real fights. So you go right ahead,” he waved a hand, “participate in the Marvel league, collect gym badges, challenged the Fantastic Four for all I care – just keep the real mission a priority. On that note…” with the click of a button the map disappeared, and Fury walked over to the table with the
“Are you ready to select your first pokemon, Agent Coulson?”

“Yes, Sir,” Coulson replied, pushing his nerves aside as he looked once again at the pokeballs on the table, eyes glowing with excitement. Fury chuckled.

“These pokemon aren’t as experienced as the ones you’ve worked with before,” he warned. “In fact, their experience is relatively low. It’s the job of a trainer to see to their growth, and in your case, grow with them. But,” he reached out a hand and set it on the first pokeball, “that doesn’t mean I didn’t personally capture each of them for their potential.”

There was that word again: potential. A sudden thought worried him. “Will I be assigned more pokemon as I progress through the region, Sir?” he asked.

Fury gave him a plain look. “You won’t be assigned shit. The pokemon you choose today will become yours and yours alone, and the rest of your team is on you. Now, are you ready to see your choices or not?”

Coulson couldn’t help but smile in relief. “By all means, Sir,” he took a step back.

It was just as Fury picked up the first pokeball that Coulson heard the door open behind him in a near-slam. Fury looked over Coulson’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow, lowering his hand.

“Is there a problem, Agent?”

Coulson stepped aside and turned to see the S.H.I.E.L.D. second in command, ex-field agent and current pokemon trainer, Agent Maria Hill. She surprisingly didn’t have any pokemon of her own, but most of the pokemon at S.H.I.E.L.D. had been trained by her.

Right now she wore her standard field uniform and her lips were pursed in a tight line as she stalked into the room, a single pokeball clutched in her hand.

“Yes,” Hill said shortly, holding up the pokeball, “there is. This pokemon may have impressed you, Sir, but respectfully, it’s better off boxed – or gotten rid of entirely.”

Fury did not look impressed. “It is a single, low-level pokemon, Hill, and the one I assigned you for this mission. I understood the difficulty after it made rounds with some of the less adept trainers, but now you’re telling me that even you couldn’t handle it?”

“With more time I could, easily, but the mission begins today and I can’t work with this one. No trainer can, not unless you want to delay the mission for this.”

“No,” Fury sighed in irritation as he looked at the pokeball, “not for one pokemon. All right, Hill; you’ve worked with all three of these starters. Go ahead and select your preferred.”

With relief Hill looked to the table, frowning at the empty space before her eyes flashed to the pokeball Fury held. Quickly she advanced forward, depositing her pokeball to the nearest stand – a stand which happened to be the otherwise ignored Phil Coulson – and claiming the pokeball from Fury, eyes shining with satisfaction.

Coulson, for all his professionalism, couldn’t help but feel somewhat cheated when she took the pokemon that Fury had been about to show him. Fury must have picked up on that, because he cast him a gruff nod.

“Sorry Coulson. Agent Hill is going on this mission too, and as both S.H.I.E.L.D.’s senior trainer and second in command, her pokemon selection takes priority.”
“Understood, Sir,” Coulson nodded, as his attention drifted to the pokeball that had been shoved into his hands. “What’s wrong with this one?” he wondered. When he looked up, both Fury and Hill were looking back at him, the latter with a less than friendly expression.

Hill clicked her tongue impatiently. “It’s constantly loafing around, quick to flee the training room if it gets even the slightest opportunity, tried avoiding its pokeball through the damn vents of all things, and disregards its trainer’s commands in favor of its own.”

Coulson looked back at Hill.

Why did it feel like he was the one being criticized, here? Not that those traits described him, but the tone she took was very berating. He just offered her a small shrug. “Maybe it knows its own capabilities better.”

The trainer’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe you’re right, Coulson.”

“Agent Hill,” Fury interrupted. He was ignored.

“Maybe you should demonstrate how to use that pokemon. You do have the potential for it.” She spoke icily. Coulson’s hand tightened around the pokeball. A battle? Now?

“Agent Hill, that’s enough,” Fury cut in again.

“Director Fury,” Hill said patiently, eyes still steady on Coulson, “you’re sending him on this mission too. He’s going to come across other trainers. You know what happens when two trainers lock eyes, right?” She asked, speaking to Coulson again.

His arm began to shake, which honestly, it didn’t make sense; even at his most nervous, maintaining resolve was what he did. It became a lot clearer when he realized that it wasn’t him shaking, but the item in his hand.

He dropped his eyes from Hill to the pokeball, lifting it up to get a better look at the opaque object as it struggled in his grasp. The pokemon inside… did it want to battle?

The pokeball gave another violent shake, and Coulson took that as confirmation. He looked back up at the other agent. She was smirking.

“Well?”

*Rival HILL wants to battle!*

“I accept your challenge.”

*Go…!*
“Go, Misdreavus!”

Hill’s pokemon – Misdreavus, apparently – wasn’t one Coulson had seen before. It floated in the space between them and was almost entirely dark blue, save for bits of its – hair? – tattering from its head that were dark red, matching its eyes and a line of round beads around its neck. He didn’t know what type it was, either. Dark, if he had to guess, but maybe psychic or ghost?

At any rate, he wasn’t given much time to think before his own pokeball jostled impatiently. Right. It was time to figure out what was inside this thing. He pulled back the pokeball in his arm, and threw.

“Go!”

The pokemon emerged in a burst of light.

Coulson would have liked to say he knew what this one was, but all he could come up with was ‘purple scorpion-thing with wings.’

“Gligar,” Fury supplied as he crossed his arms and leaned against the table. “Dual-type, ground and flying. You two had better not screw up the lab,” he warned, though whether he was talking to the pokemon or the trainers, Coulson was uncertain.

Hill put a hand on her hip and looked over at Coulson patronizingly.

“Gligar, attack!” he called.

“Misdreavus, psywave!”

Gligar spread its blue wings and jumped up to take flight, but made no move to attack, as Coulson had hoped. Instead it just breezed around the offending psywave before turning its back on the misdreavus to look at Coulson just as patronizingly as Hill had.

The agent’s fist tightened in frustration. He’d called the pokemon out to battle, what more did it want from him?

“You need to do better than that,” Hill explained disdainfully. “’Attack’? You don’t know what you’re doing, Coulson. Even the gligar can see that.”

In response, said gligar swooped around and stuck a large pink tongue out at Hill, causing her to scowl. Well, at least it wasn’t on her side either.

Coulson just had to think; he knew about pokemon, at least he thought he did. Sure he’d been a kid, but how much had really changed? Gligar, dual-type, ground and flying. Inexperienced, so it probably didn’t know even four of its moves yet – in fact, two was more likely if it’d been intended as a starter.

Gust? No. That was flying, but this wasn’t a bird, and he wasn’t going to waste a move figuring that out and looking even more foolish. What else would it know? Tackle? That didn’t seem right either. Looking back at the pokemon, a thought occurred to him. Maybe its type was different, but it did have that barb…
“Gligar, poison sting!”

As soon as the order was issued Gligar swooped abruptly towards the misdreavus, jabbing it with its poisoned tail. The pokemon staggered back at the hit, and Hill’s eyes widened for a split second.

“Poison sting, again!” He commanded at that instant, taking advantage of Hill’s shock to get in two attacks before she and Misdreavus could counter.

“Psywave, Misdreavus!”

This time Gligar was close, too close to evade the attack, and took the damage. Coulson was worried initially but Gligar still soared strong, so he called for another poison sting.

“Growl!” Hill called then, and Misdreavus floated back quickly, opened its mouth, and elicited a ghastly sound towards Gligar. This one Coulson knew; Gligar’s attacks wouldn’t be as strong from here on out.

Looking at how little damage the misdreavus had accumulated, it didn’t bode well. Coulson didn’t want to keep commanding the same thing, but he couldn’t exactly put the battle on pause to try to figure out a different attack. The best he could do was go with another poison sting while trying to identify its second move.

“Spite!” A problem Hill clearly was not having. Misdreavus’ spite didn’t do Gligar any damage, yet with every new use of ‘spite’ his pokemon was getting more worn out. What was it? A weakening move? Would Hill’s next attack take Gligar out? She was playing with him; drawing this out deliberately by switching to non-attack moves. He didn’t know her hand, but he did know that mindlessly repeating ‘poison sting’ would be playing right into it.

It was time for something different. Gligar was part ground-type, so he’d give it a shot.

“Gligar, sand-attack!”

Coulson’s eyes lit up triumphantly as Gligar brought its claws together and flecks of golden sand began to appear. Coulson had this; Gligar wouldn’t lose if Misdreavus’ evasion fell to the point where it couldn’t actually land an attack. They could even win.

Then, all thoughts of winning vanished when Gligar dispelled the sand, going instead for another poison sting. The attack landed, but so did Misdreavus’ – another psywave. This one sent Gligar flying back, landing on the ground roughly and skidding to a stop near Coulson.

The agent took a quick knee while the pokemon struggled to its feet. It was still hanging on, but it didn’t look good. Why didn’t Gligar just listen? It should have used sand-attack!

“That one’s not Gligar’s fault, you know,” said Hill, perfectly casual. “It’s yours. Sand-attack is a ground type move, and has no effect on pokemon that can levitate.”

Coulson’s jaw tightened. Levitate. He hadn’t realized… and of course, Hill was right. Looking at Gligar, he frowned. “So you do know better, after all.” As weak as the pokemon was, it still managed to give him a flat look as though that were the most obvious fact there was.

“Furthermore, Misdreavus is a ghost type. Poison attacks do half as much damage – not counting the effects of growl. For all of your attacks, my pokemon is still healthy enough to withstand at least eight more. As for your Gligar, I’d be surprised if it had enough energy for five.”

“What?”
“Spite,” Fury input with a sigh. “Gligar can’t use poison sting all day. Spite drains the number of
times a pokemon can use their last move. I’d call it a dirty trick, but what the hell were you
thinking, trying to do a sand-attack in the lab?” Fury glared.

“In all honesty,” Hill said to Coulson, “It’s a small wonder that you can command that pokemon at
all. Maybe you will become a half-decent trainer someday. You’re not one now, though, so forfeit
or I’m finishing it.”

Coulson looked over at Hill and her misdreavus. They were right. Hill not only had the type
defense, but she’d set up a situation where he and Gligar just couldn’t win. He sighed and lifted the
pokeball – only to have it stopped suddenly by a purple claw against his arm.

He blinked at the gligar. “You still want to fight?” The pokemon nodded. “That’s irresponsible.” It
narrowed its eyes. Coulson glared right back, but Gligar wasn’t letting up. Not before Coulson did,
anyway; he lowered his arm.

“Fine,” he relented, setting down the pokeball and reaching into his pocket. Gligar watched him
with suspicion still, but Coulson just put his free hand on its arm and pulled out the potion.

Gligar stepped away as if insulted, but Coulson kept it close. “Not like that you’re not,” he said
sternly, already spraying its injuries. “You want to fight, I want to help. It’s win-win. Now if you
think this battle is something we can still win too, then let’s do it.” With Gligar was back to full
health, Coulson stood and looked over to Hill. “Assuming that’s okay with you?”

“Healing items aren’t off-limits in trainer battles,” said Hill calmly. “They are, however, signs of
desperation. It won’t change anything.”

“We’ll see.”

“Psywave!”

“Poison sting!”

Both attacks hit, poison sting for a little, psywave for more. Gligar powered through the damage,
though, while Misdreavus’ deep blue body tinted to more of a purple and the ghost pokemon
looked somewhat ill.

Misdreavus was poisoned.

“Good,” said Coulson, “now again! Don’t let up!”

“Fight through the poison. No more stalling, Misdreavus. Psywave!”

This time Misdreavus’ attack came first, but Gligar was moving fast and didn’t try to dodge. Quite
the opposite, actually. It barreled straight into the psywave’s path, eyes too keen on its target to be
bothered with its own health, and delivered a powerful poisonous jab to the precise area where the
ghost pokemon had been poisoned.

After that the more powerful attacks of psywave seemed to catch up and Gligar collapsed again,
landing heavily on the floor. As for Misdreavus, the force of the sting pushed the ghost pokemon
back towards its trainer, where it began to levitate lower to the ground, looking weak but not
completely out.

Hill slipped a hand inside her pocket, but whatever she intended to do, she didn’t have time.
Misdreavus fainted to one last sliver of poison damage, just as Gligar pushed itself back up.
“We did it,” Coulson said in quiet astonishment. They had actually beaten Agent Hill in a pokemon battle.

“Don’t let it get to your head,” Hill said quickly, recalling Misdreavus to its pokeball. “If you hadn’t used that potion—”

“And if you hadn’t been so intent on proving to him that he couldn’t win, maybe you would have,” Fury said, pushing himself up from the table. “Report to medical, Agent Hill. Your pokemon needs it. Return to the lab once it’s been taken care of.”

“Sir,” Hill acknowledged, before looking back at Coulson. “Next time, you won’t win.” With that she straightened her posture and walked briskly out of the lab.

“Have I done something to offend Agent Hill, Director?” Coulson asked mildly.

“Probably,” Fury said, retrieving a potion from his cabinet. “She hasn’t just been training S.H.I.E.L.D.’s pokemon, but the trainers too. Then Strange went and told her they’re all second to you.” He strolled over to the gligar. “And then there’s this guy.”

It – no, he – gave Fury a foul look, which the director promptly ignored as he sprayed him with the potion, restoring him to full health once again.

“This guy’s been passed from trainer to trainer, and couldn’t be bothered to listen to a single one of them,” he glared at the gligar in irritation. It yawned.

“In fairness to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s trainers, I think he just really wanted to beat Agent Hill,” Coulson reasoned, remembering the way the pokeball shook right before he’d called him out.

“Maybe, but he still listened.” Fury turned to regard Coulson for a moment, before looking back down at Gligar. “At any rate, this will be your new pokemon.”

“I don’t get to pick anymore?” He asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

“Well?” Fury gave him a dubious look that the pokemon echoed.

“No.”

“Good, because I’m sure as hell not dealing with it.” To that, Gligar switched from being cross with Coulson to sticking his tongue out at Fury.

“Hill said this pokemon impressed you?” Coulson prompted.

Fury looked down at the gligar, still waving its tongue absurdly. “I wouldn’t go that far,” he snorted, “but it’s certainly unique.” He walked back over to his table, setting down the empty potion bottle and picking up a small black device before turning back to Coulson.

“You know that all pokemon have a special ability, depending on the species. For Misdreavus, it was the ability to levitate. Some other pokemon species have more options, but even then it’s still one or the other. Gligar, for instance,” he gestured towards it. “Most are either born with the ability to keep their attack power from being lowered, or increased their evasiveness in a sandstorm.”

Coulson couldn’t help but think of how helpful that first one might have been in the battle earlier, but remained quiet and waited for Fury to continue.
“Some pokemon, a rarer few, have what’s considered a hidden ability. Immunity to poison, in Gligar’s case.”

“Wait,” Coulson held up a hand, “a hidden ability? How does-”

“It’s complicated,” Fury dismissed quickly. “New generation thing; let’s not get into it.”

“Right,” Coulson said skeptically. “So… this gligar is immune to poisons?”

“No. This gligar never misses.”

“It- what?” Coulson looked down at Gligar; he looked bored.

“He has an ability that’s usually found in bird pokemon,” Fury explained. “One that prevents him from losing accuracy. It’s not a regular skill for this species to have, so you can understand my interest. Even against pokemon with raised evasion- or so I think. Haven’t been able to work with him enough to figure out everything,” he gave it another irritated look, to which the gligar brazenly snapped his claw.

“Regardless,” Fury stepped forward, holding out the black device for Coulson. “That battle you had with Agent Hill was as impressive as it was downright embarrassing. Take this Pokedex with you on your mission. You’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Coulson gingerly took the device and inspected it with interest. He discovered his S.H.I.E.L.D. ID number etched into the back surface.

Fury nodded. “You still have to see R&D for pokeballs, and go to medical for healing items. Gligar could use a check-up after that battle, too. Remember, both of you,” he stressed, “Pokecenters are there to help.”

Gligar seemed to disagree, and crossed his claws to let it be known. Coulson gave him an admonishing look before returning his attention to Fury.

“Is there anything else, Sir?”

“Yes, actually,” the director said. “You should give your pokemon a code name.”

“A code name?” Coulson asked, amused. “Is that anything like a nickname?”

“No.”

“Ah,” Coulson said, attention back to the gligar, who returned a challenging gaze.

“Just come up with something.” Fury said, walking away and returning a moment later with a clipboard in hand. “Makes mission reports a hell of a lot easier, none of that ‘Growlithe did something’ crap. Well that’s great, Agent, which growlithe? Or are you talking about the enemy, did they have a growlithe too?” Fury rolled his eyes. “Code names, Coulson. Every S.H.I.E.L.D. pokemon gets one.”

Coulson nodded and knelt, eye-level with Gligar as he thought about his ability, the one usually associated with birds. The one where he didn’t miss, despite the circumstance.

“How about…” he watched the pokemon tense in defiance, as though preparing for the worst suggestion ever and ready to respond with a poison sting if needed. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that.
“Hawkeye?”

The pokemon was no less guarded, though his defiant expression slipped into one of contemplation. After several moments, Gligar lifted his claw and let out a short, content growl.

Coulson smiled and looked up at Fury. “Hawkeye,” he confirmed. “Return,” he added as an afterthought. The gligar became a silhouette of red light before it returned to the pokeball. Coulson stood and tucked it into his pocket.

“We’ll get you a bag, too,” Fury said idly, “but now I have other things to take care of, and so do you. Do you understand your mission?”

“Travel through the Marvel region. Investigate Team Hydra. Put a team together.”

Fury nodded approvingly. “We have S.H.I.E.L.D. tech to communicate; you should have access to everything else you need to get started. And Coulson.”

“Sir?”

“I put you on this mission for a reason, not just because Doctor Strange deemed it so. You’re a damn good agent, and with time, I think you could become a damn good trainer. Despite that, I’m not looking for good. I’m looking for the best – the very best. So, Trainer Coulson, can you be the very best?”

Maybe earlier he would have doubted his answer. Now, though, after teaming up with Hawkeye and winning their first battle, he was invigorated.

“Like no one ever was, Sir.”

“Good. I want regular reports. Now get going.”

Coulson nodded and saw himself out, to get the supplies he needed and to leave the Helicarrier. His new S.H.I.E.L.D. mission had just begun.

Saving progress...
After their initial team-up, battle, and victory, Phil Coulson didn’t think he was going to have many problems working with Hawkeye, despite what Fury and Hill had said back at the Helicarrier. Of course, that was before he set off on Route-616.

So far, Phil liked to think that he’d been doing everything appropriately. He got a bag from S.H.I.E.L.D. – a black leather messenger bag that surprisingly suited him without looking too tacky – he received potions and pokeballs to help fill it, and he’d listened calmly when one ‘Mr. Lee’ from the first town demonstrated how to capture a pokemon, which brought him to the current issue: actually catching one for himself.

He needed more than one pokemon for his team; that was just common sense. This oddish, for example. According to the Pokedex it was a dual grass and poison type, so it would make for an ideal capture; he needed to cover his bases, after all. After it had taken a few hits, Phil took a deep breath like he had so many times already, reached for another pokeball, and moved his arm back to throw.

Only to have Hawkeye roughly blunder into him, causing Phil to drop the pokeball and fall back to the ground, almost certainly bruising in the process.

*Wild Oddish fled from battle!*

“Hawkeye!” Phil snapped, frustration growing. His inability to capture a single pokemon this evening had nothing to do with his own capture skills, and everything to do with the gligar’s interference. From ‘accidentally’ hitting wild pokemon harder than usual to knock them back into the tall grass to distracting Phil for long enough to make him lose track of them, Hawkeye was clearly against the idea of a new teammate.

“While I’m glad you learned the ‘knock off’ attack, you do not need to demonstrate it. Particularly not on me, when I am trying to catch a pokemon.” He spoke as patiently as he could manage – which at this point, wasn’t saying very much. At all.

Hawkeye swatted at the fallen pokeball, now cracked after its drop. He seemed far too proud about this. Phil clenched his jaw. He honestly thought after the battle with Hill things would be okay. What more did he have to do to get through to this pokemon?

Phil picked himself up and reached into his bag, withdrawing a pokeball. “Hawkeye, return,” he said clearly, giving the gligar just enough time to turn and glare at him before it disappeared in red light once again.

“It’s time to stand down,” he told the pokeball. “You may not approve of any of the pokemon I’ve been trying to catch today, but our mission is to assemble a team. You alone aren’t enough to handle everything that’s going to come our way, and until you can deal with that, I’m going to catch new team members on my own.”

The pokeball shook in protest, but Phil shook his head. “Not this time,” he said, and tucked the item away in his bag before opening the pouch that contained his empty pokeballs. He only had three standard pokeballs left, but S.H.I.E.L.D. had also given him an ultra ball, two great balls, a dusk ball, a net ball, and a heavy ball.

He pulled out a standard pokeball. Hopefully one of the three he had left was enough to catch at
least one pokemon; he didn’t want to have to resort to one of the more specialized balls so soon.

On his own now, Phil continued to look out for any sign of wild pokemon wandering amid the trees and tall grass. He hoped that without Hawkeye this venture would be easier, but it just proved difficult in a different way. He caught glimpses of wild pokemon here and there, but they were either too far away or too quick for Phil to reliably engage them.

This changed when Phil came across a dog-like pokemon, keeping low to the ground as if on the prowl, attention on a patch of grass a few yards in front of it. Phil became anxious; this was his chance. He took two quick steps forward and threw, distracting the pokemon’s attention just before the pokeball hit it and it disappeared inside.

Phil eyed the pokeball intently now, determined not to lose track of it – and determined to make a capture.

The pokeball shook once.

Then, twice.

Instead of a third shake, the device exploded open and the pokemon re-emerged, leaving the now defunct pokeball at the base of its paws as it turned toward Phil with a heated growl.

Phil’s frown at the failed capture turned to one of slight worry as he flipped out his Pokedex, something he probably should have done in the first place.

*Poochyena: dark type. It has a very tenacious nature. Its acute sense of smell lets it chase a chosen prey without ever losing track.*

Okay. Something he definitely should have done in the first place. The poochyena was advancing. Well, there was an easy fix to that; he’d just catch it. A pokemon with a trait like that was bound to be useful on his team, anyway.

The poochyena took one more step and then jumped to attack, but Phil moved quickly, and with his offhand he flung another pokeball and pocketed his Pokedex as the poochyena disappeared inside. This time it didn’t pause to shake. The pokemon exploded out again in an instant and charged after him.

Phil evaded to the side and heard its fangs snap loudly together in the space right next to him. After it missed it barked and turned around, but Phil had already dug out another capture ball – his ultra ball, this time, because agent or not he didn’t know that this was a pokemon he could outrun. When the pokemon disappeared for a third time Phil sprinted back to put more distance between him and the ultra ball, just in case, and listened for the sounds of the device.

One shake.

Two.

A third.

*Argh! Almost had it!*

“Damnit,” he uttered, reaching into his bag once more as he heard the poochyena pick up to a run. Then, Phil abruptly stopped and whirled around to deliver one last throw.

Mid-air the pokeball burst open and Hawkeye emerged, gliding easily with the momentum from
Phil’s throw and barreling offensively into the poochyena to knock it off its course. With a yelp the
pokemon was thrown to its side, but scrambled back to its feet and fled quickly into the grass.

Phil blinked. Was it really that easy? His hand drifted back to the Pokedex to dig up more
information, still wary about the pokemon that could unfailingly track scents.

*It turns tail and runs, however, if the foe strikes back.*

Ah. So it was that easy. Phil sighed in relief and put the Pokedex away again, took a deep breath,
and looked up at Hawkeye. He looked about as smug as Phil had suspected.

“Thank you,” he said regardless, because all things considered, he’d expected Hawkeye to glide
around and mock him for at least a round or two before actually helping – provided he would help
at all.

Hawkeye acknowledged his thanks by crossing his claws and continuing to look ridiculously
comfortable with the situation.

“This doesn’t change what we talked about earlier,” Phil said stressfully. “If anything, it just
proves how much more we do need a team. I suppose this isn’t something I can handle alone,
either,” he sighed.

Hawkeye was silent and looked at Phil with more seriousness than he was used to. Phil raised an
eyebrow curiously, but Hawkeye just narrowed his eyes with a smirk Phil could almost describe as
fond. Then the pokemon hopped nearer to Phil and reached out to tap its pokeball, returning on his
own.

Phil frowned. He wanted to find that reassuring, but if anything that just made him more uncertain
of where he and Hawkeye stood right now. He might have to think more on that later, but for
now…

“Let’s call it a day,” he put the pokeball away and looked around, finding the main road again
quickly and taking the path back to town. They could both use a rest at the Pokecenter for the
night, and anyway, Phil needed more pokeballs. Hopefully it wouldn’t be a wasted purchase, but
tomorrow would tell.

- 

The next day, Phil returned to Route-616. He wasn’t ready to give up on catching another
pokemon, not yet. Besides, there was still an area he hadn’t gotten around to checking out, where a
part of the dirt path veered off into a small rocky canyon with paved stone.

When he found this path again he ventured down it with curiosity. It seemed like a natural
progression of the route, and yet so different. His steps switched from a shuffle on the dirt to
echoing clicks on the pavement and the air felt more pristine, almost in a mechanical way. Phil
turned on the first corner and was surprised to see the canyon continue not as a natural structure,
but as a wide, rigid hallway with the walls cut perfectly straight. He felt like he had wandered into
the corridor of a mansion of sorts, with the open sky still above him.

Then, just as Phil took another step to continue his exploration, Maria Hill appeared at the end of
the hall. They locked eyes.

“Coulson?”

Great. Just what he needed.
“Checking out the Marvel League, huh?” she asked as she approached. “Well, forget it. You can’t challenge the Fantastic Four until you’ve collected all eight gym badges. On that note, have you caught any new pokemon?”

“Not yet,” Phil replied calmly. “When I find the right pokemon, perhaps.” There was no way he was admitting his capture difficulties to Hill, not a chance.

“That’s naïve,” Hill said plainly. “You’re not going to get very far if you don’t plan to capture anything but your final intended team. Starting out, you need to work with what’s available.” She shifted to the side and lifted her hand, revealing three pokeballs attached to her utility belt before she removed two and held them casually.

“Being a pokemon trainer is about progression, and pokemon are interchangeable. Any member of a team could prove itself well enough to merit a permanent spot and a code name,” she said as she looked over the pokeballs carefully, “just as any pokemon could fall short of what makes for an ideal fighter and be replaced.” She looked back at Phil. “Even if it’s your first pokemon. Sentiment is nice, but it doesn’t necessarily mean victory. On that note, how is Hawkeye?”

“Doing well, thanks.” Phil said curtly.

Logically, he knew that there was merit to the things she said; he knew he needed more pokemon, and Hill’s strategy for team building was the one he’d attempted from the start. Then she brought up Hawkeye. Difficult as he was, Phil had no intention to replace him and didn’t appreciate the implication that he would – or the reminder that he was having more trouble than he’d let on.

“Good. So he can battle.”

Was she serious? “We just battled yesterday,” he argued.

“Maybe,” Hill stepped back, “but a lot can change in a day. The difference between one pokemon and three, for example.”

“That’s hardly fair.”

“Do you think Team Hydra will be fair?” she asked incredulously. “That’s battling. Six versus three, one versus two; the winner is determined by who still has useable pokemon, not how many. But enough talk; a demonstration will be far more effective. Spearow!”

Damnit. “Hawkeye! Knock off!”

“Peck!”

The pokemon collided in mid-air, with Hawkeye wrenching one of Spearow’s wings and Spearow jabbing Hawkeye with its beak.

“Fury cutter!” Hill said quickly, launching Spearow into an assault that hit Hawkeye three times. He looked roughed up at this point, but then again, so did the Spearow.

“Poison sting!”

“Return!”

Hill suddenly returned the spearow, and sent out a mankey in its place. Phil didn’t know what he’d expected, but it certainly wasn’t a fighting type, that flying types had both defensive and offensive advantages over.
The switch out didn’t deter Hawkeye; much to Phil’s satisfaction, he just redirected his poison sting to focus in on Mankey, jabbing it sharply and leaving it poisoned.

“Mankey, low kick!”

And now Hill was going for a fighting move. Really?

“Quick attack, Hawkeye!”

Despite issuing the order second, Hawkeye attacked first, this follow-up attack working with the poison to weaken it significantly. Then in retaliation, Mankey jumped up and delivered its low kick to Hawkeye, toppling him from the air and sending him in a heavy crash down.

“Hawkeye, quick attack, one more time!” Phil commanded, but the gligar didn’t respond. Phil’s eyes widened. Hill recalled Mankey.

_Hawkeye fainted!_

“But…” Phil said helplessly, a pain in his chest as he looked at his fallen companion, “the type advantage…”

“Isn’t everything,” Hill finished, reaching into her bag as she walked towards him. She wore an expression of indifference that he found instantly infuriating.

“Aren’t you happy you won?” he asked with a bitter edge.

“Honestly? No. Not when you’ve made it so easy.” She paused to toss him something. He caught it reflexively. “Catch more pokemon. We’ll battle again.”

She disappeared behind him, but Phil didn’t bother to look after her. Instead he looked down at the max revive in his hand, and ran to his pokemon.

“Hawkeye,” he said, dropping to a knee and using the formula. Hawkeye’s damage then disappeared and he lifted his head slowly, but he didn’t get up. Phil’s frown deepened. While Hawkeye was once again completely healthy, he didn’t seem to be taking the loss well. Phil couldn’t blame him; neither was he.

“Let’s take a breather,” Phil decided, reaching into his bag and pulling out the food he had packed for today’s training session. It was hours too early for lunch, but he didn’t really care.

Not that it turned out to matter; they rested against the stone wall for a good hour before either actually touched the food. They ended up staying there for close to two hours in total, chatting lightly while recovering their resolve. Well, Phil chatted; Hawkeye listened.

Finally Phil recalled Hawkeye and stood to leave, back to the main area of the route and back to the town. It was time to move on from this place, he decided.

So naturally, on his way there was a rustle in the bushes, and a wild pidgey hopped out. Phil looked at it critically. Well, Hill had her spearow.

“Hawkeye!” he threw the pokeball, “knock off!” Hawkeye emerged and executed the move perfectly, leaving the pidgey in a weakened state and gliding around it before stopping to block off its exit path.

Phil, who already had his hand on a new pokeball he’d purchased last night, gave Hawkeye a
questioning look. The pokemon looked back in brief resignation before returning his eyes to the
pidgey, making sure it didn’t get away.

Phil took a moment, but finally pulled out a pink heal ball and let it fly. One shake, two, and then
three.

Gotcha! Pidgey was caught!

While Phil walked over to retrieve his new pokemon, Hawkeye swooped back and landed, keeping
at a fair distance. Phil looked down at the heal ball with a small smile before tossing it lightly in
the air, calling the pokemon out.

Pidgey flapped its wings before him at eye level. The heal ball he’d used restored it to perfect
health.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” Phil said, “suddenly attacking like that. It was unwarranted.
Hopefully I’ve fixed some of the damage, though?” he asked earnestly. Pidgey continued to flap its
wings quickly as it looked down at itself and chirped contently.

“Good,” Phil held up the heal ball once again, and instead of recalling the pidgey, clicked it open
and snapped it in half with little effort. Pidgey blinked. Hawkeye looked over at him sharply. Phil
just smiled. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Take care.” With that the pidgey chirped one final
time and flew off. He watched it for a moment, tucked the two halves of the heal ball neatly back
into his bag, and then turned to Hawkeye.

“We don’t have to do things Hill’s way,” Phil said as he approached him. “Like Hill, I thought that
it would be better to catch a few more early on, but… maybe instead of forcing a team, we should
become one, first.” He stopped in front of Hawkeye, took a knee and extended his hand. “What do
you say?”

Hawkeye watched him carefully and looked down at his hand. Then the pokemon looked back up,
eyes gleaming as he grinned at Phil. He lifted his claw and hit it lightly against his palm.

Phil smiled back. They were just off their game, that was all. The next time Hill wanted to fight,
she wouldn’t find it so easy – no matter how many pokemon she had.

Until then, “think we can handle a gym?”

Hawkeye snapped his claw and raised it in the air with a gleeful cry.

Excellent. Phil thought so, too. “Let’s go, then. We have work to do.”
“So you would take more damage from grass, but you’re a flying type too, which means less damage. So, regular?” Phil sat against a tree in the shade, Hawkeye at his side.

They had just gotten on the forest path to the town of the first gym. Right away he was warned that there would be other trainers in the forest, which had given him pause. Phil wanted to be as prepared as he could be, and Hawkeye had been working hard, so now it was his turn.

“And the flying type takes more damage from rock and electric…” His Pokedex was open on his lap, and he had his wrist held up to scroll through the projected type matchup files on his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech. “Not ground, though. Which leaves you on equal footing with rock, and… immune to electricity, as well as ground?” Phil looked over at Hawkeye with a pleased smile.

Hawkeye looked bored and unimpressed.

“Well excuse me,” Phil said blankly, “would you prefer it if I figured out your weaknesses by accident?”

Hawkeye just rolled his eyes, so Phil elected to ignore him. “Ice and water,” he murmured to himself, frowning as he thought of their next destination. Lake Town. Would it be a water type gym? That could mean trouble. Phil wondered if there was anything they could do to combat something like that, in the same way Hill’s mankey had beaten them despite the type disadvantage.

Just as Phil went to pick up his Pokedex to overview Hawkeye’s moveset, his S.H.I.E.L.D. Comm Device chimed, and the type matchup interface was overridden by an incoming call screen. Hawkeye turned his head curiously.

“It’s Director Fury,” Phil informed, before sitting up and accepting the call.

“Agent Coulson,” Fury greeted with a nod once his image appeared.

“Director,” He nodded in turn. “Has something come up?”

“In your location? No. Consider this a courtesy call, to make sure the rookie trainer I sent off with the unmanageable pokemon isn’t dead yet.”

At the mention, Hawkeye took the opportunity to hop on Phil’s back, hooking one claw over his shoulder and sticking out the other to animatedly wave at Fury while Phil buckled under the sudden weight. Urgh.

Fury raised an eyebrow. “Hello to you too, Hawkeye. You two seem to be getting along,” he noted, looking back to Phil.

“Yes,” he replied, straightening his shoulders while Hawkeye snickered. “Relatively speaking.”

“Good. Any new pokemon I should add to your file?” He asked expectantly.

Phil faltered. “I caught a pidgey?”

“Are you asking me or telling me, Agent?”

“I released it.”
“Damnit, Coulson,” Fury replied, closing his eye and lifting a hand to rub his temple, “you-”

“Please, Sir,” Coulson held up a hand. Hawkeye did, too. “I know. Trust me I know; I got the whole lecture from Agent Hill before she proceeded to destroy us in our rematch. Either way, I’m not changing my mind.”

Fury gave him a hard look, but Phil just returned a polite smile. Finally the director sighed in recession. “Fine, fine. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m starting to,” he replied. Hawkeye echoed this sentiment with a short cheer.

“Well good luck, Coulson, because you still need it – and get a move on, will you? S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech shows that Hill’s already in Lake Town.” Fury paused, suddenly looking away from Phil and to the bottom corner of the interface. “That’s her now. Report back to me later; I expect you to have a badge. Dismissed.”

Fury disappeared, and the type matchup chart returned. Before Phil could address it, though, Hawkeye flipped off of his back to land directly in front of him, fixing Phil with an intent stare.

“It doesn’t matter where Hill is,” Phil replied, though it was half-hearted. He didn’t want this new piece of information to bother him as much as it did, but the idea of Hill being so much farther ahead irked him.

Hawkeye, too, because he responded by jabbing his claw through the holographic interface, effectively closing it.

“Fine,” Coulson said, standing up, “but only because I’m going to take more time to study later, at the next Pokecenter.”

It didn’t seem to matter to Hawkeye, who was now gliding around and punching his claws in the air in victory. Phil shook his head. He really needed to stop rewarding bad behavior.

He began to walk back to the main path ahead of them, looking it over. The forest itself he was less concerned about, but the trainers could be difficult. So far he’d only had two battles, and both of them with Hill. He couldn’t help but wonder how battles with other people would compare. Hill had done it, though, so he would too. This was his mission now, and with Team Hydra on the horizon, hopefully this first test of his mettle as a trainer wouldn’t be cause for too much worry.

-  

It wasn’t.

Phil didn’t want to say it was laughably easy, but it almost was. He was victorious against every trainer he faced that day, and with every victory, Hawkeye grew stronger. It also gave Phil a healthy boost in confidence about his own capabilities – and a healthy dose of respect for Agent Hill’s.

At the time of their first battle he had been amazed that he won, but it was never outside the realm of possibility. Then in battle two he’d been frustrated with his loss, but still believed them to be on equal footing but for number of pokemon. This hadn’t changed; that’s just how he thought about Hill, as an equal. A rival.

And then there were the forest trainers, who he was able to defeat in battle just as effortlessly as Hill’s latest win against him, whether they had one pokemon or four. He’d only needed to use one potion too, outside of battle after four consecutive wins. He and Hawkeye worked well together,
and that potential everyone had been going on about – well, he was starting to see it for himself, too.

Lake Town was a small place, and aptly named: in addition to the tall trees that made the town seem as much a part of the forest as the actual forest before it, the northern edge had a vast, scenic body of water. Just glimpsing it from the entrance made it easy to tell why the town was named for it.

Still, Phil wasn’t here to sightsee. After a visit to the Pokecenter where he reviewed type matchups and Hawkeye was healed, he went out in search of the first gym.

It was easier said than done. He always thought that gyms were supposed to be grand buildings with clear identifiers. In a small place like this it should have been easy to find, but Phil had no such luck. Even after asking a citizen to point him in the right direction, all he found was a sign that read ‘Lake City Gym,’ with no accompanying building. There was a large, grassy space where a building could be, but. Was he missing something?

“Excuse me?” Phil turned at the foreign voice, belonging to a young girl. “Are you looking for the gym leader?” she asked.

Phil blinked. “Yes,” He said in relief, “do you know where they are?”

“Yeah,” the girl nodded. “Since it’s evening, check by the lake. Um, good luck!”

“Thank you,” Phil nodded gratefully. So apparently, sightseeing was exactly what he should have done first. Well, there was no helping it now; he went off to check out the lake.

The lake was large and calm, with subtle waves that ruffled the crescent moon reflected on its surface. He scarcely had time to admire the view, though, before he was accosted by one of the fishermen from the dock, who gave him and old rod and insisted that he try it out. He did. All he could hook were magikarp, none of which he had the desire to catch, so he politely withdrew.

Then the other fisherman challenged him to a pokemon battle, and all he had were magikarp. Six of them. So yeah, that set Phil back somewhat.

He decided that it might be good to avoid docks in the near future as he took to walking along the shore, looking for the alleged gym leader and leaving Hawkeye out to glide alongside him for a second set of eyes. It was a good call, because it wasn’t long until Hawkeye was soaring forward at an increased speed. Phil had to jog to keep up, but it wasn’t very far until he could see what Hawkeye saw: a young brunette woman wearing tight grey from neck to toe with a brown fur tunic, bracers and boots, kneeling as she spoke to a small white and blue pokemon with yellow cheeks and a large, bushy tail. Curious, Phil took out his Pokedex.

Pachirisu: electric type. It makes electricity with pouches in its cheeks and shoots charges from its tail. It lives atop trees.

The pachirisu was the first to notice Phil, and quickly scurried behind the young woman. She watched it curiously and looked up at them before standing, and Phil did a double take. Was that a tail?

“Hello!” she greeted, while Pachirisu peeked out from behind her legs. “You startled her,” she said, matter-of-factly.

“Oh,” Phil blinked, “sorry about that...”
“That’s okay,” she nodded, looking down at the pokemon. “She’s just a bit spooked. Came from Black Mountain, you know. Oh, but who are you?” she asked. “I don’t recognize you from town.”

“Phil Coulson,” he supplied. “I’m not local; I’m actually here to challenge the gym leader.”

“The gym leader? That’s me!” She said happily, before her expression turned apologetic. “Sorry! I didn’t think there would be another one so soon. Anyway, I’m Squirrel Girl! Normal type is my specialty,” she smiled. “Seems only fair that I let you know, seeing as I get a sneak peek at your pokemon right here,” she turned cheerfully to Hawkeye, who smirked and responded with challenge.

“Oh, you think so?” Squirrel Girl grinned back. “Well it’s nice to meet you, Hawkeye, and you’re on!”

Phil paused. Okay, the facts that she was the local gym leader and went by the name ‘Squirrel Girl’ aside – “you can understand him?”

“Yep!” Squirrel Girl replied. “I can understand all pokemon. Cool, right? So, how about we battle tomorrow morning? I have to talk to Pachirisu, still.”

“Tomorrow is fine,” Phil said distractedly, taking in her words and remembering what she had mentioned just a moment ago. “You said something about Black Mountain?”

Then Squirrel Girl frowned, turning to look beyond the lake to the mountainous area just beyond it. “Yeah.” She held out her arm and the pachirisu hopped up, climbing to settle on her shoulder where she pet it lightly. “It was this little girl’s home, but lately pokemon have been disappearing, acting oddly, or both.” She looked worried. “Pachirisu’s friend disappeared a couple of weeks ago, so she was looking everywhere. When he finally turned up, he couldn’t remember her at all.”

“What?”

“Horrible, isn’t it?” she said sadly. “I want to check it out, but with my responsibilities as a gym leader… what?” she looked over at Hawkeye, who’d spoken up. Hawkeye proceeded to respond, leaving Phil feeling somewhat awkward and a little bit envious of her ability to speak to Hawkeye in a way that he couldn’t.

“You?” Squirrel Girl questioned. Phil cast Hawkeye a quick, critical look, before his expression softened. Scratch that. If he was going on about what Phil was almost certain he was going on about, then they already understood each other perfectly.

Squirrel Girl turned to look at Phil. “Hawkeye thinks that you two can look into it,” she confirmed through the translation.

“Yes, we can.”

“I’d be grateful, not going to lie, but with my responsibilities as a gym leader… what?” she looked over at Hawkeye, who’d spoken up. Hawkeye proceeded to respond, leaving Phil feeling somewhat awkward and a little bit envious of her ability to speak to Hawkeye in a way that he couldn’t.

“You?” Squirrel Girl questioned. Phil cast Hawkeye a quick, critical look, before his expression softened. Scratch that. If he was going on about what Phil was almost certain he was going on about, then they already understood each other perfectly.

Squirrel Girl turned to look at Phil. “Hawkeye thinks that you two can look into it,” she confirmed through the translation.

“Yes, we can.”

“I’d be grateful, not going to lie, but! It’s completely out of the way of the league, not to mention dangerous. I can’t just let a trainer volunteer for something like this,” she lectured, holding up a finger.

“I understand,” Phil said. “How about a trainer with a gym badge?” he asked innocently.

“Wha? Do you- oh! I see,” her grin returned. “A gym badge, huh? Yeah, that could work. Don’t think this means I’ll go easy on you!”

“I’m looking forward to it,” he replied with a smile of his own. “Until tomorrow, Squirrel Girl.”
“Nine o’clock. You better bring it!”

“I hope to. It was nice meeting you,” he nodded before he turned to leave, Hawkeye in tow.

As he walked away from the lake, he lifted his wrist to bring up the S.H.I.E.L.D. map. It immediately fixated on his location, and from there he dragged it around to focus on Black Mountain. It lacked the iconic little ‘H’ that denoted suspected Team Hydra activity, but Phil wasn’t so sure.

Despite the gym, Lake Town was a remote place, Black Mountain even more so. Even if Team Hydra had nothing to do with this, something had to be going on. Pokemon didn’t just disappear. One thing was certain, though: winning his first gym badge was now more important than ever.

Phil closed the map and went to his contacts. Badge or no, it was time to update Fury.
The Hero Badge

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to say thanks to everyone who's been reading so far! It keeps encouraging me; who doesn't love feedback? Slightly longer chapter this time, please enjoy.

One thing Phil probably should have asked Squirrel Girl before leaving was to confirm the location of her gym. Everyone he’d asked in passing just pointed him in the direction of the gym sign, so that’s where he was waiting now, with no leader in sight. Granted, it could be because he was ten minutes early, but it still concerned him.

Hawkeye, perched happily on the gym sign and looking as eager as ever, was a different case.

“I really hope this is the right place,” Phil said, looking around again. Hawkeye laughed shortly and nudged his shoulder with a claw, pointing once he had Phil’s attention. There was Squirrel Girl, emerging from the trees and waving excitedly.

“Phil! Hawkeye! Hey!” she jogged up. The pachirisu from yesterday was on her shoulder and let out a couple of happy squeaks before hopping onto the grass and up to perch on the sign beside Hawkeye.

“Good to see you,” Phil said with a light smile, “I was starting to get worried – there’s not exactly a building here. Where’s your gym?”

“What?” She smiled. “It’s right here!” she motioned to the grass field. “Who needs a building to battle? Way nicer out here, anyway.”

Phil looked around. “Well now it seems obvious.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she laughed, “you’re new.”

“Thanks… what are those?” he asked when she got out two sticks with cloth triangles attached to them, one brown, one purple.

“Flags,” she said cheerfully, handing them to Pachirisu. “She’s going to cheer us on. Cute, right?” Pachirisu raised the little flags in the air, waved them with a little song accompaniment and finished with a spin. Phil smiled while Hawkeye clicked his claws together in applause before he leaped from the sign and spread his claws, turning his attention on Phil.

Pachirisu was counting on them. They had to win. “We’re ready.”

“Good.” Squirrel Girl began walking to one side of the grass while Phil went to the other. She reached into a small bag clipped to her belt and pulled out two pokeballs. Hawkeye glided over to the battlefield, landed, and turned his head to catch Phil’s eye with a questioning look. Phil looked back with a confident smile and a slight nod. Hawkeye grinned and turned back to face Squirrel Girl, jumping back up and spreading his wings to hover on the breeze.

“All right then,” Squirrel Girl raised her first pokeball, “let’s see what you’ve got! Monkey Joe, go!” The sentret had barely emerged from its pokeball when Squirrel Girl followed up with
“defensive curl!”

“Poison sting!” Phil said swiftly, propelling Hawkeye forward. Just by the way they moved, Phil could tell Hawkeye was faster. He got his attack in before the sentret was able to raise its defense, and poisoned it to boot.

“Quick attack!” Phil said next, though by this time the sentret had completed its defensive curl so Hawkeye’s attack didn’t do as much as it could have – which actually didn’t look like it was something to worry about. Those two attacks plus a hit of poison damage had Squirrel Girl’s pokemon in bad shape. One more hit ought to do it.

“Don’t let him get you down Monkey Joe, fury swipes!”

“Counter it!” Phil urged, “one more quick attack and it’s ours!”

Squirrel Girl’s sentret charged Hawkeye with claws ready, but Hawkeye met him head on. He threw up one claw to lessen the minor damage of the first swipe and barreled forth the other to counter, effectively cutting Monkey Joe off mid-attack and defeating him.

“Yes!” Phil rejoiced with a fist in the air, before clearing his throat and composing himself. He wasn’t typically so... well, call it the rush of his first gym battle. One pokemon down, one to go, and Hawkeye had yet to take any real damage.

Pachirisu cheered and waved her stick purple flag excitedly while Hawkeye smirked and snapped his claws. For once, Phil was right there with him. Bring it on.

“We’re not out yet,” Squirrel Girl said, recalling the fainted pokemon. “You did great,” she spoke to it gently, “we’ll get you to the Pokecenter right away,” she promised, before tucking it away and raising her second and final pokeball. “Your turn, Tippy-Toe!”

As soon as the unfamiliar pokemon was out Phil lifted his Pokedex, scanning it with haste. Cinccino, normal type, good at deflecting attacks. He opened his mouth to issue an attack, but Squirrel Girl’s came first.

“Tippy-Toe, retaliate!”

The cinccino moved fast. Faster than Hawkeye, and faster than Phil could keep up with. One moment it was beside Squirrel Girl, and the next it was slamming Hawkeye unyieldingly into the ground.

“Hawkeye!” Phil called, eyes wide. That attack- that attack was so powerful. The impact made him wince, and seeing Hawkeye’s newly damaged state didn’t make it any better. He had been near full health, and now- was he out? Had they lost, as swiftly as they had lost against Mankey’s low kick?

No. Hawkeye dug his claws into the ground stubbornly and used it as momentum to throw himself up, catching the wind to keep afloat but just barely hanging on. Just one more attack was all it would take.

“Sand-attack!” Phil said quickly. He and Hawkeye didn’t have time to argue this time, the cinccino was too fast; they would lose. It was time to keep going, no matter the odds. “Don’t let it get you, Hawkeye, lower her accuracy and evade!”

“No. Hawkeye, lower her accuracy and evade!”

“Finish him, Tippy-Toe! Double-slap!”

Hawkeye was at least fast enough to keep her from getting two attacks in a row, and delivered a
blast of fine sand. Tippy-Toe staggered and narrowed her eyes to try to see through the sand that had gotten in them, but pressed forward with her paw raised and swiped it powerfully – across the air. The sand did the trick, and Hawkeye evaded.

“Good, now knock off!”

Hawkeye let the wind carry him back, focusing on the cinccino as she recovered from her missed attack. He took an extra moment, eyeing Cincinno and resituating himself. Phil wasn’t sure what to make of it, but this was Hawkeye’s show just as much as it was Phil’s. They were in this together, and he trusted him.

Not an instant too late Hawkeye charged, slamming into Tippy-Toe just as she turned her head upward, critically knocking her off her feet and to the ground. The impact caused her to open one of her small paws and drop a berry that she’d been clinging to.

Phil’s heart skipped a beat as Hawkeye glided back to put some distance between him and his opponent. He had to be running off of pure adrenaline at this point. His attack had done damage, a lot of damage. Enough?

It was down to one last attack. If Tippy-Toe landed the next hit, she would win – if Hawkeye did, he might win.

“Come on Tippy-Toe, double slap!”

“You can do this Hawkeye, now quick attack!”

Maybe Tippy-Toe had more speed than Hawkeye, but that one move was quicker to execute than nearly every other. Hawkeye hit first. It was enough. They won.

Pachirisu cheered, waving her flags in tandem. Squirrel Girl released a breath and recalled Tippy-Toe.

“Wow,” she said, walking across the field, “that was some battle! I’ve got to admit, I thought I had you there. Hawkeye, why don’t you go ahead and have that berry you knocked off of Tippy-Toe? Take another one, too,” she pulled out a small berry and tossed it over, “you could use it,” she smiled apologetically.

Hawkeye caught the berry and was more than happy to do just that. Phil watched with satisfaction as Hawkeye’s state improved, to a point where he only looked a little worn down. “Don’t worry. We’ll go to the Pokecenter right after,” he assured, though Hawkeye just rolled his eyes. Phil would never understand why he didn’t like them.

“So!” Squirrel Girl clapped her hands together, snapping Phil back to attention, “Congratulations! You fought well. It’s my pleasure to give you this!” She pulled out a small object, holding it out to him. “Ta-da! It’s the Hero Badge!”

Phil smiled and took it with gratification. The badge was perfectly circular and colored in reflective red, white, and blue. It sort of reminded him of a small shield, with a white star in the middle blue circle, and rings of red and white extending outward. He liked it – the name, the look, everything.

“Is it too much to say that this is my favorite badge already, even if I haven’t seen the others?” he wondered aloud.

“You like it? Me too! It’s simple, but inspiring.”
“Couldn’t have done it better if I had design input myself.”

“Here – take this, too!”

“Hm?” Phil tucked away the badge in his pocket for now, before looking at the silver disc she held up. “Oh – is that a Technical Machine?”

“Yeah! It’s TM67, Retaliate. On its own it’s okay, but it’s best used after a teammate fainted. It avenges their loss, doing double the damage.”

“I saw that,” Phil said wryly, sharing a look with a grumbling Hawkeye.

“Maybe you’ll use it sometime. It’s pretty powerful,” she nodded.

“Yeah. Thank you, Squirrel Girl,” he tucked the TM away in his bag, then got out his pokeball to let Hawkeye rest for a bit. “Now, would you like to walk with me to the Pokecenter? We can talk more about Black Mountain.”

At the mention, Pachirisu looked up from her flag-twirling and set them down on the gym sign before hopping down and scurrying to reclaim her spot on Squirrel Girl’s shoulder.

“So you really are going to investigate… yeah. Let’s go.”

“You think this could have something to do with Team Hydra?” Squirrel Girl asked. She, Phil, and Pachirisu sat at a table outside of the Pokemon Center while their pokemon were being tended to inside.

“I know it’s not much of a theory,” Phil said, recalling how skeptical Fury had been about it, “but either way, it does sound like something unnatural is going on. I know this might not match their usual patterns according to everything reported on the news, but…”

“We can get to the bottom of this,” Squirrel Girl said as she lifted up her pokegear. “There may not be a Team Hydra problem in my town, but I know a few other gym leaders who could give us a better idea. Here – let’s exchange numbers. I’ll call you if anything relevant comes up.”

“And I’ll keep you posted,” Phil brought up his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech as well.

Once they exchanged contact information, Phil brought up his map of the region and zoomed in to their location. “So from here, what’s the best route?” He was ready to make digital annotations.

Squirrel Girl opened her mouth to answer but Pachirisu beat her to it, speaking with quick insistence to Phil before turning to Squirrel Girl and continuing with a much longer dialogue. Whatever Pachirisu was trying to say was lost on Phil. Squirrel Girl, however, understood clearly and nodded as she gave the pokemon her full attention. Their conversation continued until finally Pachirisu turned back to Phil, jumped up on his shoulder, and stayed there.

“Sorry,” he said, “What just happened?”

“She says she can show you the way,” Squirrel Girl explained with a gentle smile. “She’s going with you.”

Phil turned to look at Pachirisu, who smiled and nodded. “It could be dangerous,” he cautioned. At that, the pokemon’s smile disappeared into a stubborn expression, complete with crackles of
electricity from her puffed out cheeks. “But you seem to know what you’re doing,” he amended quickly.

“It is her home, after all,” Squirrel Girl reasoned. “I mean, I would want to help, too.”

At that moment a pink-haired nurse stepped onto the outside patio, drawing their attention. “Miss Green and Mr. Coulson? Your pokemon are fighting fit!” she announced, holding the door open for a chansey to walk out with a tray of three pokeballs: two on one side, one on the other.

“Great!” Squirrel Girl smiled, getting up and collecting hers.

“Thank you,” Phil said with a smile as he followed suit.

The nurse nodded. “We hope to see you again!” she said brightly, before returning inside with Chansey.

Phil tossed his pokeball lightly and Hawkeye joined them, swooping towards Phil but stopping short when he noticed Pachirisu on his shoulder.

“She’s coming with us,” Phil said. Hawkeye appraised her lightly before nodding his agreement, and Pachirisu graced them with a large smile before hopping down and sprinting away, stopping a few yards away to turn back and wave them over.

“Good luck Phil, Hawkeye, Pachirisu,” Squirrel Girl said, looking at each of them in turn. “Are you sure you have everything you need?”

“Positive. Thank you,” Phil said, then turned to Hawkeye. “Time to go.”

Hawkeye flew forward after Pachirisu while Phil bade Squirrel Girl one last farewell before catching up.

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It was evening when they arrived on the mountainside. Squirrel Girl hadn’t lied, it was definitely out of the way. There weren’t even other trainers. Plenty of caves, though, which made Phil all the more grateful Pachirisu had come along to guide them around the rocky paths that Phil may or may not have gotten lost exploring.

Instead their business was strictly outside amid the thick trees, chill wind, and rocky terrain. It was here that Pachirisu slowed down to a careful walk and began to look around, losing her certainty as a leader. They’d arrived, but what was next?

“Keep on the lookout,” Phil told Hawkeye, becoming more attentive himself. He’d noticed as they progressed that wild pokemon appeared less frequently, and even more so here. For an environment like this, he’d think a lot of different types of pokemon could live contently.

Several minutes passed in eerie silence as the sun disappeared completely on the horizon. Pachirisu had given up leading and jumped to Phil’s shoulder, clinging tightly. Hawkeye took the lead instead. He wasn’t at any loss for resolve, but the same wind he relied on to fly was several degrees colder at night here than it had been in Lake Town.

After his third shudder, Phil frowned.

“Hawkeye—” Hawkeye immediately raised a claw to silence him and sped forward, landing on the ground ahead. Phil blinked and hurried to catch up to see what Hawkeye saw: a lone pokemon,
resembling a small bear with a crescent moon on its head.

*Teddiursa: normal type. If it finds honey, its crescent mark glows. It always licks its paws because they’re soaked with honey.*

Phil lowered his Pokedex to look at Teddiursa. Its paws were at his side and it looked at them with foggy eyes and a confused frown.

Pachirisu jumped down to the pokemon with a concerned look and began speaking hurriedly.

“Does she know him?” Phil asked Hawkeye, who glanced back to shake his head before refocusing on the conversation. Teddiursa’s reply came slowly, and by the time he was finished Pachirisu’s frown deepened and Hawkeye’s eyes narrowed.

Phil once again took in the teddiursa’s expression, and their reactions. “Pachirisu, you said that you had a friend who reappeared without his memory. This teddiursa…”

Pachirisu didn’t look back, but nodded.

Hawkeye took over the talking, his statement much shorter and the teddiursa responded in kind before the pokemon began to wander off. Hawkeye spread his wings and took flight. For a moment Phil thought he was going to stop the teddiursa, but instead he looked down at Pachirisu and asked a question, staring at her intently.

Pachirisu looked nervous before she closed her eyes in thought for a few seconds, eventually nodding and looking around. Then she pointed. Hawkeye looked over at Phil, held up a claw, and then took off.

“Hawkeye!” Phil took a quick step after him as he watched the gligar disappear beyond the treetops. He schooled his expression into a more level one, and told himself that it was fine.

Pachirisu hopped back to his shoulder and patted him gently.

“I know. I know he’ll probably be right back. I shouldn’t worry.” He tried not to think about Hawkeye suddenly disappearing in a place where pokemon were known to disappear, and was grateful for the buzzing of his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech. It was Squirrel Girl.

“Phil! Good, I’m glad I got through to you. How are things going?”

“Good. We’ve arrived, and it’s been quiet. Encountered a teddiursa with amnesia I think, and Hawkeye just took off to investigate.” After his brief report, Pachirisu added one of her own.

Squirrel Girl nodded. “Sounds like Hawkeye’s scoping out some of the places Pachirisu hasn’t been. Don’t worry, he promised Pachirisu he wouldn’t rush into anything.”

“Thank you,” Phil said gratefully, to both her and Pachirisu. “Did you speak with other gym leaders?”

“Yeah. Listen, I know you shouldn’t rule it out completely, but I don’t think Team Hydra is behind this. That’s what I wanted to tell you. I talked with the psychic type leader, and that’s what we think it is: some kind of psychic energy. Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Phil considered this. “Unfortunately,” he concluded. Since pokemon amnesia was a factor, it was definitely plausible. Before he could think much more about it, a cry from above made him look up. He smiled. That was fast. Now he felt silly for worrying.
“What is it?”

“Hawkeye’s back,” Phil relayed while the pokemon touched down, looking at Phil intently. “I think he found something. Thanks for the update, Squirrel Girl. We’ve got to go.”

“Okay. Be careful, you three!”

Phil nodded and disconnected. “Lead on, Hawkeye.”

Lead on he did, moving swiftly through the cold and taking them farther up the mountainside. When he finally slowed to a stop, there was one last veil of trees before the terrain expanded into a small plateau with an immediately apparent point of interest: a building.

It was broad with a single story, just on the edge of the plateau beside a steep canyon. There was a single front door and high, thin windows that prevented an outsider from seeing any details. What Phil could tell was that it was a building of just one room, and the interior walls were not the unassuming brown of the outside paneling but a deep, crimson red.
“I was not expecting guests.” The man turned. “Has my work here drawn attention?” his voice was level and calm.

Phil stood in the doorway, eyes narrowed at the man on the opposite side of the large room. There was a back door on the wall just behind him, and through the sliver of window next to it Phil could see it led to a back balcony rather than serving as a second exit. More concerning right now was what the other walls held: rows and rows of sealed metal pods, connected through cables.

“What is this place?” Phil demanded, Pachirisu on his shoulder and Hawkeye at his back. “Are you responsible for the disappearing pokemon? Are you a part of Team Hydra?”

“Team Hydra?” The man looked torn between laughing and turning up his nose. He went with the latter. “They should be so lucky. I am Ivan Petrovitch, artificer of the Pokemon Control Device! As if mere criminals would be on my level!” He reached out to his desk and lifted the object in question. The short staff was the source of the room’s red light, featuring a gem that was dim itself but had an expansive glow.

“You’ve been controlling the mountain pokemon,” Phil realized, looking around at the pods with sudden fury as he realized what must be in them, “luring them here and brainwashing them for your twisted experiments!”

“Very good,” Petrovitch nodded as he eyed the two pokemon beside Phil. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t work on captured pokemon… yet. But oh, how effectively I’ve manipulated the wild pokemon, you have no idea.”

At that statement Pachirisu growled and her paws dug into Phil’s shoulder, just enough to give her sudden sprint towards Petrovitch a decent kickoff.

“Pachirisu!” Phil called, in unison with a cry from Hawkeye as they both started after her. They were too late to stop it; the electric pokemon did not relent in her charge, and leaped to attack Petrovitch.

She was promptly struck to the side.

Phil’s feet stopped moving, eyes frozen open as he could do nothing but watch as Pachirisu cried out and hit the floor. Her eyes opened blearily and she made an effort to get back up, but it only resulted in another collapse.

“Now. Where were we?” Petrovitch turned back to Phil and Hawkeye. “Ah, yes. A demonstration, I think.” With his free hand, he picked up a black remote with a few different buttons on it. “I have just the thing to deal with that gligar of yours.”

Phil had had enough. “Hawkeye, knock that staff off of him!”

Hawkeye was one step ahead of him, gliding swiftly to close the distance. Even so, Petrovitch looked unconcerned. He simply clicked a button on the remote and gestured with the staff.

“Watch out!” Phil barely had the time to warn him when a pod opened before the swift blur of a
pokemon sprang from it. His pulse quickened as it closed in on Hawkeye, proving to be much, much faster. Only at the very last moment did Hawkeye turn, giving up on his attack to raise an arm in defense.

His guard succeeded, and Phil released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. The two pokemon struck claw against claw in a moment that nearly stood still until both recoiled to their respective sides, the space between them befitting a battle arena.

As they sized each other up, Phil finally got a good look at the other pokemon. Raising his Pokedex in situations like this had become a habit by now.

Sneasel: dual-type, dark and ice. It is extremely vicious and will not stop attacking until its foe is incapable of moving.

Wonderful. An ice type.

As if the Pokedex entry wasn’t enough, this naturally vicious pokemon’s eyes also glowed in an angry red, reflective of Petrovitch’s staff.

Hawkeye glanced back at Phil with uncertainty, to which he gave a grim nod. Yes, he knew this looked bad.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” Petrovitch asked fondly while the sneasel remained in its offensive stance. “I’ve harnessed an energy so powerful that not even dark-type pokemon can resist, with enough persistence.”

Hawkeye’s uncertainty turned into a hardened glare as he turned away from Phil to the other pokemon, calling out to it. If that was meant to achieve something, it failed; the sneasel did not move.

“Hawkeye, don’t hold back,” Phil stressed. Right now, that pokemon didn’t need their sympathy; it was a serious threat that needed to be knocked out as quickly as possible. “Sand-attack!”

“And here we get to the other great thing about her right now: that second type. Ground and flying? It shouldn’t take more than a single move. Icy wind!” He waved the staff, and Sneasel moved.

The delay in the order caused the two pokemon to attack near simultaneously, with the sand-attack being released a little bit earlier. Sneasel picked up on this and redirected its flurry of ice and wind to counter the sand, resulting in both moves nullifying the other.

“Use it on the gligar,” Petrovitch said tersely.

“Avoid it, Hawkeye; you have to lower its accuracy!” Phil was just as tense. Sneasel outsped Hawkeye easily, and if the ice attack hit, everything would be over just as it began.

But it wasn’t. Hawkeye actually evaded the frozen gust, and a lot easier than Phil expected given how agile the enemy had proven to be. The sneasel also failed to dodge the sand-attack, and Phil smirked fiercely. Good – they had a chance. He was getting good at working with those.

Meanwhile, Petrovitch’s amusement diminished. “You think this matters? Look around! On the off-chance that you defeat my prize – and you won’t – I have more. So many more. Now, end it! Icy wind!”

“Keep dodging! Go for another sand-attack if you can, but above everything else, do not get hit!”
Phil said, ego forgotten because damnit, he was right. Even if the battle came close to turning in his favor, he would just release and control another captured pokemon. Was there a way around that? There had to be. Think.

“Fine,” Petrovitch said furiously, when yet another icy wind failed, “You want to drag this on? We’ll drag this on. This time, I can’t miss! Feint attack!”

“Fury cutter!”

“Fury swipes!”

“Up to you!” Phil called out hastily, because he had his plan.

Hawkeye didn’t waver. While he and the sneasel continued to trade blows, Phil turned his eyes from the battle and set them on Petrovitch. Then he raised a fist and sprinted.

Petrovitch nearly flinched. Not something he was expecting, clearly. “Stop him!” he called out, and just before Phil reached the man Sneasel was there, brandishing its claws menacingly against his chest. Phil stopped short, and slowly raised his hands in recession. Petrovitch relaxed.

“Really?” he asked, amusement returning. “What did you think you could achieve?”

“The remote,” Phil admitted grudgingly. “I was hoping that if I could get to the remote, I could fry its power and stop you from releasing any of the other pokemon to control. With, I don’t know, some kind of electrical current maybe.”

Petrovitch blinked in confusion before his eyes narrowed. “Well you failed.”

“Clearly.” Phil couldn’t help himself; he smiled.

Petrovitch’s eyes widened and he and the sneasel followed his gaze to the desk behind him, just in time to see Pachirisu hold up the remote and release an electric shock from her tail, engulfing it.

“No!” the man gasped, hand gripping the specter tightly causing both the gem and Sneasel’s eyes to pulse red. The pokemon turned on Pachirisu with claws raised to strike, but then Hawkeye was there, crashing into the sneasel with a quick attack and slamming them both to the floor.

At this point, Petrovitch was enraged. “Your foe’s weak! Get him! Feint attack!”

“Hang in there, Hawkeye! Quick attack!”

The quick attack came first, but before Hawkeye could move from the close quarters Sneasel delivered its attack in the form of a punch that sent Hawkeye skittering back. Both pokemon were breathing heavily now, through exhaustion and damage. The difference was that the sneasel looked like it could still fight; Hawkeye, however…

“I didn’t think you had any more useable pokemon,” Petrovitch said with a sneer. “That look you’re wearing confirms it.”

Phil was too distracted to listen, instead staring at Hawkeye, straining his mind for any conceivable way he could get over to him with a potion before Petrovitch and sneasel had their say, and desperately, unfairly, willing him to keep going.

“And it’s just as I said, of course. You had no chance of winning, with or without my access to the other pokemon.”
Phil didn’t even say anything; as quickly as he could he reached his hand inside his bag and pulled out the first pokeball he could grasp.

“You! You do have another pokemon! Stop him!” Petrovitch hissed, lashing out with the staff. Sneasel’s attention snapped to Phil and she moved fast, extending her claws. Just as she reached him Phil threw out his hand. The luxury ball exploded open, prying out of Phil’s grasp as it touched the pokemon and immersed her in a white light before falling to the ground and starting to shake.

Phil didn’t wait to watch. Through Petrovitch’s yells of protest he ran to Hawkeye, potion already tugged out by the time he reached him. He healed him quickly while Petrovitch furiously hit buttons on his remote, to no avail. Finally he dropped it and looked up, but only for a moment before he turned tail for the balcony, staff still in hand.

“I don’t think so,” Phil said with distaste. “Hawkeye? Knock off.”

Hawkeye swooped with relish, disappearing after Petrovitch out the balcony door. Phil went to the desk where Pachirisu lay, pulling out another potion. The pokemon tilted her head weakly to give him a small smile.

“Shh,” he cooed, “close your eyes. This shouldn’t sting.” The potion restored her completely, and for that, he was relieved. “You did a good job,” Phil praised, once she was up on her feet again. “No, a great job,” he amended with a smile. “Do you think you can get that remote running again? Not that manual won’t work, but if it’s possible to free everyone all at once…”

Pachirisu’s eyes hardened with determination and she gave a quick nod, hopping over to where the remote sat. She looked at it curiously for a moment before turning around and pushing down on it with her tail, releasing an electric spark.

At once the sealed pods sprang open, and the pokemon within them opened their eyes. Over half of them he couldn’t name, but they were all living, breathing creatures that just got back their freedom. None seemed to have any loss of memory, either – for better or for worse, because the more these pokemon recalled, the more they directed their glares to the back door and balcony. Phil couldn’t say he blamed them, and began walking to the back door. He heard the footsteps of the pokemon follow after him.

Petrovitch didn’t notice. He was too busy gripping the railing and leaning over the edge, in a state of panic. “You idiot pokemon; your idiot trainer! Do you have any idea what you’ve just knocked down in that canyon!? All that progress! All that power, lost forever!”
“I think that’s the least of your worries right now,” Phil said coolly.

Petrovitch froze and turns slowly, looking at Phil and the rest of the pokemon with terror. Hawkeye balanced on the railing and waved a claw with good cheer.

All around Phil were hisses and growls. First a persian crept forward, and then a black and white bear pokemon with a leaf sticking out of its mouth, and then more followed. He looked around at them all, frowning until his eyes fell on a weepinbell. “Do you know vine whip?” he asked, and the pokemon happily hopped forward, releasing vines to constrict Petrovitch before he could try to go anywhere. Phil nodded his approval, then turned to face the rest of the pokemon.

“I work for an agency called S.H.I.E.L.D.,” he explained to them, ignoring the sudden curse Petrovitch let out behind him. “We specialize in dealing with people like this. Rest assured, we’ll see to it that this man will answer for his crimes in your home.” Hawkeye seemed to echo his statement, and glided to his side in support. “Until then, can you make sure he doesn’t go anywhere?” The pokemon cried in a chorus that was his confirmation, and he smiled. “Great. I’ll leave you, then; I have some calls to make.”

Phil and Hawkeye left the balcony and returned to the room, no longer glowing red. Pachirisu was there, with several of the other pokemon that hadn’t jumped to the offense. These ones just looked lost. It would be all right, though; Pachirisu was making rounds, actively reassuring and rallying them all. She paused to look up at Phil, and he nodded. He’d leave it to her, and take his call outside.

He started for the door, but Hawkeye let out a short yell behind him. Phil turned to see him hanging back, claws crossed as he stood just behind the luxury ball on the floor.

“Right,” Phil blinked down at it. He’d thrown that ball as a ploy more than anything; something to stop the sneasel for a moment so he could get to Hawkeye. He didn’t think it would actually take. “I guess we should at least take it to the Pokecenter, and then- what?” he asked after Hawkeye snorted. The pokemon set his claw on the luxury ball briefly before lifting that same claw to point at Phil.

“You can’t be serious. On our team?”

Hawkeye grinned.

“All that time spent making sure I didn’t catch anything, and this is the one you want.”

Still grinning.

“She just beat the crap out of you. Shouldn’t you be discouraged?”

He waved a claw dismissively, like it was a thing of the past even though some of the damage still showed. Phil rubbed his temple and began walking over.

“All right, fine, maybe. We need to get you both to the Pokemon Center anyway, so we’ll see from there. For now, rest.” He pulled out Hawkeye’s pokeball and knelt down to offer it to him. Hawkeye looked content, so tapped the pokeball and disappeared inside.

Phil picked up the other ball and stood, looking at them both side by side. He eyed the luxury ball thoughtfully. It wasn’t the call he would have made. In glancing back at the more familiar pokeball, though, he had to admit that it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. They’d have to see.

For now he tucked the both of them away, turned towards the exit, and lifted his Comm Device to
call S.H.I.E.L.D.

At the same time, much further below, a red light gleamed at the base of a canyon. By the next night, it would be gone.

Chapter End Notes

And then there were two. What do you think so far? Please let me know!
Phil sat in the Lake Town Pokemon Center the next day, reviewing his copy of the digital files they’d put together from everything acquired at Petrovitch’s Red Room.

They lacked the whole story, but significant pieces did remain. Petrovitch was from a different region, and had been a part of a lesser-known crime circle that tampered with Pokemon power and control. The control part Phil knew well enough from the brainwashing that occurred at Black Mountain, but the power bit of it was something different.

Petrovitch’s notes hinted at even more experiments through the form of a serum that was designed to alter a Pokemon’s ‘values,’ whatever that meant. There was also a letter, presumably from Petrovitch’s superior, that charged him with the task of re-acquiring an escaped Pokemon that the serum had worked on. A Sneasel, in fact, which took Phil a while to realize; most of the letters and notes only ever referred to this Pokemon as ‘the widow,’ a moniker devised to set it apart from the ones that hadn’t escaped.

Which did create a small problem.

‘That Pokemon could be dangerous,’ Fury had said through their communication. ‘You need to keep an eye on it, or transfer it here so we can.’

“Hey!”

Phil looked up to see Squirrel Girl, heading his way with a tray of two Pokeballs. “Figured I’d bring them over,” she said as she sat down.

“Thank you,” Phil replied, closing the file and reaching over to take the pokeball and luxury ball.

“And the mountain Pokemon?”

“Those medics of yours are really great, you know? It doesn’t look like there will be any lasting damage. As for the Pokemon that were already brainwashed, Pachirisu and the others are out looking. There could be something we can do for them yet,” she said hopefully.

“I hope it all works out,” Phil said. “I’m glad I was able to help.”

“Help? That’s putting it lightly! You and Hawkeye, you saved them all. You saved her, too,” she added, looking to the luxury ball in Phil’s hand. He followed her gaze.

“I suppose we did.”

“So, what now?” Squirrel Girl asked. “You’re moving on, right?”

Phil nodded. “I have to. Let me know if there are any changes here, okay?”

“Yeah, I will.” She leaned back. “You can get to X-Town and the next gym by going east, but you’ll have to go through Gamma Cave, so I’d stock up first.”

“Good idea.” Phil said, going over a mental inventory of what he had and what he could use. More potions certainly, maybe fill back up on antidotes. He didn’t exactly expect to have a poison problem if he was going through a cave, but he hadn’t expected to have a psychic mind control device problem on a mountain, either.
“Miss Green?” A nurse peeked her head in the waiting area. “There’s a trainer out front. He appears to be confused as to the location of your gym…” she trailed off apologetically.

“Again?” Squirrel Girl threw up her arms. “There’s a sign! Though I guess they do sometimes have to find us first. All right,” she got to her feet, “better go before he hurts himself. Bye, Phil! Good luck!”

“You too,” he called back, but she was already out the door. Phil smiled and stood. He supposed he should follow suit.

Once Phil was just beyond the boundary of the city, he clicked off his Comm Device before reaching inside his pocket and taking out the luxury ball. He stared at it for a moment before getting out his regular pokeball too, tossing it lightly.

When Hawkeye emerged he gave Phil a scolding look like he knew Phil was almost going to do this without him, but then was content to stand on the ground and look at the luxury ball expectantly.

Phil released it.

In a burst of light the sneasel appeared, standing perfectly calm yet alert as she looked directly at Phil. Her gaze was piercing.

“I know some of your history,” Phil said first. “Petrovitch had files. They said you escaped before he found you again at Black Mountain. I understand you’ve been manipulated into service for a long time,” he said quietly. The sneasel didn’t so much as flinch.

“I also understand that you fought it,” he continued. “When we battled at the mountain, you held back. Didn’t you?” The more Phil had thought about that fight, the more he realized how that must have been the case. Not that he didn’t believe in his own ability – or Hawkeye’s – but Sneasel had every advantage back there. He remembered in particular how not a single ice attack of hers had landed. It was either improbable luck on their part, or deliberate sabotage on hers.

Sneasel arched her brow pointedly, and Phil couldn’t help but imagine a sarcastic ‘what do you think?’ along with it. Hawkeye even nodded his own confirmation, which was a little more surprising.

“I would have thought you’d be irritated,” he said, “but you knew?”

Hawkeye rolled his eyes before tapping the side of one of them, reminding the agent what he was named for.

“Right,” Phil said, thinking back. “I guess that makes a lot more sense too, with how insistent you were on bringing her with us. On that note,” he turned back to Sneasel, “Director Fury – my boss – thinks you’re dangerous. I agree. But,” he raised his hands as he noticed the pokemon’s claw twitch, “As much as Hawkeye and I would like to have you on the team, you’re overdue for making your own choices. The alternate option is supposed to be bringing you in to S.H.I.E.L.D., but given Hawkeye’s track record with them – and me – it wouldn’t be completely out of the question for him to just break your luxury ball if that were the case. Would it?” He looked at Hawkeye, who did his best to appear innocent. He did a poor job of it.

“I have been looking for a new teammate, though,” Phil continued. “One to join us in battles as we take down Team Hydra.” Hawkeye looked at him pointedly. “And the Pokemon League.” The look
remained. “And the Fantastic Four?” How was that still not enough? “We also have this kind of douchey rival.” At that Hawkeye beamed and Phil couldn’t help but laugh, while Sneasel looked at them both like they were insane.

“So,” Phil calmed himself, though a smile remained, “that’s what we’re about. What do you think?”

The harshness of Sneasel’s expression soothed into one of curiosity, though she only regarded Phil like that for a second before directing the look to Hawkeye, where it dwelled a while longer.

Hawkeye responded with an open smile, void of even the smallest bit of snark that he usually sent Phil’s way. It was strange, seeing him so genuine, and even though Sneasel had nothing to compare it to she seemed just as surprised.

Then she spoke to Hawkeye, in a soft yet controlled voice and he responded with exuberance and gestures – one of which seemed to point out Phil. The sneasel smirked at that and the agent raised an eyebrow, but then Sneasel turned to him and nodded once.

“Really?” Not that it had been completely out of the question, but so many factors so far had been against him getting a second pokemon, he was surprised that it was actually happening. And pleased – definitely pleased. “Okay. Well. I hope you’re okay with fighting right away, because there’s a route and cave coming up and the last time we traveled there were a lot of trainers. Oh,” he broke away from his muse, “and we need to give you a code name, though I don’t really know where to go with this one. I know in the letters they called you the widow…” Sneasel smirked at that, causing Phil to trail off.

“Widow?”

She nodded, and Phil smiled.

“Wellcome to the team.”

- 

And a terrifying addition she was. Trainers were all across the route leading to the cave, meeting his eyes and challenging him to battles. Phil started leading with Widow straight away, figuring out her style and moves while at the same time trying to keep up with her speed. After the first couple of fights he got the hang of how much faster battles seemed to move with a faster pokemon.

Widow’s movements were technical, accurate, and quick; any doubts he’d had about her holding back when they were enemies were eliminated just as quickly. In the instances where she was at a disadvantage Phil would switch out to Hawkeye, who covered her bases both in type and defense. Widow covered his weaknesses in turn, with no disadvantage to water and even resistant to ice.

It was great having two pokemon to battle with, and two pokemon that complemented each other at that. It was almost disappointing when he turned a corner to see that he’d reached the end of the route, with only two people still lingering beside the tall grass. Beyond them was a small rest area with a Pokecenter, though, so he was grateful for that.

“Just a couple of trainers left,” Phil turned to Hawkeye and Widow, handing them each a berry to restore health, “then we take the rest of the night off. Sound good?”

Hawkeye gave a distracted nod as he ate, while Widow simply looked content. Phil hung back a minute longer until they were all good to go then continued down the path, eyeing the two young trainers up ahead. Neither had taken notice of Phil, but he wasn’t directly in front of them yet so
obviously they wouldn’t have. That part made perfect sense. What was a little different was that rather than occupying their own small ‘zone’ as many other trainers did, these two stood together, laughing and chatting happily.

Maybe they weren’t here to battle? Phil wondered if he should leave them be. Cautiously he continued down the path until he crossed them. They looked up in sudden attention.

“Are you a trainer?” asked the boy with the red hoodie, silver headband and black hair.

“Let’s fight!” the boy with the green hoodie, black trainer gloves and blonde hair finished.

Phil chuckled to himself and turned. Of course, attitudes always changed when he crossed their paths. “Yes, I am a trainer,” he confirmed, if Hawkeye and Widow behind him weren’t indication enough. “Who am I challenging first?” he asked, looking curiously between the two.

The boys blinked and looked at each other briefly before turning back to Phil.

“Not like that,” the black-haired boy said as he shook his head, “we mean a double battle!”

“A double battle? Is that exactly what it sounds like?” Phil asked.

“Yep,” the blonde confirmed.

“But I’m just one trainer…”

“With two pokemon, right?” he smiled.

“Can it work like that?”

“Of course,” the black-haired boy laughed, “it’s just a different style of battling, so it’s fine.”

“We each only have one pokemon, so we do it together – and that’s fine, too,” the blonde nodded. “So,” he pulled a pokeball from the pocket of his hoodie, and the other boy did the same, “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Youngsters Billy and Teddy want to battle!

Go! Widow and Hawkeye!

Phil moved back as his pokemon rushed forward, two pairs of eyes gleaming with anticipation. Phil was right there with them, too. They’d worked well in tandem, but how well could they work together? Looks like they’d get a crash course.

“Go, Wiccan!”

“Hulkling, I choose you!”

The two pokemon emerged at once, revealing a small gray pokemon Phil had never seen before and a vaguely familiar pink pokemon that he paid less attention to, raising his Pokedex to collect data on the first.

Espurr: psychic type. It has enough psychic energy to blast everything within 300 feet of itself, but it has no control over its power.

Perhaps that description should be daunting, but all Phil could think about was how lucky it was
that Widow was a dark type and completely immune. He had his first matchup. Now, for Hawkeye’s opponent.

Sneasel: dual-type, dark and ice. It is

Phil snapped his Pokedex shut and looked up.

Standing on the opposite side of the road was now a sneasel, a perfect reflection of Widow but for a lighter, more amused expression. But just a second ago it was…

“A ditto,” Phil realized. That’s why it looked familiar; even if he’d never actually seen one in its real form before, he definitely knew of the shapeshifting pokemon. This made things tougher, but his plan remained: take down the psychic type first. “Widow, go after the espurr with feint attack!”

“Feint attack for you too Hulkling, you know what to do!”

“Calm mind, Wiccan!” Billy commanded in the meantime. While the pair of sneasels faded into darkness, the espurr simply closed its eyes and kept calm. Phil didn’t have time to question it; he needed to command in alternation.

“Hawkeye, keep your guard up for the attack and-” Phil didn’t get to finish by the time the sneasels reappeared, but he didn’t have to, because Hawkeye was ready. Or he would have been, if he’d been attacked at all like Phil had predicted.

No, Hawkeye was left ignored, for as soon as Widow appeared before the Wiccan, Hulkling was right there at a matching speed and blocking Widow’s swift claw with its own. The duplicate sneasel hadn’t attacked that round, but defended, protecting its ally. Suddenly the idea of double-battling made a lot more sense to Phil beyond simply having two simultaneous single battles.

“Hawkeye, use quick attack against the- Hulkling! Widow, fury swipes!”

“You’re on the defense now Hulkling, keep that guard up!” Teddy cried.

Despite the command, two against one at equal or quicker speeds was too much for Hulkling to handle. It guarded from the damage of Hawkeye’s quick attack just fine, but in doing so left itself open to Widow’s fury swipes, damaging it in quick succession.

“Wiccan, assist!” Billy called out in the midst of Widow’s assault. Wiccan turned sharply, focusing on Hulkling for but a moment before it emitted a pulse of psychic energy that warped into the form of physical shards – ice shards. As soon as they appeared they were sent forth in a gust of its own icy wind, striking both Widow and Hawkeye.

Widow hissed and staggered back, resisting the brunt of the blow but looking stiffer for it. That’s right; icy wind hindered speed as well as dealt damage. It was easier to overlook when she used it earlier in other battles that day – she had already been faster than them all.

Hawkeye took the worst of it, and the worst was very, very bad. Most of his health had been depleted with that single attack, to the point where Phil didn’t know whether or not he should be grateful with how intently he got back up or guilty because it was becoming a trend.

Maybe he ought to turn icy wind right back against them, but right now the sneasel duplicate had more speed than the original, and that problem took priority.

“Widow, finish Hulkling with a quick attack!”
The hit landed, but like Hawkeye, the pokemon hung in there.

“Awesome, Hulkling! Now use fury swipes!” The same assault Widow had dealt Hulkling just moments ago, Hulkling turned around on Widow now.

“Hang in there, Widow!” was all Phil could say, because now Hawkeye was gearing to attack again – and so was Wiccan.

“Hawkeye, you can still finish this. Knock off!”

“You’re doing great, Wiccan, now confusion!”

“Widow, cover him!” Phil called, though it was more a plea than anything else, like the first battle with Hawkeye where he wanted him to ‘attack.’ He knew Widow was immune to psychic, but drawing away from her grapple with Hulkling now on an unclear command would leave her open, and then-

She did it.

Widow did it; without a second to spare she had her opening to attack, and instead used it to sprint over to Hawkeye and Wiccan, putting herself right between the two and letting the psychic rays strike her harmlessly.

Hawkeye didn’t hesitate either, swerving around Widow and crashing Wiccan to the ground. Wiccan was defeated.

There was still Hulkling, moving in to finish the unguarded Widow, but before Phil could so much as start to call ‘quick attack’ Hawkeye was already doing it. He delivered his blow, quick and light, and it was just enough to finish what Widow had started.

Youngsters Billy and Teddy were defeated!

“Aww, you weren’t supposed to win!” Teddy said with a small laugh as he and Billy recalled their pokemon. He laughed; Phil was just relieved. “That was seriously your first double battle?” Teddy asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Phil said, recalling both Widow and Hawkeye as well. They deserved a rest. “It an interesting style, though. Challenging, too – though that might be because of how well your pokemon worked together,” he recalled.

Billy smiled slightly at that. “A lot of times it’s luck – the move ‘assist’ just kind of picks one of his moves at random,” he nodded to Teddy, who grinned and continued, “and my moves are your moves, so.”

“Something different every time?”

“Pretty much!”

“Since we’re talking about moves,” Phil said thoughtfully as he looked to Billy, “can I ask what that one Wiccan used right in the beginning? I haven’t seen it before.”

“Oh, calm mind?” he asked. Phil nodded. “It’s a psychic move that lets pokemon power up their special attack and defense,” Billy explained.

“Both?” That explained the power behind its icy wind. “I didn’t think pokemon could learn moves
“They can’t,” Billy shook his head. “It was from a Technical Machine. I, uh, might know the psychic gym leader,” he scratched the back of his neck.

“Psychic?” Phil asked keenly.

“Um.” Billy faltered. “Whoops?”

Teddy snorted. “She’ll be fine. Come on,” he said, grabbing Billy’s hand, “let’s go to the Pokecenter so we can train some more.”

“Yeah- oh, wait!” Billy reached his free hand to his backpack and pulled out an ultra ball, offering it to Phil. “Since you beat us, here – maybe you can catch something good.” The two ran off after that, leaving Phil to smile down at the ultra ball. He hadn’t gotten any new pokeballs since the poochyena fiasco (aside from the luxury ball he’d already used), so he was more than happy to have an ultra ball again. He’d try to save it for something good this time.

Phil put the item away in his bag and got out the two pokeballs from his pocket as he walked to the Pokemon Center, the jagged mouth of a cave coming into view on his right.

“Tomorrow,” he told it contently. For tonight, rest.
The next day, Phil was all set to travel through Gamma Cave. At least, until he got near it.

“Hold it!” He was stopped in his tracks by an angry military general, charging forward with another man in uniform following closely. The pair walked around him to stand in front of the cave entrance.

“There’s a situation in Gamma Cave right now. It’s closed to civilians until it’s cleared,” the general stated, folding his arms behind his back.

“Excuse you, I’m S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Phil stepped forward and reached for his ID.

“Bah! S.H.I.E.L.D. I don’t care if you’re the damn champion, stay out of it! Private!” He turned abruptly to the other man, who stood at attention at once. “Keep stationed here. Until I return, nobody gets through. Understood?”

“Yes General Ross, Sir!”

“Good! Dismissed!” Though that dismissal seemed to be more for himself, because General Ross abruptly turned and disappeared into the cave. The private blocked the entrance now, but Phil marched forward anyway.

He didn’t budge. “Nobody gets through right now,” the man said, “General’s orders.”

Phil lifted his identification. “As I said, I’m S.H.I.E.L.D. I’m also on a mission, so it would save us both a lot of trouble if you would kindly get out of the way.”

“Nobody gets through right now,” he repeated emphatically, “General’s orders.”

Phil clutched his fist in frustration and found himself walking away. They couldn’t settle this with a pokemon battle? It would make things easier. Seriously though, he needed to progress, and it wasn’t going to happen unless he could get through that cave. There had to be a way to get him to move. Maybe he should call Fury. Did Hill need to call Fury about things like this? Probably not.

Phil tried to ignore that nagging feeling. Rivalries weren’t important right now. Whatever was happening right now in Gamma Cave could very well be S.H.I.E.L.D. business just as much as it was military, if not more. Phil lifted his Comm Device and began navigating to the call screen.

Who did they think they were anyway? Blocking off the cave, and to him? The audacity…

Hey. Wait a minute.

Phil stopped just short of making his call and instead closed it to the menu. Then he took a deep breath, set his shoulders, and promptly walked back over to the cave entrance. He cleared his throat, and the private looked up flatly.

“Oh!” The private was flabbergasted. “You have the Hero Badge! My mistake. Go right ahead!” he stepped aside, content to stay there.

Thought so. Good. Phil released his lapel and straightened his suit. Now, onward to Gamma Cave
— for real, this time.

The cave was dark when he stepped inside, but not too dark to see, even after the entrance disappeared behind him. Unfortunately he couldn’t progress much farther than that before he hit a fork in the path, two tunnels going in seemingly opposite directions.

Phil frowned, lifting up his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech. No signal in here, but he should still have access to his map… there we go. Yes, Gamma Cave. Now zoom… scroll around a little bit… there. Right. He lowered his wrist, leaving the map on standby and proceeded down the right path.

To find it caved in. Phil frowned. This wasn’t right.

“Widow!” He released the sneasel, who looked around cautiously. “We’re supposed to go this way, but it’s blocked,” he brought up his map again. “See if you can find a way through, or around?” he asked distractedly. Widow nodded and began to examine and prod at some of the rocks while Phil scrolled around the map for a couple of minutes, getting lost in thought.

Finally Widow stepped away from the wall and Phil looked up. “Anything?” She shook her head and started moving past him. “You won’t have any luck there either. The other path is a dead end. Widow?” She didn’t pause or turn to look at him, but at least she was only walking. It allowed him to catch up. “I’m telling you,” he said, following her down the left path this time, “it’s a-” he snapped his mouth shut when they turned the corner and a large, extended path was revealed.

This time Widow did pause to look back at him, but it was only a glance before she resumed her lead. Phil jogged to catch up, then walked and checked his map again at the same time.

“Is this thing inverted or something?” he frowned at the display, but that wasn’t it either. The space, the structures; they were all different from what he had recorded. Phil was a little baffled, but clearly the map wasn’t going to be of much help here.

When he closed it and looked up, Widow was staring again. She’d come to a full stop to turn and cross her arms. Once she had his attention she raised a claw and pointed to the cave wall.

“What? Don’t tell me there’s a hidden path or- hey, don’t sigh at me.” Phil moved closer to examine the wall, trying to see what she saw. When he did he stepped back, eyes wide.

“This is new,” he realized, looking all around them to confirm it. “All of this is new. The cave in; these paths. They were made recently.”

It wasn’t a comforting thought, to say the least. What was so strong that it could shake up the structure of an entire cave? He’d have to send Fury a memo to redraw their maps.

“Let’s keep going. Just, with caution,” he said. Widow had no qualms.

The path was very straightforward and bare, which gave Phil mixed feelings. On one hand there was probably a massive, rampaging monster waiting for them somewhere at the end – but on the other hand Phil was told there’d be zubat, and there weren’t any of those so far so that was nice.

Everything was almost eerily silent until the path opened into a large, cavernous space. The first thing Phil noticed was that the walls here were not as recent as the tunnel so he proceeded with caution, sticking close to various rocks as he and sneasel used them for cover while maneuvering to a point that didn’t obscure their vision. When they finally got into position and peeked around the corner what they saw was not a pokemon – sleeping, enraged, or otherwise – but a man.

He looked like some kind of super nerd or scientist, if his white coat was any indication. Perhaps
the more glaring evidence was the makeshift lab set up all around him, with several different machines positioned in relation to a large, glowing rock that radiated green energy.

“Excuse me,” Phil stepped out into the open.

The man turned with some alarm. “Another one? Wait, you’re not military… oh, I see! Then you must be the Team Hydra recruiter at last! You are, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” He didn’t even hesitate. “You said military. Is there something I should know?” He crossed his arms.

“Ah, yes. All it means is that I unfortunately don’t have anything to demonstrate right now, but believe me that problem will take care of itself. In the meantime, let me tell you why I should become a Hydra Scientist. My name is Brian Banner, as you know, and I have spent my life researching how to make pokemon powerful.”

“Of course,” Phil replied, keeping his tone bored as he adjusted the strap of his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech, just so happening to trigger its record feature. Widow meanwhile began to inspect the scientist’s machinery, eyeing the cables that kept them running with particular interest.

“The answer was right here all along. The pokemon living in this cave were always more hostile, and even a little bit stronger than others. I’ve discovered the source: Gamma Rock,” he gestured to it behind him, “and from this rock, I created an evolutionary stone so powerful that it enhanced a weak test subject to the strongest pokemon there is!”

“I see. Can you show me this pokemon?” Phil made sure he sounded impressed, not worried.

“Well, no. But soon!” Banner said quickly, taking a defensive stance. “The trial wasn’t perfect,” he admitted. “While I have undoubtedly created the most powerful pokemon, there are a few…”

“Out with it.”

“It’s impossible to control,” he admitted. “Its power is without parallel, but the transformation is triggered by rage, and then there’s no getting through to it. Not until it calms down and reverts back. This I know well; it’s happened several times, which is perhaps how the military heard of it. Their presence is inconsequential, though,” he assured him. “When the general arrived, I unleashed my hulk. Now it’s only a matter of time until he’s taken care of, and my subject returns. Then,” the scientist smirked keenly, “I can give you a proper demonstration.”

In the distance Phil heard the echo of a roar. His blood ran cold. Only a matter of time. He glanced at Widow and gave her a subtle nod.

“So the transformation isn’t permanent. What makes you so sure it would return here?” He asked, keeping Banner’s attention on him while Widow silently slashed the first cable.

At that the scientist let out a cold laugh. “It always does. Where else could it possibly go?”

“And the Gamma Stone?”

“One-time use, unfortunately, but I have another synthesizing as we speak.”

Phil watched Widow slash three more cables from behind Banner’s back. Not anymore, probably.

“Good. Stay here, Banner, I’m going to see your hulk in action.” He sincerely doubted the man would stay, not as soon as he discovered the sabotage of his machines, but he’d call S.H.I.E.L.D.
reinforcements after him later. Right now, he had a general to try and save. Somehow.

It wasn’t until later when he was running down another new path with Widow that he realized he hadn’t asked what Banner’s pokemon was.

It might have prepared them, but probably not.

How could you prepare for the immense roar of a jagged green monster, crashing through the stone itself to emerge directly in front of you? What defense was there against such a furious creature and the aggressive glare it turned their way? Even Widow, for all her inner focus, flinched.

Phil threw a great ball just to buy time, but the pokemon used a massive claw to strike it forcefully to the ground. Then it advanced, and what was left of the pokeball was crushed beneath its heavy stomp.

“Better run now,” Phil said quickly, taking his own advice after Widow, who worked fast to put some distance between them and it.

The pokemon roared again and took another step, but then another pokemon with a blue body, four fins and sharp teeth emerged behind it, shooting out a jet of water from its mouth. Phil knew that pokemon – S.H.I.E.L.D. had sharpedo as well. Now, since there was a distraction, the pokemon he didn’t know:

**Tyranitar: dual type, rock and dark. In just one of its mighty hands, it has the power to make the ground shake and mountains crumble.**

“What are you waiting for? Join him! Take it down!” Phil heard the general yell and then there were two more sharpedo joining the first, each attacking the tyranitar just as the first had.

Tyranitar growled in pain and crashed into more stone, trying to get away from the sharpedo as they closed in, General Ross right behind them.

“You!?” the general snarled when he saw Phil. “I thought I told you to scram! And what do you think you’re doing?” he barked at his three sharpedo, “why do I have to spell it out for you every turn! Aqua jet! Aqua jet! Aqua jet!”

Water was super effective against rock, Phil knew that. The tyranitar’s power must really be something to withstand so many of the attacks – and yet, not a single sharpedo had a scratch. Was it not fighting back, or?

Huh. Come to think of it, it hadn’t tried to attack Phil either, not exactly. Banner had said that the general would be ‘taken care of,’ but the only one who seemed keen on doing any real damage here was the general himself.

Tyranitar continued to thrash, tearing through the stone around him and sending rocks crashing down. Phil and Widow maneuvered quickly out of harm’s way, as did Ross and his sharpedo. The only one who took any damage was the tyranitar itself, in its own weary confusion. It was slowing down.

“Now, hydro pump!”

The foremost sharpedo opened its jaw, shooting out a huge rush of water that slammed against the larger pokemon. It released a pained cry, and Phil grimaced and started forward, only to have Widow grab at his sleeve to stop him.
When he looked back at she wore a serious expression and shook her head. “You think we should just let him…?” She did. Phil hesitated as she lowered her hand. Maybe Widow was right to stop him from interfering. Victim of experiments or not, this tyranitar was dangerous.

Then again, similar things had been said about her, hadn’t they? Phil frowned. He needed a second opinion. Or maybe just backup.

“Hawkeye!” Phil didn’t know how much Hawkeye had been aware of inside his pokeball or if he’d even paid attention, but the pokemon emerged ready.

Tyranitar’s howl turned into a higher-pitched whine. Phil looked over quickly and stepped up on the rubble to get a better view. The sharpedo’s attack was finished, leaving a small pokemon lay panting where the tyranitar once stood.

This new pokemon was an echo of its evolved form, with a similar color, pattern, and body shape. The most obvious contrast was that it was only about two feet tall, compared to almost seven. A quick check with his Pokedex told Phil that Tyranitar had reverted to its earliest evolutionary form, Larvitar.

“What the hell is this?” Ross grunted, stepping over the rocks so he could see as well. Larvitar cast him a glare, but it was quick to fade. The pokemon was close to fainting, at least. “Bah! That’s not natural. Hydro pump, the lot of you! You heard me! Hydro pump, hydro pump, hydro pump!!!”

What? That was overkill – no, not even, that was just straight up- “Widow, icy wind; Hawkeye, quick attack!”

Hawkeye growled agreeably and moved. For an instant Phil worried that Widow wouldn’t follow up, but then he felt the cold chill behind him. While Hawkeye put as much power as he could muster behind his quick strike to the first and Widow’s icy wind blasted the other two, Phil shoved his hand into his bag.

“For caves,” he gripped the dusk ball tightly, then let it fly.

The pokemon vanished inside and the ball shut close, shaking just once before it was pummeled by the torrent of three hydro pumps and blasted down the tunnel towards Phil. The agent threw himself in its path and reached out, capturing it securely in his hand just as it sealed with a final click.

_Gotcha! Larvitar was caught!_

Phil fell on his back, landing roughly on the fallen stone but managing to stay there with his eyes snapped shut until the last of the water gushed away.

When he opened his eyes General Ross was before him, his three sharpedo at his back. Phil’s pokemon were at his side, Widow standing resolutely to his left and Hawkeye on his right, clinging to a high notch in the stone.

“Hand that over now,” Ross snapped, “in the name of the military!”

“In the name of S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Phil stood and pulled out his identification, dripping just as surely as his suit, “no.”

The general growled and reached out to simply take the dusk ball, but Phil blocked his hand. “Don’t be a thief, General.”
“You- you won’t get away with this! I’ll speak with your director, have that pokemon where it belongs, and see you fired!”

“Please, do.” Phil tucked away his ID, but kept the dusk ball securely in hand as he passed Ross. “I look forward to it.”

He didn’t look back but could hear Hawkeye following him, and assumed Widow was as well. It wasn’t until they were a good distance away and Ross was out of sight that Phil knelt and unlatched his bag for potions. Hawkeye stopped right next to him while Widow hung back, watching for the general.

Once Phil had a potion in hand and two more ready, he released Larvitar.

The pokemon only glanced at his surroundings before falling into silent acceptance. No, not acceptance – resignation. Even as Phil healed his wounds, the larvitar was numb to the sting. Silence persisted. How did one break the ice with a pokemon like this?

“So. Hulk, is it?”

Not like that, apparently, for the pokemon’s eyes flashed to his and narrowed. It wasn’t like the glare he’d given Ross, though; it had far more discomfort.

“Sorry,” Phil said quickly. “Let’s just let the other guy be the Hulk, then. I can’t call you Larvitar though, so… how about something more normal?” he gauged the larvitar for some reaction. There was none. “Bruce?” he tried, saying the first thing that came to mind. The pokemon just shrugged.

“Do you hate it?” Phil frowned. “Okay, how about…” he tried to think, but the larvitar let out an exasperated breath and lifted its hand, shaking his head and muttering quietly.

“So ‘Bruce’ is fine, then?” he questioned. It was Hawkeye who nodded the confirmation for him. “Okay, Bruce,” Phil dug out some food to offer him. Bruce eyed it warily before turning away. “I know you didn’t ask for this. Any of this,” Phil added, thinking back to Brian Banner and his experiments, “but with your condition and everyone who would pursue you for it, I really think it’s best if you stay with us for now. As a companion, nothing more.” He knew that S.H.I.E.L.D. too would be interested in this pokemon, but Fury had said it – Phil’s team was his own. He could protect Bruce from that at least, even if it meant keeping a close eye on him himself and being ready with his pokeball in the case of a potential, er, hulk out.

Bruce looked at Phil carefully, before Hawkeye distracted him with conversation. Once again Phil was grateful for his first pokemon, and whatever recruitment message he chose to spread. Bruce’s tension ever so slightly eased as he gave Hawkeye a wry response with the hint of a smile. When Bruce looked back to Phil his expression was serious once again, but he nodded.

“Great,” Phil said. “You’re probably pretty tired, and I’ll get us to a Pokecenter as soon as I get out of this cave, but why don’t you rest until- hm?” Bruce started walking away, down the tunnel a bit more. Phil stood and followed after, snatching up his bag and the food and ignoring the discomforting reminder that his clothes were wet. When Bruce stopped he pointed out a new tunnel, that broke away into what looked like another cavern farther ahead.

“That’s the way?” Phil asked. Bruce nodded. “Thank you.” Bruce nodded again and raised a hand to point at the dusk ball. As soon as Phil lowered it for him he tapped it, disappearing to rest inside. Phil tucked it away and turned to face his two other pokemon, Hawkeye right beside him still and Widow now approaching.
“And you two?” he asked, holding up the pokeball and luxury balls respectively.

The pair shared a look and a short conversation before turning back to him, Hawkeye smiling, Widow her usual reserved self.

“Sounds good,” he put them away and turned towards their path out. “Now, let’s get out of here and make a call to the director. They have a general to deal with and a scientist to pick up. Then, it’s straight to the Pokecenter. And dry cleaning.”
“S.H.I.E.L.D. got him,” Phil said the next morning after he got the notice himself, “that scientist.” He shifted the bag strap on his shoulder so he could talk to the dusk ball and walk through X-Town at the same time more easily. “Some of his research too, I thought you’d like to know. I asked them to look for a way to help you if possible.”

The discussion with Fury about the Hulk wasn’t as bad as Phil thought it’d be. Sure he got some grief for it, but ultimately the director agreed that Bruce should stay with Phil. It was better than the possibility of handing him over to Ross – and a relief that they got to him before Team Hydra.

“In the meantime, today will be a rest day for you guys. You deserve it. After everything that’s happened, I’m realizing that I still don’t know pokemon and types as well as I should,” Phil said somewhat sheepishly as he opened his bag and set Bruce’s pokeball with the others.

“If we’re going to keep getting into dangerous situations like this, I need to learn more. There’s a school here – well, an ‘Institute for Higher Learning’ – founded by the Pokemon Professor himself. If there’s any place to study, that’s it. We’ll look for the gym tomorrow, but for today… ah, here it is,” Phil smiled when the larger building was in sight.

Once inside, a sign directed him to the grand library. He was surprised to find it empty once he was let in, but didn’t waste any time finding a copy of the type matchup chart and taking it to a table to study. He had looked this thing over time and time again on his tech, but maybe a physical version would help make it stick. Some of them were easy, like how fire was weak to water. Others, like steel’s immunity to poison, took a while to get but made sense when he thought about it. And then there were the frustrating particulars that he could never get to stick, like, where was it – there! – like how grass was resistant to electric, and that was the only way those two types related at all. There were a ton of those that he could never remember, never mind dual-type matchups or somehow knowing which pokemon was which type. At least he had the Pokedex for that last one, but it still wouldn’t hurt to study it here. He had a whole day for it.

The time passed slowly and the library didn’t get any new guests, so after an hour Phil decided it might help him relax a little to have a pokemon with him. He released Hawkeye.

He didn’t know why he thought that’d be a good idea. Like the last time he’d tried to study with Hawkeye around, the gligar became bored within a minute and went about entertaining himself through distracting Phil. Phil recalled him quickly enough and sent out Widow instead.

It was a slightly better idea, but still not a great one. Phil didn’t think Widow was trying to distract him intentionally, but she kept her arms crossed and continuously gave him judgmental looks, like what he was trying to learn was the most amateur thing in Marvel and he was stupid for not having it all down. He recalled Widow after ten minutes.

Then, Phil considered his new third pokemon. Of course, he was cautious to release Bruce; worried that it may release the Hulk right after.

Nobody was around, though, and everything was quiet, limiting any factors that could stress Bruce out enough to… change? Evolve? Phil wasn’t exactly sure what to call it, or just how angry Bruce needed to be before it would happen, but libraries were peaceful, right? That and he’d promised Bruce that he’d be a companion. He didn’t want to go back on that and keep him confined to the dusk ball. Earlier he figured he’d let Bruce out with Hawkeye when they were on the road, but
maybe the library was fine. At any rate, it was worth a shot. Hawkeye and Widow each got their chance, so it was only fair. He released Bruce.

The larvitar looked around cautiously before turning his questioning gaze to Phil.

“Just trying to liven up studying with some company,” Phil said, a little cautious himself, “if it’s not too dull for you.”

Bruce smirked ironically before climbing up on the chair next to his. Phil glanced over a few times, but the minutes passed silently and without incident. It helped him relax and re-focus on the chart, which was getting easier to understand.

Bruce was perfect for this.

“All right,” Phil declared quite a bit later, “I think I’ve got it. Just to make sure, though,” he looked over to Bruce and slid the chart across the table, “will you quiz me? Or just, let me know if I’m wrong?”

Bruce looked thoughtfully up at him, and then to the chart. He climbed up to stand on the table, pulled the sheet a little closer to him, and turned it over completely so it was face down. Then he nodded.

“You know all this?” Phil asked, staring. Bruce nodded again. “All right,” Phil said hesitantly, “well then let me start with naming the types…”

Bruce did know it, all of it; even the strengths and weaknesses of types that weren’t his own. He nodded helpfully when Phil was right, raised a hand when he was still missing something, and turned the chart over when he was wrong to point out the correct answer.

Again – perfect.

“…and finally, dragon type has no effect,” Phil said as he finished the last type. “Yeah?” he looked to Bruce for confirmation, who nodded; even smiled a little. Phil smiled back. “All right, so I missed a couple, but I’d say we’re good. Thank you,” he reached for the chart, then folded it back up neatly and stood to put it back. To his surprise, Bruce hopped down from the table to follow.

“Let’s see… I found this…” he stopped before the proper shelf, but paused. “Huh? There’s something here.” Indeed, in the space where he’d taken the chart from now sat card and a folded note. They must have originally been underneath the chart. Curious, Phil picked them up. The card was an ace of clubs, and once he put the type chart away he opened the note.

_I evolve to one of three:
Attack, defense, or harmony._

Phil felt a tug on his pant leg and looked down to see Bruce, confused and curious.

“It’s a riddle,” Phil said, looking back to the note and repeating it aloud for Bruce. What a riddle was doing here—and with a playing card of all things—it couldn’t say, but it was hard to be presented with something like this without wanting to solve it and see where it led.

That second part he wasn’t so sure about, but thankfully the first made it easy. There were only so many pokemon that could evolve into three forms.

“It’s Eevee,” he said contently, looking around the library. “So, do we look up Eevee?” When he looked down at Bruce he looked almost amused as he gave a small shrug. “Yeah,” Phil agreed,
“may as well.”

Phil led the way to the pokemon species section of the library, then found Volume #133: Eevee. He picked it up expecting to find something underneath it, but there was nothing there. He frowned. Was he not doing this right, or?

Another tug. Phil looked down to see Bruce reaching up towards the book with that same little entertained smile he’d worn before.

“Okay,” Phil said somewhat suspiciously, but knelt down to hand him the book. Once Bruce had it he set it down on the floor and began turning through the pages quickly. Less than a minute later and he’d landed on a two-page spread that he held up to Phil, displaying a chart with a single eevee in the center that had arrows pointing out to – “eight?! There are eight different eeveelutions now? That seems far too excess- wait, never mind. This one’s cool.”

Phil took a few moments to admire the new forms before closing the book. “You knew I was wrong, didn’t you?” Suddenly Bruce’s expressions before made more sense, and the one he had now confirmed it. “All right, all right. Clearly I need to study newer pokemon next. If it’s not Eevee, what is it? What other pokemon can evolve into three forms?”

This time Bruce took the lead, to Volume #236: Tyrogue.

“Wait, there’s a third?” Phil asked when he saw the volume Bruce was now paging through. He looked to the space right next to it to see Volume #237: Hitmontop. “Of course,” he said with a small laugh, solely at himself. “I know that pokemon, even. I should have known this one. Maybe I’d have gotten it eventually?” he said hopefully before Bruce turned to a page with another card and another note. Bruce took both and offered Phil the book.

It was another spread with evolutionary details, this time for Tyrogue. It evolved at level twenty; to Hitmonlee if it had greater attack, Hitmonchan if it had greater defense, or Hitmontop if attack and defense were equal. Phil let out a small sigh and put away the volume, resolving to do better on the next one.

“So, what have we got?” Phil asked Bruce as he crouched down. Bruce handed Phil the ace of diamonds card, and angled the riddle so they could both read it.

*With this move type won’t matter at all
The greater you are, the harder you fall.*

“So it’s a move,” Phil said thoughtfully, looking the riddle over several times. Not ‘the bigger you are,’ as the saying normally went? Then again, that implied size. This deliberately said ‘greater,’ so if size wasn’t the factor… wait. Weight! “A move that does more damage the heavier the opponent. It’s low kick.” He mentally thanked Hill for that one, then took it back immediately.

Moves were categorized together by type and then alphabetically, so it didn’t take long for Phil and Bruce to find both the book and page with the next card and riddle.

*Correct again, you’re awarded a spade
But to become the champ, what would you trade?*

Phil added the ace of spades to the other two cards and handed the riddle to Bruce.

“Do you have any idea?” he asked, once he’d had time to read it. Bruce looked bemused and gave a slight shake of his head, though it was clear that he was still thinking. Phil went quiet and left him to it, trying to consider the solution himself.
He wished he knew more about the pokemon league. “Badges, maybe?” Phil looked down at Bruce, who looked back doubtfully. “I don’t know. Maybe you turn them in to challenge the Fantastic Four, or, something. What else would it be? A concept? Time?” He didn’t think that was right. He didn’t think ‘badges’ was right, either, but for lack of better ideas went to look them both up anyway.

Bruce didn’t leave that aisle, but did start to slowly pace it.

Phil paged through any relevant books he could find, but nothing turned up. Eventually he just grabbed a book about the pokemon league, and after a quick flip through, took it to Bruce’s aisle and began to actually read it.

“There’s got to be some kind of lead in here, or a clue, or something,” he found the champion section in the index and turned to it, scanning through the paragraphs for anything that could even remotely relate and turning the pages slowly.

Before his frustration with the third riddle could reach a new level, Phil heard a sharp breath. He lowered the book to look at Bruce; the pokemon’s eyes were a little wider, processing. Phil didn’t want to cut into his thoughts so waited, and a moment later, Bruce looked up at him with triumph.

“You’ve got it?” Phil asked eagerly. Bruce nodded and hurried to the end of the aisle out into the open space, looking around quickly.

“Hey, wait up! I have to put this away,” Phil said. Bruce stopped and cast him an impatient look, so Phil hurried.

As soon as he returned it and stepped out of the aisle where it was from Bruce scurried off again, forcing Phil to jog to catch up as they went once again to the pokemon species volumes.

“Are you sure?” Phil asked, but Bruce just waved a hand dismissively without looking back as he kept going, slowing down as he got closer to one of the shelves. He stopped at the base of it, looking up determinedly and raising both of his hands. Phil watched with uncertainty until Bruce gave him a pointed look and gestured his head up to the shelf.

“Oh! You’re too short. I mean- here, let me help,” Phil went over to pick up Bruce, who thankfully didn’t mind the short comment and directed Phil with his arms. The pokemon was a lot heavier than Phil thought he’d be, but he chose not to comment this time and helped him reach the book he’d been after: Volume #67: Machoke.

Phil set Bruce down and let him page through it, trying to figure out how a single, specific pokemon was somehow the key to becoming the champion. Machoke was no pseudo-legend; Phil didn’t even think it was fully evolved. To confirm, he looked at the next volume on the shelf.

#68: Machamp.

Champ.

“What you would trade… it’s a trade evolution,” Phil realized, just as Bruce turned to a page with a card and a note sticking out. As expected, it described the evolution method: a machoke had to be traded in order for it to evolve into a machamp. “It wasn’t an abstract riddle, it was just painfully literal. Bruce, you’re a genius!”

Bruce blinked at the praise, then growled affably. He handed Phil the ace of hearts, but kept the new riddle for himself. He only looked at it for about a second before he smiled and handed that up to Phil too.
“All right,” Phil added the card to the others, now a complete set of aces from each suit, and looked at the riddle.

You’ve just passed for wit, so please come on down  
Just name the type of the gym in this town.

It took Phil a little longer than Bruce, but soon he was smiling as well.

“Let’s go.” Invigorated, the two of them hurried to the section with pokemon type overviews and looked for the type that was the common ground of Tyrogue, low kick, and Machoke.

“Here it is. Fighting.” Phil pulled the book free and handed it to Bruce, but paused when he noticed something in the now empty space.

There is a slot under the book!

Phil stared at it for a moment, before doing the only logical thing and inserting the four playing cards. It was a perfect fit.

Click!

Suddenly the entire book case began to rumble and Phil jerked away, Bruce stepping back slowly beside him. The huge shelf then began to gradually slide to the right, stopping for good when the side hit the wall.

Wow! A hidden staircase!

“Huh. Neat,” Phil decided, peering down the staircase that had been beneath the bookshelf. It led down to a door marked with the league gym icon in the center, and the word ‘DANGER’ across the top.

“Well if that’s the case,” he remarked, then looked to Bruce. “Why don’t you return?”

Bruce looked between the door and Phil with some reluctance.

“I’ll be fine,” Phil said easily. “It’s a gym battle. I have Hawkeye and Widow for gym battles.” Bruce’s eyes averted uncomfortably and he gave a small nod, like he felt bad for not being an option. Phil wouldn’t have any of that.

“And I have you to help get to them,” he added, causing Bruce to glance back at him suspiciously. “I’m serious,” Phil assured him. “Do you think I could have gotten all of this alone? I’d be stuck reading books about the pokemon league, if I’d have even gotten past Eevee,” he laughed a little. Bruce smirked. “I’m glad you want to help,” Phil went on earnestly, “but you already have, tremendously. We’ll take care of the rest.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the dusk ball.

Bruce stared for a moment, then started walking away.

Phil faltered. “Hey, where are you...?” He watched as the pokemon went to where the shelf had moved and held up the fighting book he still carried.

“Oh! Right, we need to put the book away first, don’t we? Here, let me.” Phil went to Bruce and knelt to take the book. Bruce smiled and traded it for the dusk ball, which he disappeared into as soon as he touched it.

“Thanks,” Phil said quietly as he put the book away. “When we get back to the Pokecenter, I’ll
show you my new badge.” Phil tucked the dusk ball away, exchanging it for the standard and luxury.

“Good news,” he told them as he descended the hidden staircase, to the room labeled ‘DANGER.’ “You’re up.”

He opened the door to a large room with tiled metal flooring and tech lining the walls. On the far end of the room was a man with a long brown coat. He had a staff in one hand, and the four ace cards in the other.

“Got your memo!” he called with a grin, raising the cards.

“Solved your riddles,” Phil replied in turn.

“Not mine,” he laughed, “the Pokemon Professor’s. Just gets in the way of battlin’ if you ask me. That’s what you’re here for, ain’t it?”

“Not quite what I had in mind when I visited the library, but apparently it is.”

The man grinned again. In one quick motion his cards vanished, replaced by a pokeball in his hand instead.

“Then let’s get to it! Gym Leader Gambit’ll show you how it’s done!”
“Go, Widow!” Phil called. When the sneasel emerged, Gambit looked amused.

“You sure about that? Thought gettin’ this far was supposed to make you smart!”

It was Widow who acted in response, screeching out her battle cry and spreading her claws with menace.

“If that’s how it is, then,” the gym leader let his pokeball fly. “You’re up, Scraggy!”

Phil checked the pokemon’s type: fighting and dark. “Icy wind!”

“Headbutt!”

Widow was the faster. She leaped into the air and unleashed her attack, inflicting a damaging blast. The scraggy grimaced but didn’t deter. He jumped up to meet Widow in the air, charging into her head first with his thick skull.

Scraggy’s attack did more damage than Widow’s, that was clear to see, but the sneasel didn’t so much as flinch as the impact threw her back. Instead she landed in a safe crouch, legs already bending in preparation to charge straight back.

“Fury swipes!” Phil called without delay. She sprang forth in assault. When the first of her several hits was a critical, he couldn’t stop himself before he pumped his fist in triumph. Then she swiped her claws a second time, then a third, then-

“Brick break!”

Widow’s fury swipes hit three times before Scraggy interrupted the streak with a swift, powerful chop.

*Widow fainted!*

Phil grimaced before returning Widow. He muttered a quiet apology to the luxury ball before putting it away.

“Dark and ice just ain’t a good start in a fightin’ gym,” Gambit shook his head. “You got some guts, I’ll admit, but we’ve got moxie!”

*Scraggy’s attack rose!*

“Don’t count us out just yet,” Phil said shortly. Widow had done a number on the scraggy, and from what he’d observed of its speed, Hawkeye would be faster. Fast enough to deliver that one solid hit they needed.

The only problem was, well, Hawkeye didn’t even have a move that was good against fighting types. He was a partial flying type, sure, but he still didn’t know any flying moves. Even the simplest one would do, but no, he hadn’t learned any. To make things worse, the only damaging moves he did know right now weren’t very effective against fighting. Knock off was dark, fury cutter was bug, quick attack was normal…

Quick attack? He could finish it off with quick attack, sure, but that probably wouldn’t help him with Gambit’s next pokemon. Phil sincerely doubted that it would be part dark type as well.
Wait. Dark type. Dark was weak to bug, even though fighting resisted it. That meant it would even out. Then- actually, yeah, that was perfect! This battle could turn in their favor yet, provided Hawkeye didn’t miss.

And Hawkeye didn’t miss.

“Hawkeye!” Phil called, releasing the gligar, “fury cutter!”

As soon as Hawkeye emerged from the pokeball he flew straight for Scraggy, slashing him with his claws. Perhaps if it was a pure fighting type it would have been able to resist more of the damage, but instead, Gambit was forced to recall the scraggy as it fainted.

“Gettin’ interesting, now!” Gambit said with a spirited grin and swapped Scraggy’s pokeball for a different one, tossing it once in the air before tossing it into the arena. “Get ‘im, Hitmontop! Triple kick!”

“Fury cutter!”

*It’s not very effective…*

After Hawkeye’s attack Hitmontop flipped on his head and spun around rapidly, kicking out at him in rapid succession. Each kick did more damage than the last.

*It’s not very effective…

*Hit 3 times!*

At least Hawkeye was able to resist fighting moves too, otherwise they’d be in more trouble. They still might be. It was down to the next move.

“Fury cutter!” Phil called again. Hawkeye circled through the air, using that attack for a second time on Hitmontop – and a third time, overall.

Fury cutter’s power doubled with each consecutive hit.

That was the plan. Super effective or not, Hawkeye was now striking out with an attack quadruple its standard damage. Between that and his previous double powered attack, it was *just* enough for the win. Hitmontop fell.

=Gym Leader Gambit was defeated!=

“Aw, mon ami! Losin’s not my style!” Gambit recalled his pokemon and headed across the arena. Phil did the same, meeting him half way.

“You think you can take the Fantastic Four?” the gym leader asked with a grin. “Here – better take this!” He presented Phil with a gym badge. Like the Hero Badge it was small and circular, but this one featured a silver X against a black background. “That’s the X-Badge,” Gambit explained. “Makes sure that pokemon up to level 30 listen to ya! Also lets your pokemon fly outside of battle.”

“Of course.”

“Here, take this too. This here’s TM31, Brick Break. Use it to bust up your foe’s defenses, and strike!”

“I see,” Phil added it to his TM bag. “Thank you, Gambit,” he said, pinning his new badge next to
the other with no small amount of pride. “Are you going to reset the puzzle now?”

“Nah,” Gambit lifted his staff across his shoulders and draped his arms over it lazily. “You already solved it; that bookshelf’ll stay right where it is. Why? Plan on comin’ back so soon?”

“No,” Phil shook his head. “I think I’ll stay and learn about pokemon for a little longer, but now after earning the second gym badge it feels more appropriate to continue. What’s my next stop?”

Gambit chuckled. “New York City.”

- 

The route to New York City was long, and had almost double the trainers he was used to. Phil found himself doubling back to the X-Town Pokemon Center a couple times just because it was closer than the next city, and there were always more trainers in front of him than there were behind.

At least, that was the way it seemed. It took going all the way back to heal and progressing again for him to realize that if he’d had just gone a little farther, he could have ducked behind a trainer and made it to a Pokemon center that was set up independently just before the entrance path to a forest. Phil could only smile wryly to himself as he healed his pokemon again anyway.

Widow just shook her head through all of it and Hawkeye laughed, but Bruce at least was sympathizing a little. He had opted to walk with Phil through most of the route while Hawkeye and Widow were out for the battles.

As tiresome as the path had gotten, though, they were definitely getting more battle experience. Hawkeye learned feint attack early on, which was definitely more useful at this point than sand-attack was. For Widow, Phil had his Pokedex read and project TM31. After viewing the demonstrated technique she had no trouble using it in battle, and whether his opponents had barriers or not, the fighting move definitely gave them more of an edge.

Concerning Bruce, well, trainer battles with the others started to give Phil a sense of what the troubled pokemon could and couldn’t handle, stress-wise. Phil had been keeping a careful eye on him, but there hadn’t been an issue until a picnicker’s nidoran landed a critical hit on Hawkeye. Hawkeye had already been through a few battles at that point, and the critical had pushed him to the red – and caused Bruce to start to see red. Phil recalled him quickly and finished the battle, keeping him away for a short period after that until everyone was healed up again. Typical trainer fights like that didn’t usually get so close, but at least now Phil knew it was safer to keep Bruce away for the more tense battle situations.

The forest was almost as long as the route, and just as painful to get through. Sure there were less trainers, but every few steps he encountered a wild pokemon and either had to battle, switch pokemon, mess around with his bag for a while, or flee. He usually fled. Even so, the additional round of trainer battles had Hawkeye and Widow each building up more damage to the point where Phil couldn’t help but wonder if it’d be better to backtrack to the Pokecenter once again. Remembering how that’d gone last time, though, he pressed on. New York City had to be closer than it was far.

And it was. After another two turns and a straight walk forward, he could see the end of the forest and the beginning of a grand bridge. As soon as Phil stepped onto it the city came into view and he picked up his pace to an eager jog.

Finally, in the clear! If he never had to return to the path between X-Town and New York City, it’d
be too soon. The view from the bridge was marvelous, but Phil rushed through it to the gate at the end until he made it just inside.

New York City. At last.

He’d been here before, but it seemed so much different as a pokemon trainer. Some things like the towering building of Stark Co. never changed, but besides that? There were Pokecenters, Pokemarts, pokemon contests and theaters, battle towers and subways, and more. This city was so much a central place for all things pokemon it had *two* gyms, and if that didn’t speak volumes, he didn’t know what could. The New York City he’d been to before felt almost like a distant memory, while the one he stood it now was new.

He took his first steps in.

“Hey, Coulson!”

…

No.

Damnit.

Maria Hill approached him from the street with vague interest.

He should have backtracked. Or used a potion. Why did he never use potions?

“Honestly I’m surprised you made it here, with how often you’ve been getting sidetracked. So, you finally got a second badge? I just earned the third, myself. It really is too bad that only one of the gym leaders is here right now. We’ll have to come back later for the other. Not very professional, if you ask me.”

Maybe it was just an encounter.

“The league will sort it out soon enough, I’m sure. In the meantime, I’m leaving for the next city. There’s no reason to stick around.”

So, it was just an encounter?

“By the way, Coulson.” Her eyes took on a challenging glint. “Did you catch any new pokemon?”

Son of a bitch.

*Rival HILL wants to battle!*

“Go, Lotus!”

Lotus? Phil watched, hand in his pocket, as Hill called out her misdreavus. Looks like she’d earned her place on Hill’s team.

At any rate, Phil felt slightly better about Widow being closer to half health than full. She was perfect for this.

“You’re up, Widow!”

Hill’s eyes widened briefly as she took in his new pokemon and his type advantage before she switched to just plain irritated. It was pretty satisfying.
“Lotus, confuse ray!”

“Feint attack!”

As always, Widow beat her to it.

*It’s super effective!*

The move made a big dent in Lotus’ health, but she hung in there to cast rays Widow’s way that seemed to perplex her.

*Widow became confused!*

“Snap out of it, Widow – one more feint attack!”

Widow was confused, but his order must have gotten through because she used feint attack again. Lotus promptly fainted.

Hill looked displeased, but not entirely worried. Phil supposed if he had four other pokeballs on his belt, he probably wouldn’t be either.

“Good, Widow. Return!” Phil said, recalling her. She could snap out of her confusion inside the pokeball. Besides, she’d be in trouble if Hill sent out her mankey. Not that Hawkeye would fair that much better against its low kick, especially when he was at half health. Again, Phil berated himself for not using the potion. They just weren’t at an advantage here.

“Go, Hawkeye!”

“Trickshot, go!”

No mankey, but something different. Phil didn’t need the Pokedex this time, not since he studied. This black bird pokemon was the dark and flying type, Murkrow.

“Use fury cutter, Hawkeye!” Weak against flying, but effective against dark; it’d even out. At double the power, Hill’s pokemon could be down in two turns.

“Astonish!” Hill shouted.

Hawkeye and Trickshot went at each other with rivaling speeds, nearly matched.

_Nearly._

Trickshot beat him to the punch and struck him with a closed up talon while letting out a startling screech. At the close proximity it made Hawkeye flinch instead of attacking.

Hill didn’t relent. “Wing attack!”

“Come on Hawkeye, fury cutter!”

Again Trickshot’s attack came just an instant before Hawkeye’s. Had Hawkeye been at full health at the beginning of their fight this wouldn’t have been so much of a problem, but the attack brought him close to fainting while Hawkeye’s fury cutter had only cause marginal damage.

One more turn and Hawkeye would faint, so Phil did the only thing he could think to do. He raised his pokeball.
“Hawkeye, return!” It was his mistake. No, not even that; it was his oversight. Hawkeye shouldn’t have to lose to Hill again because Phil wanted to conserve their potions and had incorrectly assumed they were in the clear.

Hill had other plans. “Pursuit!”

Phil watched in alarm as the red beam of the pokeball hit Hawkeye to recall him, and Trickshot bolted forward. The murkrow’s talons were glowing black, enabling him to strike through the red that washed over the gligar – and for double the damage because of it.

**A critical hit!**

Hawkeye’s pained cry was clipped as the pokeball made him vanish, definitely down for the count. At best. It all happened in an instant but it felt longer to Phil. It was a good thing he had learned earlier when it wasn’t safe to have Bruce out, because if Phil was seeing red, he could only imagine.

“What the hell was that?” Phil snapped at Hill. “I was returning him! You already won!”

Hill had the decency to look a little abashed at the critical, at least until Phil started yelling. “What, so you could call him back out later to get the upper hand on a pokemon that’s not as fast?” she shot back.

“What? No! Why would I do that?”

“Strategy! But maybe you’re right, and it was my mistake for assuming you had any!”

“Go, Widow!” Phil called, because he’d had enough. “Brick break!”

“Night shade!”

Trickshot was too slow for Widow’s intense strike. That plus the hit from Hawkeye’s fury cutter brought him down.

Hill gripped her pokeball tightly as she recalled the pokemon and steadily reached for another. Phil didn’t know whether he should forfeit to the Pokecenter or stay with Widow and do as much damage to Hill’s team as they could. Widow certainly looked like she’d favor the latter.

Before he could make that call, though, and before Hill could lift another pokeball, his S.H.I.E.L.D. Tech chimed. Both of theirs did. It was a call from Fury. Hill responded instantly, and Phil, a beat later. As soon as the display projected he found himself in a three way call with both the director and the agent across from him.

“Hill. Coulson. I see you’re still in New York City – or, just arrived. Good. You won’t be leaving just yet. I have a mission for each of you. How about we talk more in person?”

“Where should we report to, Sir?” Hill asked while Phil recalled Widow. Their battle was clearly over.

“Look up.”

Phil did. The S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier was flying straight above.
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