Denounce the Evils

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Additional Tags: my name is earl but its team rocket, archive warning is for snippets of james' backstory and all are tagged/warned accordingly, nothing terribly graphic but i give more details in my opening notes so make sure to read them!, be safe. love yall.
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Denounce the Evils

by MadiYasha, Walpurgisyiff

Summary

All lives touch other lives to create something anew and alive.
With the loss of Team Rocket as an organization, Jessie, James, and Meowth set out to do something they never would have previously dreamed-backtracking across the regions, reuniting with old friend and foe alike, in an attempt to make up for their wrongs. Join the trio as they take off on a determined search to find their white tomorrow on the path of righteousness.
Foundations

Chapter Notes

This chapter is short in comparison to the rest of the story, and it is very dialogue heavy. But I figured getting the sooner I got the show on the road, the sooner I could get to writing the fun stuff. With that in mind, please enjoy my shaky grasp on writing Ash :P

Denounce The Evils is the child of me and my best friend Ven. Neither of us could make it happen without the other--or at the very least, it definitely wouldn't be as good. He's responsible for most of the ideas with external conflict--the action, if you will--I'm the one who puts words to it, and writes the more internal stuff/dialogue. My writing, a combination of mine & Ven's ideas. He's also responsible for most of the more creative chapter titles... mine tend to be pretty boring, his could actually be episode titles half the time.

If you're ever wondering who to praise for an idea, just ask! I'll tell you if it was me or Ven, pff. He doesn't get nearly as much love for all the content he puts into these chapters, tbh.

That being said, this chapter was all me! It was written before we decided to work together, back when I wasn't sure if I could commit to the story or not. He didn't even beta this one! So even though AO3 says it was both of us, keep in mind this garbage fire is solely my own :'

DTE, while a generally uplifting story, is not completely void of heavier moments. While I'm not a fan of angst, I'm also not a fan of completely sweeping character's traumas under the rug. This story focuses a lot on bad people who have been hurt in their own ways, and the conflict they feel at having to break the cycle when they feel its one they were justified in perpetuating. It deals with abuse, abandonment, neglect, assault, PTSD, ableism, and a lot of other hard things that people go through. More than all that, though, it deals in HEALING from those things.

I'm saying all this upfront cause i feel like the content warning slapped on the story can be a little intimidating. The bad that happens in this story, however, is never painted as anything other than what it is--cruelty that deserves to, and always will be, rightfully punished. Hopefully, that is something you're all interested in as much as I.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s a curious concept, the moment everything falls apart.

Oftentimes, when a person is prompted to imagine their collapse, their mind goes to catastrophic places. You see your loved ones passing, or your home ablaze, or the airless wreckage of an accident as you try to claw yourself to freedom. So easily, we view the foundations of our lives as strong and supporting, only felled by the most vicious and foul of circumstance.

Real life, of course, is a little less exciting than that.
Real life reminds you that no—it is not always dynamite tumbling down the strong and stable wood of your heart’s home. Sometimes, a screw comes loose. Sometimes, a crucial beam breaks and sends the whole thing cascading.

Jessie, James, Meowth, and Wobbuffet were sitting in a cheap diner when it happened. They were dressed lazily in civvies, their attention directed to a meal they were still deciding if they were going to pay for. The heat stuck Jessie’s bare back to the seat of the booth, and she brushed her hair out of her face, taking another bite of her syrup-logged waffle. The mood was one of apathy, boredom, and a general feeling of ‘well, what now?’ The television was drolling, the fluorescent lights above them hummed weakly, and the chatter of various trainers and their pokémon from within the dive wasn’t really doing anything to help their moods.

The TV flashed to breaking news, and the quartet didn’t care to pay any more attention to the fact. News happened every day, and none of it was any more exciting than the things they would often get caught up in themselves, always hovering around the Ketchum boy’s protagonistic luck. The patrons of the diner, however, had since broken into cheers over whatever was happening on the diner’s minuscule television. This changed two things: one, it piqued Team Rocket’s curiosity. Two, it provided a window of opportunity, for them to run away in the euphoria and avoid paying for their meal.

The four of them shared a look, then a nod, as they all shoved as much food as they could in their faces, and rose. Quietly, they began to tiptoe away, towards the door, each of them sneaking a casual glance at the commotion on the TV as they passed the crowd around it.

Then, in sync, the Rockets all froze one by one.

From the static speaker of the shoddy diner TV, the newscaster’s words rang in their ears.

“—at last, puts Interpol’s longstanding investigation into the infamous organization to a close, or at the very least, the beginning of one—”

Their eyes widened as they saw him. Giovanni, their boss, being carried out of Kanto’s Rocket HQ in handcuffs. Hundreds upon hundreds of pokéballs being carted out in trucks. SWAT teams surrounding the building, cuts to even more of them surrounding the Viridian Gym.

People cheered.

Every time it cut to new footage, people cheered.

“Do you think this is the end of Team Rocket for good, Mr. Looker?”

“Well, there will always be loyalists out there who act of their own accord…”

The foundation below the Rockets cracked eerily. They all felt it somewhere deep within them as they stood there, frozen, surrounded by strangers.

Crack, crack, crack...

“...but Giovanni was entirely the brains of this operation, and we’ve apprehended his next-in-commands as well. All things considered, Team Rocket won’t be able to do much, de-funded and dethroned.”

SNAP

People cheered.

They all watched as every single patron in the diner rallied, roaring praise at their demise. Celebrating, pointing, laughing as the four of them fell into the rubble of their shattered lives.

The cheering turned to white noise. The world fell away.

The team formerly known as Rocket receded back into their corner of the diner, horrified expressions unchanging as they stared blankly into their empty plates.

Trainers and pokémon continued to cheer.

A haze of doubt hung over the former agents. As the celebration petered out around them, none of the four of them spoke a word.

Ash couldn’t pry his eyes away.

And it’s not like he wasn’t trying! Alright, so in his younger days, yeah—he had been fooled by some pretty silly disguises. But over time, he’d become more perceptive to those kinds of things—eyes tuned to the sharpness of the emerald and sapphire glares that would peer into him from behind strangers’ smiling faces. Asking him if, just once, might we handle your pikachu?

You couldn’t even really classify these as disguises. They were dressed stylishly, their hair done up even more so, and despite half their backs being turned to Ash, he could tell it was Team Rocket. They took absolutely zero note of him, not even casting him a glance. They just sat there, unmoving, taking up space in the location.

The boy’s mind flashed back to the rumour he’d caught wind of that day, arriving in town on his way back from the League. He hadn’t believed it at the time—being Kantonian, he’d watched Team Rocket persist for years with little to no involvement from the police. There was no way it’d fall in his lifetime, clearly.

But as Ash stared (quite impolitely) at his enemies sitting adjacent from him, and registered the darkness that seemed to hang over them as a whole, it began to slowly sink in that maybe there was some merit to the word on the street. He shot a look at Pikachu, who’d been just as oddly mesmerized by the spectacle as him, and the pokémon met his eyes. Without words, Ash inquired, and Pikachu hesitantly nodded, climbing up onto his trainer’s outstretched arm.

Team Rocket’s eyes didn’t move to meet him, even when he stood awkwardly on the side of their booth. They simply stayed quiet, with the world dissolving into chaos around them, their gazes fixated on nothing, unfocused. Waves of empathy hit Ash hard, and he cleared his throat sheepishly, unsure of what to say or do or if he was wasting his time on people who tried to rob him literally less than a day ago. The whole thing, conceptually, was a little bizarre—but he was and always would be an empath. Ash sensed no malice in them, standing there.

“Hey, uh…” he looked downward, hand scratching the back of his head. “Are you guys, like… okay?”

The Rockets were snapped out of their cruel trance, their heads moving mechanically to stare up at their nemesis. Ash saw their eyes, finally, red-rimmed and tired and weakened. One set of them still wet with tears. They stayed silent, letting their current state answer his question. He sighed, then looked at Pikachu, then back to them.

“No sneaky stuff,” he preempted. “Can I buy you dinner?”
He saw their lips quivering and their expressions creaking as soon as he said the words. All at once, they tackled him as a unit, shouting ‘thank you, Twerp!’s and soaking his outfit with their tears. The diner was empty, except for the single waitress who stared curiously at the spectacle—wondering if someone had finally come to pick the sulking and unresponsive group up.

Pikachu had reflexively jumped onto the floor at the sight of Team Rocket lunging in his general direction, and Ash met his eyes again. They shared a look, their thoughts mingling in silence.

Are you sure about this, Ash? Pikachu had pondered. It could easily turn sour.

It could, The boy responded, then smiled. But helping someone who needs it is always worth the risk.

“For real? You’re telling me you taught yourself to talk? Just… because?”

“No, ya dope! I did it for love!”

“Not sure I get it… but that’s really amazing! Who knew someone like you was so smart!”

“Don’t make me retract my t’anks, Twoip.”

Rain pattered on the streets outside, painting the roads into mirrors that reflected the lights of the city and the glow of the midnight stars. Ash’s eyes were heavy and aching for sleep, but he couldn’t pull himself away from what he was hearing. A whole new world was slowly opening up before him—and it was one he never dreamed existed, let alone one that he’d see. Under buzzing lights, he sat with old enemies, their battle scars becoming acquainted with his own.

“You both have been through so much!” He beamed. “I mean, James, I knew about some of your history, but knowing even more, it’s amazing you made it out of that alive…”

“Trust me,” James responded. “I tell myself the same thing most every day.”

“Hey, Jessie!” The boy dragged his gaze over to her. “What about you? Got any stories like that?”

The redhead took a long sip from her soda. “Of course I do. My life is a long epic of trial and tribulation…”

Ash peered into her, his eyes shining, his hands balled into excited fists.

“...but I hardly have time to sit here and turn myself into a pity magnet. That’s what we have these two for.”

He softened, a little disheartened. Jessie was walled in. She was hardened. It wasn’t that he wanted to pry, it was more so that he was painfully curious, throughout the years, to know what on earth made her… like that. He picked his words carefully.

“Well, the only time you guys are pitiful to me is when you’re doing bad stuff,” he said. “I don’t really see… these things that made you, I don’t see them as pitiful! They’re obstacles you’ve overcome! That’s like, the exact opposite!”

Jessie regarded him, considering his words, her expression morphing into something that Ash couldn’t entirely identify. She tested the waters.

“Listen,” Jessie began, staring at a particularly interesting spot on the wall. “What is there to say? I’m the most talented, passionate, gorgeous, and brilliant orphan you will ever meet. My beginnings were
humble, and I quickly trampled them to rise to stardom. I don’t know how to frame it more romantically.”

Meowth rolled his eyes. “Oh please. You was so poor ya ate snow. And t’ought it was a treat.”

“Because it was!” Jessie snapped. “Honestly, what kind of deprived life did you live that you don’t think it’s a treat?!”

Ash had a feeling there was quite a lot he was missing, but he could practically see the writing on Jessie’s forehead that boasted ‘sorry, you must be a level sixteen friend to unlock my Tragic Backstory.’ He decided, wisely, not to press his luck.

“Yeah, see, nothing about that is pitiful,” he told her. “The world gave you nothing and you worked for everything that came after. That’s not deserving of my pity. That’s grit. You deserve pride, and it looks like you know that!”

She laughed, almost scoffed, and buried her face in her soda, cheeks flushed. Ash smiled, feeling the gratitude practically radiating off of her from behind ages and ages of toned and steely demeanor. Wobbuffet saluted in her general direction, his mouth hanging open in a knowing grin.

“You guys…” he said. “You… please don’t take this the wrong way? You really don’t seem like bad people. You just seem like you were dealt hard circumstances and wound up… here.”

“But where else is there to wind up?” Said James. “Being bad is the only thing we’re good at.”

“No offense, but… that’s literally the wrongest thing you’ve ever said.”

“Yeah? ‘N’ how do ya figure dat?”

“I mean, think about it,” Ash responded. “Every time you try to do bad things, to me or to others, you all end up fumbling around and then getting blasted off far away.”

They nodded. He continued.

“But I’ve seen you help out before. How many times have you come to the world’s aid when it’s been in danger? I know because we fought together, on the same side. Whenever you fight for good, you triumph. You had to have realized that by now, right?”

The quartet blinked, then shared a rather blank look.

Oh, Ash realized. They had no idea.

“…you really… never made the connection?”

Their expressions stayed. Jessie was the one who spoke.

“We… just…” she paused. “We had a life before you, you know. Before this wild game of cat-and-mouse began…”

“Too literal.”

“Point taken. What I mean is, we used to be good at this. Used to be ruthless, and criminal, the stylish rogues that we were…”

There was a bittersweet longing in her voice. Ash caught himself empathizing again. Rooting for the villains as he stared into that small window through the past.
“...but we fell into this routine, with you and your pikachu. And… I think you might have rubbed off on us, Twerp.”

He shook his head. “I think you always had the potential to be good at heart. You just… might not have known.”

“No, it’s not just that,” Jessie continued. “You’re obnoxiously goal-oriented. You’ve been chasing this dream of yours, this Pokemon Master thing for years now, and you still haven’t thrown in the towel, no matter the setback.

“I guess we just told ourselves that so long as there was a twerp out there running towards that goal, there would always be us right behind him, arms outstretched to snatch up his sparky rodent. I feel like, if one of us stops… the balance of the world disappears.”

“Hm. Well,” Ash said. “Like you said… there was a you before me. And there was a me before you, before our paths crossed, anyways. And look… everything was okay.”

It was James who responded this time. “He’s right, you know…”

“My goals haven’t changed, true. But dreams aren’t set in stone. When I met Brock—”

“Who?”

“The tall one.”

“Right. Continue.”

“...when I met Brock, he was so certain he wanted to be a breeder. Dedicated years of his life to it. Studied every ounce of information he could find.

“But come Sinnoh, through a few twists and turns of fate, he realized what he really wanted to be was a doctor. Now he’s far off somewhere training for that dream, probably losing it over how many Joys he gets to hang with all day.

“The point is… just because you’re passionate about something… I mean, if you change your dreams, that doesn’t mean all your hard work and passion goes to waste. You still lived through it. You still learned it, and gained something valuable.”

“Getta load o’ dis,” Meowth grinned wickedly. “The Twoip praisin’ us for stalking and stealing from him for an eternity!”

“Hardly!” Ash laughed. “But there had to have been non-nefarious things you learned through pursuing even the nastiest of goals. That’s just something that goes on when anyone works hard at anything.”

“You think so?”

“I know so! There’s nowhere to go but upwards after this. Don’t think of it as losing the battle. You’re not giving up! You’ve collected tons of experience, so now you’re evolving!”

“Evolving!” The three of them repeated excitedly, with an enthusiastic ‘wobbuffet!’ layered over the exclamation.

“Exactly,” the boy gave them a thumbs up, his winning smile stuck on his face. “Go for broke on your next dream. Make this one a mega-evolution.”
“Dreams…” James echoed, suddenly lost in thought. “But… the only dreams we’ve ever dreamt besides this one have caused us to split up, and…”

“…we learned pretty quick dat splittin’ up doesn’t woik for us.”

“It’s true. We’re an unbreakable trio!”

“Wobb~uffet!”

“…an unbreakable quartet!” Jessie corrected herself. “Team Rocket is the only dream we can all chase at the same time… what if there’s nothing else out there for us?”

Ash crossed his arms, deep in thought, considering what they’d said. When he spoke again, he sounded just a tad unsure.

“I think everything happens for a reason,” he told them. “There has to be something else out there you haven’t discovered yet, or why would you all be here, trying to figure out where to go?”

“That’s true…”

He closed his eyes, continuing to speak. “Maybe… maybe you guys should keep traveling. Learning more about yourselves… learning how to be good… the world is so big, and has so much to offer. I think if you do that, your dream will find you on its own.”

When Ash opened his eyes, he wanted to see theirs burning with purpose. Instead, the group looked slightly dejected. James voiced their concerns.

“But… being good,” he moped. “That’s a tall order… where would we even start?”

“Hm…” Ash’s thoughtful expression returned with a vengeance, his eyes pointed downward. “Wait! I got it!”

“Have you, now?”

“The easiest way to be better is to own up to the times when you were worse!” He exclaimed. “So, why don’t you start with apologies? Everyone can do those!”

“Have you MET us, kid?” Meowth mumbled.

“How do you apologize to someone for the kind of things we’ve done? No one’s going to want to forgive us.”

“That’s how it is for everything,” the boy told them. “People can’t always forgive you. But if you apologize to them, it means you’ve owned up. You’ve done what you can to fix things. And honestly… it feels good.”

“It… it does…?”

“Well, yeah!” He beamed. “Try it. Right now. You can apologize to me! I’m not gonna reject you lot.”

“Start with YOU?” Jessie gaped. “But—you—our track record with you is by far the nastiest!”

“All the more reason to get it done sooner,” Ash stayed smiling. “C’mon. I promise you’ll feel great.”
The four of them shared an uncertain look. A year ago, a month ago, a day ago, five hours ago—if you had told any one of them that this is where they would be soon, none of the Rockets would have believed you. They envisioned themselves there, again—the remnants of their foundation dead under their feet. And beyond it, a boy with a name that literally meant “remnants,” aglow with embers untouched, beckoning them forward to shelter.

James was the first to move, clasping his hands together, his head down. The silence was shattered instantly as he spoke.

“Please find it in your heart to forgive us, Twerp!” He begged. “I have no idea what we could ever do to atone for all the years of chase we’ve put you through! But at the very least, we have nothing to lose now, so I’m willing to try!”

Meowth seemed to respond to this, his tail twitching nervously, and he uncrossed his arms as soon as his teammate finished speaking.

“Jimmy’s right,” he stated. “Dey say th’ definition of insanity is doin’ th’ same t’ing over ‘n’ over while ya expect different results. I dunno how many years I got left on dis big round earth… might as well see what it’s like on da other side of history.

“Twerp, I hope you can forgive us for all we done some day, even if I’ve played ya like a fool more’dn a few times,” the cat gazed beside Ash, towards two small auburn eyes, and a softness unlike anything any of them had ever heard entered his voice. “And Pikachu…?”

The mouse’s voice was far less soft, suspicious. “Pi?”

“You ain’t never gotta forgive me,” he said. “I made my peace wit’ dat. But… I am sorry.”

Pikachu’s expression loosened, seemingly caught off-guard in the sincerity of the statement. As he became momentarily lost in the feeling of it, his trainer beamed beside him.

From across the table, Wobbuffet stirred, quietly inquiring at his trainer, who was silent as the night and locked rigidly in place. Jessie’s arms remained crossed, her eyes somewhere else, her jaw tight. Ash and Pikachu watched her body language dance with itself for a while as she tried to muster up the humility to say what everyone else had said so easily.

“Fight me.” She finally mumbled.

“What?” Everyone responded in unison.

“Fight me!” She said, louder this time, face completely red. “You and me, Twerp! A Pokemon battle, fair and square! One on one!”

Ash blinked. “Sure, but, why?”

Jessie seemed to have gone back to having no way to articulate herself, so James became her voice.

“No, that makes complete sense, actually,” he said to Ash. “When Jessie really feels indebted to someone, she buys them gifts. She doesn’t know anything about you except that you love to battle more than anything. This is her way of apologizing.”

“I’m—right—here—!”

“An’ yer about as eloquent as a mamoswine right now.”
“Twerp,” she turned to him. “Do you accept?”

The boy seemed mystified for a moment, but it wasn’t long before his smile came back brightly, and he stood, arm outstretched towards her.

Jessie grabbed it, and he yanked her out of the booth, pulling her to her feet, fire in his eyes and determination lining his grin.

“Prepare for trouble.”

Stars were fading from the sky above them, and the sun’s slow creep into the waking world painted the universe around them in the bluest hues. Leaning against a bench outside the Pokémon Center, the battlefield in front of them still warm with energy, they sat united.

“Aren’t your friends worried about you, Twerp?”

“We’ve parted ways,” Ash responded. “I was on my way back to Kanto. My flight'll be leaving in a bit.”

“And you decided to spend your last day here hanging out with old enemies in the middle of the night…” James marveled. “Your faith in the world absolutely astounds me sometimes.”

There was silence, then. Flying types started waking up, chittering gently in the trees.

“Hey…” the trainer started.

“Yeah?”

“It might take a while before I’ve decided whether I forgive you, or not… but I can accept those apologies. I can tell they meant something.”

James regarded Ash, a genuine smile completely enveloping him.

“I hope just as much as you do that someday I can forgive you,” Ash said. “And Jessie?”

She turned slightly, her eyes moving but her head cast upward.

“Use your wobbuffet more,” Ash teased. “You guys probably woulda gotten Pikachu by now if you had! What a powerhouse!”

“Tell that to him,” Jessie grinned, balancing her foot on the back of the Pokémon’s head. “Lazy little blob would rather scream all day than battle.”

In response to this, he did indeed scream.

When the sun was far enough into the sky to warm their faces, the six of them got up to part ways. The dawn brought with it a new day. For Ash—a new adventure, somewhere beautiful. For the former Rockets, a new life entirely.

Blues and pinks and purples danced across the world as they all shook hands in the sunrise. In the hustle of the morning, Ash asked them one last question.
“So… was it worth it?” He inquired. “Was I right, I mean. Did it feel good?”

Surprisingly, Jessie was the one to answer him. “It did.”

“Freeing.” James added.

“Like somet’ings missing, but in a relieving way.”

“Now imagine feeling that way all the time.”

“Do ya t’ink we could do it?” Meowth said. “I mean… the scope of everyt’in. Travel backwoids… right our wrongs…?”

Ash spoke, his words full of promise.

“No dream is unattainable if you want it bad enough.”

They nodded wordlessly, their hearts swimming.

“The next time we meet, it’ll be as friends! Okay?”

Jessie’s response carried resolve that nearly matched Ash’s own.

“Tell Pallet to expect us. Not today… but some white tomorrow.”

“I will.”

He disappeared towards the Pokemon center, waving the whole way, even Pikachu broke his suspicion and cast a cursory smile toward them. It felt warmer than any heist they’d ever pulled, left them more full inside than any meal they’d ever stolen, gave them more promise than any direct deposit they ever woke up to.

The quartet stood there for far longer than necessary, hearing the world come to life around them, their feet itching toward their balloon in the forest but locked firmly in place. The weight of Jessie’s previous confidence suddenly hit her, and staring straight ahead, she perused her teammate for validation.

“James, are we really going to do this?”

“Meowth,” he mirrored her. “Are we really going to do this?”

“…Wobbuffet? Are we really gonna do dis?”

“Wobbuffet!”

The foundation at their feet was gone, but the soil beneath it was rich.

The dawn brought with it a new day, and as its sunlight came upon them, they felt the soft earth begin to sprout anew.

Ash whispered quietly into the call as his mother answered. The sunlight filtered in through the windows on her end, and he thanked his lucky stars that the timezones hadn’t been unkind to him.

“Ash, honey! And Pikachu! Calling again so soon? Did my birthday come early this year?”

He laughed, softly, and pressed on. “Actually… something weird came up.”
“Oh, are you doing alright? Do you need anything? Are you going to be able to get home okay?”

“Yeah, mom, I’m fine! I’ll be on the flight in a few hours. It’s just…”

“Tell mommy what’s up,” Delia insisted. “I know that face.”

“It’s… a lot.” He said.

“And I’m a whole lot of mom. What do you need?”

“Well,” He scratched the back of his head.

“Have you been watching the news?”

Chapter End Notes

So, there's the set-up! If it wasn't completely obvious, I want this series to be about the rockets backtracking through every region, meeting up with old friends and enemies, and hopefully making amends in the process. I have a good chunk of ideas, but... not enough to make this story as epic as I really want to. I know how it's going to end, but as for how to get there... I'm very open to input. So! I have some questions for any TR or Pokenai fans in general out there--

- Who are your favourite characters? How can I include them in this story? Honestly, I'm open to any ideas!

- What are some of your favourite episodes? What characters of the day would you like to see again?

And, one that's a little stranger...

- Would anyone be opposed to me writing this series non-chronologically? I'm thinking that I'm gonna just write it as a series of loosely-connected chapters, and then order them as time goes on. Would that be too confusing, for anyone? What order you read them in shouldn't matter too much, I don't think--when the development really hits at the end, I'm gonna crank out a couple chapters in traditional chronological sense. Until then, it's gonna be more structured and free.

What do you think? Give me some feedback, if you're out there. I'm really excited to write this fic--and the more input I have, the more I can write.
Kalos was just as beautiful as they’d remembered it.

They touched down just before sunrise in Lumiose, and despite the lack of sleep, Jessie’s eyes absolutely burned with determination to see the lights in the city of love once more. Not morning people at all, the boys tried their hardest to keep up with her—practically a child in a candy store.

The city, on the other hand, knew nothing of sleep. Its heart beat onward through the early hours, and night rowlet roamed the street with smiles hanging from their faces. It wasn’t at all hard for them to waste hours enveloped in Kalos’ intoxicating embrace.

The former Rockets’ new lifestyle had definitely not been unkind to them. As it turned out, when you weren’t wearing gang signs across your chest and robbing people left and right, they usually would just help you out if you needed it! This was still coming as a bit of a shock to the three of them, who were convinced at this point that they were locked in some kind of awful torture bubble growing up which prevented them from knowing kindness in others. Its ghost hung over them whenever the impulse to do bad reared its head again.

Were these the kind of people that the twerp had always known? Or did he, too, know suffering, but chose to overcome it through sheer force of will? Chose to acknowledge that one day, things would be better? And how did he stay so kind while he waited?

In any case, months and months of offering manual labor to every person they could had left not only their hearts, but their stomachs and wallets full. The battling economy was still rich, as well, and people were more than willing to shell out money for a win. It certainly wasn’t the stacked blood money they were used to—but it felt better, and they got by with meals to eat and enough luxury to enjoy life.

Finally, after hours upon hours of James and Wobbuffet acting as Jessie’s nonexistent impulse control (preventing her from spending dinner money on twenty dollar lipstick), they’d reached their destination in the heart of the city. It loomed above them, and they realized all at once that they felt smaller than they had in a long while. The screen within its chambers flashed on almost instantly.

“Greetings and welcome to Lumiose City Gym!” A robotic voice welcomed. “For what reason have you come?”

Jessie stepped forward, her words loud and clear as she glanced down at the notes she’d scribbled hastily that morning.
“We’ve come for a personal audience with Gym Leader Clemont!”

There was a silence that sunk into their core, and they nervously looked to each other in its wake. Then, shuffling noises. Eventually, they saw him there on the screen—looking much less baby-faced than they’d remembered him, his features gaining angles despite the surprise and suspicion written all over them.

“Team Rocket?” He inquired. “What on _earth_ are you planning with this?”

As if rehearsed, the four of them bowed their heads, hands locked together tightly where Clemont could see them. James spoke.

“Well… _what would Ash do_?”

He knew the answer before he finished the thought. One by one, the members of the quartet raised their heads as the doors shifted open and the blinding stadium lights within Prism Tower began to creep across their faces.

In its center, Clemont stood his ground, his tone electrified.

“Allies,” he stated. “Really?”

Instantly, they were on their knees before him. It was a routine well practiced, something they had finally started getting the hang of. Hard, at first—to make themselves vulnerable in such a way—but they were slowly finding out that the payoff was usually worth it despite that moment of weakness. Together, they could handle anything, and lowering themselves to atone for their past was nothing compared to the suffering they’d previously known.

Ever the scholar, Clemont had questions.

“Of course it was him! I can’t imagine a better person to turn someone’s entire life around than Ash Ketchum.”

“Aha! That’s high praise, kid! Got a crush?”

“Wh-what?! No! Why would you even…!”

“Ha! It’s written all ovah ya face, science twoip!”

Clemont was sputtering and half-hidden behind his hands, the bread he’d baked now tumbling right back onto his plate. Despite the red that currently painted his face, he was wearing a shy smile that he hadn’t discarded in hours. The breakfast had quickly turned jovial, and any initial suspicions that the gym leader had, had very quickly laid themselves to rest once they all got talking.

Like most things on the former Rockets’ journey, it was going… ridiculously well.

“Well, listen,” Meowth had said, far into the conversation. “We know ya still might not trust us, after everythin’. We’ve not only come to apologize, but ta offer ya our soivices.”
“Services, you say?” Clemont inquired, chin resting on his hands.

“Indeed! We’re skilled at manual labour, and once you get us started, there’s no stopping!”

Jessie finished the thought. “Not only that, we’re adaptable! Whatever problem you might have, we can easily mould ourselves to fit the solution!”

“Woobuffet!”

“So whaddya say? Is there anyt’ing at all ya might need help wit’? Big or small?”

The boy crossed his arms, eyes closed in thought.

“Well, actually…”

They leaned in, intent to listen.

“You see, I was just about to make a bit of a trip,” Clemont said. “Out to Reflection Cave, pretty far west of here…”

They nodded, always stuck in unison.

“In one of my dad’s helicopters, it’ll be no time at all, really. A few hours, maybe. But in all honesty…” he ran a hand across the back of his head. “I’ve never been on an outing like that alone. I always had Bonnie with me. But now she’s off on her own, and I can’t bring Clembot with me, since it needs to run the gym in my absence…”

“I don’t blame you if you’re scared,” Jessie said, sounding a bit harsher than she would’ve liked to. “I vaguely recall a Kalosian cave with some freakishly fiendish things going on in it.”

“As do I… it gave all of us quite a scare. If you’re offering your time, it would be a pretty big help if —”

“Consider it done!” James suddenly announced, fists balled excitedly. “We can head out as soon as possible!”

“Team Escort! I like da sound ‘o’ dat.”

Caught off guard at the pace of their determination, Clemont smiled, and nodded, suddenly overcome with confidence.

He’d always felt it, himself—but he didn’t realize just how much of a visible impression Ash could leave on someone until he’d seen it in action. He wondered if they saw it in him, too.

“So what are we looking for, anyways?”

Clemont grinned, his glasses shining, always eager to inform. “Well, in the deepest recesses of this cave, there’s supposedly a deposit of glowing crystal… on its own, it doesn’t seem to serve much purpose other than looking cool. But…!”

“But?”

“What little we know about it seems to suggest that it’s one of the most receptive materials to solar power in existence! If I could get my hands on some of it, I could study it, or build a machine capable of potentially finding more… imagine, being able to outfit the city with an easily renewable
energy source! The money we would have to invest in even greater pursuits of knowledge!”

James’ eyes were full with almost as many stars as the young scientist besides him. They’d been enthusiastically taking turns sharing with each other the various things they’d learned over the years building machines, and Jessie, Meowth, and Wobbuffet couldn’t help but hang back and carry quiet smiles. They couldn’t bring themselves to tease the two for being such nerds when they seemed so happy, radiating passion that nearly lit them up against the murky cave’s walls.

“So you said you spent time in the same strange place as Ash when you were last here?” Clemont asked, after a silence. “What was it like there?”

“Unreal,” Meowth rolled his eyes. “Whole place was topsy-turvy. We was there, and you an’ da rest of da twoips was there, but everyone in dat world was… wrong.”

“How so?”

“Well, da twoip was a crybaby. Didn’t wanna do anyt’ing but cry all day. Da twoipette was super rude and loud like Jessie—”

“Watch it.”

Meowth tensed, paws raised in a gesture of surrender, before he continued.

“Da tiny one was all polite and quiet. An’ you! You was some kinda beast, running everywhere at top speed, climbing trees—”

“S-seriously?!” Clemont’s eyes were massive. “I couldn’t even accomplish that if I wanted to!”

“Maybe not, but dis version of ya sure could. Everyt’ing was all opposite. We even met ourselves! Dey were ridiculous! These noble heroes of justice, preachin’ about doing good and saving da day, and… and…”

His sentence trailed off, and James peered into him curiously as he became lost in thought.

“Meowth?”

“Oh, man. Dey was almost like how we are, now!”

To this, Jessie let out an amused and hearty laugh. “You think they’re over in that other world right now, deciding to turn a new leaf and join the dark side?”

Wobbuffet whispered slightly, in response. He sounded almost worried for them.

“There’s always been theories proposed by great minds in our age,” Clemont whispered, turning a corner that lead them down an incline. “That an infinite amount of universes exist, parallel to ours… some where everything is entirely different, and some where the only difference is a single torchic never hatched.”

The cave was becoming darker, now, the mirrored surfaces lining it slowly fading away in the shadows.

“To think that we’re standing right in the middle of what could be a gate into any one of those worlds… ah! It just fills my heart with excitement! There’s so much I’ve yet to learn!”

Clemont’s impassioned ramblings were punctuated with a clumsy shout when something on the cave floor caught his feet. As he cascaded forward, the rest of the group grabbed at his clothes reflexively,
pulling him backwards to decency and saving him from the painful potential. He sputtered to a halt in the darkness, flashlight pointed downward and darting back and forth in an attempt to identify the offender. Startled, he almost jumped several feet in the air when his light rested on it.

Eyes.

Wide open, transfixed directly on him, and not the only set. Lines of them, shining and fixated and scattered across the cave floor like eerie galaxies. He froze for a moment, unsure of how to proceed.

Then, curiously, he reached his hand out to make contact with the one he’d stumbled over.

“Stop!”

Jessie’s voice was as sharp as a whisper could be, and she dove forward and yanked Clemont back with little grace.

“You can’t just go around grabbing at whatever you see! A scientist’s curiosity is no excuse for carelessly throwing away your life!”

He swallowed. “What… do you mean?”

She took the flashlight from his hand then, slowly moving it off the floor and upwards. The blond’s gaze widened.

They’d stumbled pretty deep into the cave, for sure—deep enough into it that they’d somehow managed to come upon an entire gathering of wobbuffet. Jessie whispered again while the pokémon stood there, immobile, desperately trying to go unnoticed by the humans who’d entered their territory.

“You can’t touch their tails,” she cautioned. “There’s horror stories about what happens to people who do.”

The colour completely drained from Clemont’s face. If I had come here alone, would I still be…?

Meowth suddenly elbowed the now relevant member of their team, his head inching upwards at the taller pokémon as he spoke.

“Go ask for directions.”

“Wobba?!”

“Oh, come on! Just ask ‘em where da biggest, shiniest crystal is. I always do da talkin’!”

Saying Wobbuffet looked stressed was probably an understatement, but no one on the team seemed willing to take his side, so he sighed and slowly approached the others.

He saluted to them, exclaiming something of interest, and they stirred. For an instant, there was an absolutely piercing silence.

After some cursory glances at each other and what felt like an eternity of tension, the other wobbuffet saluted right back, speaking their names in comparatively hushed tones, all in unison.

Gazing at the spectacle, Clemont and his escorts let out a collective breath that none of them had realized they were holding in.

Wobbuffet then opened a dialogue with the gathering, his tone phasing from completely
uncomfortable into a more normal and jovial one. The others nodded at him as he spoke. His arms were moving a mile a minute as he gestured, no doubt trying to explain what exactly it was they were looking for with his limited understanding of it and childlike vocabulary.

“Is it working?” Clemont whispered, leaning down to Meowth.

“I t’ink so, dey’re just agreein’ wit’ everyt’ing he says…”

Midway through the statement, the crowding of Pokémon began to part down the middle, their stubby feet shuffling awkwardly to the sides of the cave. Jessie’s wobbuffet turned over his shoulder and excitedly beckoned them forward, immeasurably proud of his smooth talking.

“Well, I’ll be,” James marveled. “That was surprisingly simple.”

Meowth had said the words to him before, but they definitely bore repeating—

“Sometimes all ya gotta do is ask.”

Down another incline, dead ahead, they were met with a room nearly blinding in its brilliance. There was not one deposit of the iridescent crystal. There was not two, or three or four.

The cave was absolutely bathed in it—the material stretching wall to wall, extending almost as far as their eyes could see. The former Rockets stood there in awe, the sight almost incomprehensible to them.

Clemont fell to his knees and started weeping.

As the day dragged on, the group had overall made some pretty good time. It took none at all to mine some of the crystal free and start their exhibition back to Lumiose, and with the sun nearly set around them, Clemont extended his welcome for them to come stay in the tower.

“There’s no point in a home this big without someone to fill it, after all.” He’d said.

Presently, they were in less warmer moods, their hair in complete disarray and the room around them covered in soot and cinders. At the center of it was Clemont, scrap metal in hand, and his bunnelby gently patting him on the back with its paw while he sat there coughing out clouds of smoke.

“How… how does that even happen?” The boy said, astonished.

Exasperated at the current failure, the young inventor found himself on his back, too tired out from a long day to will himself to power his brain back on and work out the kinks. He let out an uncharacteristic sigh and laid down his tools for the night.

James was next to him, now, his voice a little more sheepish than he would’ve liked.

“Ah, you know…”

“I do,” Clemont said, sitting back up, composure suddenly regained. “Failure paves the way to success. I’ve never minded before when my creations go haywire. It simply is something that happens.”

James blinked, surprised at the recovery.
“...but that doesn’t mean I don’t still feel the sting of discouragement sometimes. I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it, especially since it was so long ago, but I got used to Ash always marveling at my creations,” He blushed, scratching nervously at his cheek. “It’s silly! I persevered before him and I will after him. But between that and Bonnie not being here, sometimes it’s hard to pick myself up off the ground.”

“You’re allowed to be sad, science twerp,” Jessie said plainly. “There’s no point in joy without sadness.”

“She’s right. Be sad an’ lonely today and let it move ya forward tomorrow.”

“We might only mope about our failures for five minutes at a time,” James added. “But that five minutes still happens!”

Clemont grinned, his spirits raising slightly at their genuine desire to make him feel better. Of course Team Rocket would have inspiring words about failing time and time again.

“Sometimes you’re stuck with only yourself, but that’s not a bad thing,” Jessie told him. “You just have to become your own biggest fan.”

“You know, it’s strange… it used to come so naturally,” Clemont responded. “I wonder when I stopped?”

“Time makes fools of us all.”

“In any case, thank you all,” the blond said serenely. “Tomorrow’s a new day.”

“Tomorrow’s a new day.” James repeated back at him, his voice confident and sure and dripping with promise.

Jessie’s eyes took in the city from the top of the Prism Tower, and she pondered in her solitude how she could feel so full of both satisfaction and longing. There was a glamour to this life unlike the one she was used to previously, and she found herself second guessing if it was real even when they’d been on the road for this long. Was ‘too good to be true’ just a lie she had held onto in order to protect herself? And if so, why did she still need it, now?

Footsteps behind her gently carried her out of her reverie, but she didn’t turn her head away from the glistening lights of Lumiose. The night brought a chill that was comforting to the humid fog swirling around her thoughts. She exhaled, and envisioned her anxieties tumbling away on the wind as it danced around her.

The woman didn’t have to turn her head to know James had come up to find her. She’d memorized every detail of how her team carried themselves, the song of their footsteps etched into her head, necessary lore. James was always the worrier—she knew he’d come for her as soon as she stepped away to be by herself.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“I’m sorry, do you know me?”

“Point.”

He strided forward until he was next to Jessie, his arms leaning on the railing as he gazed down at the city alongside her. She spoke first.
“Have you finished your little project, then?”

“I think so,” he said, a bit sheepishly. “Though, I’m a little out of practice…”

“Well, in this case, that might be a good sign.”

A comfortable silence fell over them, for a while. Nothing between them but the sounds of the city as they drolld out into nothingness and the quiet whistle of the night air.

“It’s moments like this where it really hits me,” James said, eyes fixated below. “Like, this is it. This is what keeps people kind.”

“Is that why you ended up so much softer than I?” Jessie grinned, turning to him. “I never got to see sights like this. You probably just called something like this a normal Tuesday.”

“Who can say?” He laughed. “I was too busy trying to stay alive to notice, anyways.”

The darkness in his voice and the smile on his face reminded Jessie why she was glad to have him, to have her little family. It was nice to know there was someone out there who could reflect on their demons in the same way she so often did—waving them off as problems for another day, problems that she in her current form wouldn’t exist without. Both she and James were thankful that their demons seemed to play comfortably with each other at all.

“Do you think your mirror self was a starving whelp like me?”

“Depends. Do you think your mirror self was a spoiled brat?”

“Does it matter? They found each other in the end just the same.”

“I hope they’re enjoying their stay on the dark side,” James said. “We should’ve let them borrow our motto! They could’ve gotten some use out of it.”

“I wish I remembered theirs,” Jessie laughed. “It could do us some good, now.”

“You know, Jess, now that I think about it…” he took a few steps back from the edge of the world, then faced her. “Our motto doesn’t actually say much about being bad.”

She faced him. “Perhaps we just need to perform it with more… righteousness?”

He shot her a smirk that was far too composed for the person she knew he was underneath, and bowed nobly with a single hand outstretched. From behind locks of vibrant lavender, his eyes pierced her.

“Well, then?”

She grabbed his hand, letting him pull her forward.

“To protect the world from devastation…”

And they danced.

“To unite all peoples within our nation.”

He spun her, and she felt like she was drowning comfortably in the lights and the night air and the feeling of being on top of it all. The world melted away. Jessie laughed like a child, unrestrained and free.
“To denounce the evils of truth and love!”

“To extend our reach to the stars above!”

She fell backwards in his arms, their footwork mingling in perfect sync, not a sound passing around them but their own rapid breathing. She could feel his face inches from her own, his hair brushing against her cheek, their noses not even an inch apart. Jessie's eyes fluttered open, charmed grin so wide she feared her face would crack clean in two.

“Jessie.” She whispered.

“James.”

He pulled her to her feet, and the two of them resumed their laughter as they carried the performance around the tower.

“Reformed Rockets, blast off at the speed of light!”

“We used to be cruel, but now we’re alright!”

They posed for no one in particular, the silence only uncomfortable in that it was incomplete. Jessie couldn’t help but throw her head back and dissolve into giggles again—in her head she just envisioned their third trying to get some damn rest, shouting his name followed by a sharp “Good NIGHT!”

And they laughed, and they laughed, and nothing else existed in their world in that moment. Just them and the promise of a blindingly white tomorrow.

“We’ll have to workshop this with the other two later.”

The following day as they were setting off, James handed Clemont a small box wrapped in paper, a near-perfectly tied ribbon resting on top of it. The boy gazed curiously at the present in his hands, unsure of what he did exactly to warrant it.

“Consider it a parting gift,” James told him. “I made it myself, but I suppose it’s from all of us.”

“As t’anks for being so quick to accept us!” Meowth cheered. “Most people we knew on a level as deep as you wasn’t exactly t’rilled to see us again.”

“Wob~buffet!”

“It’s no problem,” Clemont said, holding the item close. “I just did what any good person would’ve done. Everyone deserves a second chance.”

“Ha! Ya say dat like we didn’t pass our second chance ages ago. We’re on at least our twentieth.”

“In an case,” Jessie chimed in. “We hope you like it. But!”

“But?”

“You can’t open it just yet,” James said. “Open it the next time something explodes in your face, when you’re feeling frustrated and like you have no one to cheer you on.”

“You have to wait! You promise, inventor twerp?”
Clemont grinned, and nodded sincerely. “I promise.”

“Until we meet again, then,” Jessie said, her normally fiery smile casting a comfortable warmth to those around her. “It’s been a pleasure.”

"May I make... one last request?"

"Sure, what's that?" James asked.

"If you see my sister in your travels..." he looked at his feet, expression bittersweet. "If you see Bonnie. Can you take good care of her in your time together? And... tell her I miss her?"

There was a strange, almost maternal instinct in Jessie's mannerisms when she stepped toward Clemont. Gently, she laid her hand on his shoulder, holding the young boy's gaze when he looked upwards at her.

"I'll make the little lemon-drop call you if I have to drag her shrieking into the pokémon center myself." She smirked.

Jessie watched Clemont's smile turn from longing to bemused and thankful, the light in his eyes radiant and hopeful and undoubtedly infectious.

"Thank you." He beamed, and the quartet knew he meant it.

With the city alive and breathing around them, the four of them bowed and said their goodbyes. The young gym leader gazed onward as they disappeared into the crowds, their shoulders looking so much more broad, their forms looking so much lighter than before. It was as if they had, somewhere along the way, dropped the things that burdened them for long enough that it became their normal.

He realized he was grateful. Grateful to people he never imagined he could feel gratitude towards. It was a beautiful, quiet moment of introspection—akin to many others he had experienced in his lifetime—where he realized that the world was still full of surprises for him to enjoy, and hidden knowledge for him to uncover.

It was weeks later when he was sitting in his workshop, clothes blackened and ragged and heart feeling much the same, when he tore into the wrapping paper and unearthed a transparent box of cogs and wheels. To most, it wouldn’t look like much, but as Clemont watched the gears turn rhythmically in it and noted the near-pristine finish of the wooden hatch on top, he couldn’t help but be impressed. The detail, the finesse, the care was there.

What do you invent for the boy who can invent anything himself? The question had kept James up well into the night. But gadgets weren’t always about a spectacular end result. More often than not, they were about the journey there. Neither he nor Clemont were sure what their end result would be… they were content to just watch the wheels keep spinning. Spinning was circular, but it was still movement.

Finally, the last cog clicked into place, and the latch on the top of it opened. A small music box tune filled the air, and Clemont’s eyes brightened as he saw what had revealed itself—small wooden effigies of the former Rocket trio, each of them holding a sign with a single word on it.

They were words he had kept inside himself somewhere, sure—but the young inventor would be the
first to tell you that sometimes, an affirmation from someone other than the voice inside your head can do you some good.

A promise for the future, a gift from good friends, and the seed of an idea that the next instance, whatever it may hold, could completely change everything.

“KEEP MOVING FORWARD!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the astounding feedback this fic has received. I'm actually a little blown away by it—and a little intimidated by it! My words are simple and my writing is "okay," so to hear that all of you were able to become invested in this story from chapter one has just left me brimming with joy. I really hope I can live up at least a little to your expectations.

I have no idea if all the chapters will be as long as this, as I'm more fond of introspective stuff rather than a whole lot of action, but hopefully you enjoy the ride with me regardless.

Once again thanks to everyone who left a comment on chapter one and opened a dialogue with me—I now have a whole document overstocked with ideas!—and thanks to my bestie Ven, who beta'd this chapter and is responsible for honestly most of the action in it.

I will continue to do my best!
Holy shit, you guys. I'm so sorry. This is a good 9k words.

I did not intend for it to be that long... but the muse just kinda took me and said fuck it to what I wanted. I hope you're alright with that!

Per request, the episodes alluded to in this chapter are:
- XY069 (Defending the Homeland!)
- XY070 (Beyond the Rainbow!)

And, briefly:
- XY134 (The Right Hero for the Right Job!)

You don't exactly need them to understand the story, but if you want a refresher, there you go!

Below their feet, the sunset-coloured treetops made the quartet forget how tired they were. Over terrain that would otherwise be treacherous without their trusty balloon, the former Rockets drifted with eyes transfixed below. Route fourteen was caught in a permanent state of autumn, its colours like something out of a sleepy painting. As they passed the wetlands, the forests became more dense, and between the exhausted morale and mesmerizing sights, they hardly noticed the thick clouds rolling in.

Booming thunder snapped all of them out of the reverie, and James nervously grappled at the handleings near the central fire. Panicked, Meowth pawed at Jessie.

“I t’ought it was s’posed to be clear today!!”

“It was, genius! You think I fibbed just to inconvenience you, personally?!!”

“I t’ink ya got rusty at the whole readin’ weather patterns business!!”

“Would you like to give it a shot then, furbrain?!?”

“Guys, this really isn’t the time…” James said, finding his voice. “We should probably drop low and scan the area for—”

More thunder roared across the skies, sending Meowth’s claws straight into Jessie’s leg as the four of them screamed in unison.

“—shelter.”

Jessie stayed cringing, her voice dark. “I haven’t felt voltage on my skin in months. I am not going back to that life.”
“Wooo~bbuffet…!”

James slowly began their descent, eyes frantically scanning the distance for something, anything. Even if it was just respite among the trees—this was a bad place to get caught in a storm. It wasn’t long before he spotted some kind of orifice along the side of a cliff, and made a beeline for it, his heart feeling a lot lighter.

Steadily, they managed to land among the treetops without much damage to the balloon. It was a messy, difficult climb up the slick cliffside as the clouds fell open and rain began to pour down on them, but somehow, through a recent stroke of luck in their good karma, they managed.

A few things were amiss, once they were able to take in the surroundings of the cave—namely, it was lived in. Thankfully, it didn’t seem to be pokemon—no, it was notably human. The remnants of a small fire were blackened and resting further in, and there seemed to be some makeshift sleeping arrangements kicked up towards the back.

“A traveler, do you think?” James inquired.

“Hopefully one dat doesn’t mind a little company.”

With the words resting anxiously in the stagnant air, the four of them made their way deeper. It wasn’t until they began to sluggishly drop themselves into the bedding of vegetation that the chill set in. James shivered, jostling Jessie accidentally, and she took it as a sign to pull herself over to the dormant fire and make an attempt to reignite it.

From the corner of her eye, she caught her star pokémon glowing iridescently as she was sifting for sparks, and she shot him a look akin to a mother about to order their child to their room.

“If you Mirror Coat that rain off, you are going to regret it.”

Wobbuffet whispered his name timidly, the light fading from around him, and he nodded.

With the fire going, the four of them sat against the cave wall with heads leaning on shoulders, hoping to find some warmth in each other. Eyes weighed down, muscles sore, minds swimming, the sound of rain slowly faded into white noise as it echoed all around them. Slowly, the world blurred into nothing as they blinked peacefully out of consciousness.

Most people jolt awake instantly in the presence of screaming, but the quartet was so used to rude awakenings at this point that they’d learned to slowly fade back into them like one would a peaceful morning with sunlight filtering through the blinds.

The source of the shouting was out of focus, for most of them—the fire had fizzled and night had brought darkness, as it does. They could only really take in her silhouette as it blurred in, but once Meowth spotted mountains upon mountains of hair, and the feisty looking fraxure lingering alongside the shadow, he somehow registered who it was.

“Dragon twoipette?” He snapped awake. “What are you doin’ here?”

“What am I doing here?! Iris continued to yell, and Fraxure shared her tone with outstanding accuracy. “I was sleeping here! What are you doing here! I had dibs on this cave, you know!”
“Have you not noticed there’s a downpour?!” Jessie shot back. “We were trying to avoid being burnt to a crisp by the lightning storm raging out there!”

“Likely story! I’ll bet you saw me come in here and were waiting for the perfect moment to ambush me!” She stood her ground. “But you’ve lost your touch! Falling asleep while you waited. Ha!”

“The nerve…!”

Jessie was ablaze when James put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it gently. She stiffened, turning to look at him, and his eyes said it all without words—remember why we’re here.

She gritted her teeth, then exhaled, annoyed. Anger was so much easier. James took the initiative.

“Iris, isn’t it?” He said, his teammates’ eyes widening. “We’re not looking for a fight, honest.”

“You really think I’d believe that?” She cocked an eyebrow. “Look, I’m not the same naive little girl I was back in Unova! I remember when Meowth played us all for fools, whimpering about how you fired him so he could infiltrate our group. I know your tricks! Don’t think I’ve forgotten!”

Had there not been a child present, they probably would’ve cursed at that. They’d forgotten just how wicked they’d been in that region in particular. This was going to be more of a hurdle than it had been thus far. His voice uncertain, James pressed on.

“I understand,” He said. “You remember how conniving we were. But take in the current circumstances—our balloon is parked right outside with nothing concealing it. There’s a massive storm outside. Our clothes are still damp, and when you found us here, we were asleep with nothing to defend ourselves. Does that seem like the same people who tore blazing trails of destruction across Unova?”

Iris’ stance loosened a bit, and she crossed her arms, deep in thought. “I suppose not… the Team Rocket I remember definitely wouldn’t make mistakes like that.”

“We honestly didn’t know you were here,” He added. “Look at us—we’re hardly dressed for an ambush. Jessie is sequined. What about that screams stealth?”

The girl snorted, a smile somehow finding its way to her. “Alright, alright, so you either suck at your jobs now, or you’re being genuine…”

Meowth scoffed. “Would ya believe both? Much as it won’t mean nut’in’ comin’ from me to you, we don’t really hang around that crowd anymore.”

“Well… ugh … I suppose I’ll go against my better judgment this once and let you stay,” Iris said. “It’s not like I couldn’t easily take all of you at once in a battle.”

What even brings you out here?” Jessie asked, willing her temper to subside. “We’re a long way from Unova.”

“Ah-ah-ah,” Iris chided, a hand on her hip. “You’re not in the clear yet. Sit.”

They did, and she and Fraxure followed immediately. The girl and her pokémon stared into them, gazes piercing.

“You tell me what your deal is first,” Iris ordered. “Then, you get to hear mine.”

The former Rockets looked to each other, feeling a lot more contented and optimistic about the
direction of the exchange, and began.

“If you didn’t have so many stories, I’d honestly think you were full of it!” Iris crossed her arms, leaning against the cave wall. “Ash worked his friendship speech magic on you, huh?”

“Somehow,” Jessie rolled her eyes. “Believe me, it baffles us too. A twerp possessing a way with words is still a twerp.”

She nodded. “Such a kid.”

“In any case,” James said. “It worked. And things have been going… surprisingly well, sudden rainstorms notwithstanding. Have we earned the right to be privy to your own tales, now?”

“Oh, I suppose so. I’m not really feeling any ominous vibes coming offa you lot,” She grinned. “What about you, Fraxure?”

The pokémon chattered at her, his tone jovial. She affectionately ran a hand over the top of his head, smiling. “Looks like you’re alright for now!”

They leaned forward, in unison, excited to hear what was going on in their time apart, and grateful that they’d managed to more or less earn the fierce dragoness’ trust.

“You can’t be a dragon master if you stay in the same place for too long,” Iris started. “And I’d already made Unova my playground. So I hit up some other regions before eventually landing here. I’ve heard talk of some pretty incredible dragon types living here, and even Kalos native ones I’ve never seen before!”

“Dat’s definitely true,” Meowth added. “We’ve had more’dn a few run-ins with some angry dragons around these parts.”

“Well! I’ve had nothing but fun,” She smirked. “I went to Professor Sycamore’s lab and got to meet his garchomp—what a sweetie! So affectionate and calm!”

The quartet shared knowing gazes, looking to each other and back to Iris. They were going to have to make a note to stop by again on their way out and offer their condolences to that pokémon in particular. The thought hadn’t even crossed their minds…

“And the professor’s aide—what was his name…? Alain…?”

Their eyes widened. “Alain’s there?! How’s he doing?”

“He had stories for me,” She looked lost in her memories, for a moment. “About his charizard. It’s so funny, when I first saw a charizard, Ash was the one showing me his… and he totally put me in my place, letting me know if it looks like a dragon, and talks like a dragon, it’s… still not always going to be a dragon. I was so ticked at the time, that he knew more than me!”

“Twerpette, don’t even sweat it…” Jessie told her. “You ever been to Alola? They have a dragon type there that’s just a giant palm tree.”

There were stars in her eyes. “That’s so ridiculous. I love it.”

“Anyways,” James said. “Alain’s charizard?”

“Yeah! He told me about mega-evolution. Said he used to have a stone that could transform his charizard into a dragon type! I mean, how cool is that?!”
“We’re well-acquainted wit’ dat one! We watched him beat da Kalos League with it! Heck, it even blasted us off once.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Iris grinned. “Lemme guess the scene. You guys in your dumb balloon. Facing Ash and Alain, who have miraculously crossed paths because of course they have, and you’ve got a pikachu in hand that’s looking more tired than scared.”

“Okay, foist of all, my face is on dat balloon, and if we’re bein’ honest I resent it bein’ called dumb —”

“Spot on, though,” James affirmed. “It was one of our worse blast-offs. Those two made the Kalos League finals, you know.”

“No way. Ash did?” She laughed. “I feel like I’ve said that sentence a good ten times in the last hour.”

“So… did Alain show you his charizard?”

“Well… that’s the thing,” She pulled her knees to her chest, the glow of the fire suddenly illuminating her. “He said he gave up his mega stones. Switched them out for new ones. He still had his charizard, obviously—it was his most treasured partner. But it’s mega forme was… different, now. I wanted to ask why, but something in his eyes told me I shouldn’t have pressed him.”

“Hm…” James mumbled, hand resting on his chin. “I have a guess or two.”

“Kid’s experienced a lot,” Meowth said. “He went t’rough da whole ‘evil organization I’m apart of just fell apart in fronta my eyes an’ now I don’t know where ta go from here’ gig long before we did. An’ he’s so much younger…”

“You know, in retrospect, I guess we’ve grown a little fond of the edgy twerp,” Jessie added. “We really do need to visit him before we head out.”

“I see…” Iris said, deep in thought. “That totally makes sense though… I still remember what he said when he showed me his charizard’s new forme.”

“Yeah?”

“Charizard erupted in this rainbow flash of light, and that’s when I felt it… the sun got so much warmer, like it was shining only on us,” She explained. “And when I asked him why he changed stones, he told me it was because… ‘Life is better in the sun… where it’s warm, and we’re free to grow strong on our own.’”

The sentence hung there on the air, and Iris saw something enter the expressions of the faces opposite to her. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but it was notably calming. She felt at ease.

“Do you think that’s what he meant?” The girl inquired. “Learning to be a better person?”

“No doubt…” Meowth said, voice almost otherworldly in its wisdom.

“Even though I didn’t get to see the dragon type charizard, I couldn’t help but feel grateful to have spent time with Alain anyways,” Iris told them. “And then after that, I made my way into the mountains, where I lived among a whole flock of noivern, for a while… I felt really at home with them!”

“Don’t doubt it,” Jessie smirked. “Your pigtails match their ears.”
“Hey!” She shoved her. “That’s a compliment, I’ll have you know!”

“And I never said it wasn’t!”

“Well, anyways. Right now I’m on the road again, trying to pull bits and pieces of lore together that I’ve heard about a really strong dragon type.”

“Really,” James inquired. “What kind of strong dragon type?”

“Stronger than pretty much any other in Kalos,” Iris explained. “I haven’t gotten the chance to learn much about it, other than it’s a really powerful dragon, and that it supposedly protects the order of this land.”

“Hold da phone!” Meowth interjected, voicing the group’s thoughts. “We know dat one!”

“Really?!”

“Yeah! It’s right around here!” He beamed. “We’re barely any time away at all on foot, let alone in da balloon! We could take ya to see it!”

“That was so easy…!” She was absolutely glowing. “…Wait. That was too easy. This better not be a trick.”

They four of them practically fell backwards.

“No, seriously! We got up t’ our typical deeds over in da wetlands near here a long time ago. There’s a dragon dere dat fits the bill poifectly!”

“It’d do us some good to stop by,” Jessie added. “We have pokémon to apologize to, there. And taking you there could be some of our apology to you, perhaps?”

“Artfully convenient? Yes. But like you were saying, we’re really no match for you in our current state,” James said. “If not escort you, we can at least point you in the right direction?”

“Hmm,” She mused. “How’s about… I’ll tell you in the morning. Once this rain has cleared up. Deal?”

“Sounds like a plan!” Meowth affirmed.

Grateful for her generosity in letting them stay, they made themselves comfortable adjacent from the makeshift bed they’d crashed earlier. As rain continued to drown out the world around them, they fell back into repose, eager to hear more of what Iris had to say, eager to help her along on their own.

It was a strange feeling—still surprising, to them—the idea of being excited to give someone a hand, rather than to take. But it surely wasn’t unwelcome.

The sun was high in the sky when they made it to the wetlands—the rain having cleared and the earth soaking into their soles. Iris was hardly prepared for the terrain, and she thanked her lucky stars that—of all the things to be grateful for—she ran into her former enemies. Without their transportation, she knew she would’ve had to traverse the inconvenient routes for much longer than she probably would’ve liked. They’d taken the balloon most of the way and elected to leave it on some elevated ground nearby, so as not to lose track of it or wind up with it literally stuck in the mud.
Fraxure, perhaps hoping to prove his endurance, had started the small trek toward even higher ground on his feet, but had given up quickly and was now hitching a piggy-back ride on his trainer. Despite the mischievous nature that had suddenly come when he evolved, he managed to still be a bit of a baby at heart. Iris hardly seemed to mind, the desire in her heart greatly outweighing the minor discomfort of the journey.

The former Rockets weren’t lost, per se, but they were going solely on memory of how to get to the cabin where their target resided. Thankfully, finding higher ground wasn’t proving to be too difficult. With one last push up a particularly tall hill, the group dragged themselves to freedom, the single tree on top of the incline giving them respite from the sun and the haze and the humidity that seeped into their lungs. They felt it wash away as they breathed in the shade.

“What are those…?

Iris’s question dropped the trio’s eyes to the bottom of the hill, where a gathering of floette and flabebe were gently swaying on the nearly stilled winds. Without letting them answer, she excitedly skidded down the hill, and Fraxure followed, just a little bit more hesitantly.

“Wait up!” Jessie shouted, and the rest of the group came dashing behind the young dragon trainer, willing their feet not to trip over themselves down the steeper terrain.

Iris halted easily at the bottom, her momentum rolling around her like waves. It was a hard contrast to the former Rockets, who went skidding to a stop, slamming into each other’s backs, barely avoiding falling over faces-first into the mud and typha.

“I’ve never seen those pokémon before!” She said, as if she hadn’t just performed a professional marathon down a hill with complete ease. “Are they grass types?”

“No, actually,” James corrected. “If I recall correctly, they’re pure fairy types.”

“What’s a fairy type…? That’s not real… is it…?”

Meowth stared at her, agape. “Ya mean you been in Kalos all this time ‘n’ ya never hoid of a fairy type?!”

“Don’t get me wrong, Kalos has cool pokémon! But I’ve mostly just been getting to know the dragon types.”

“Oh man,” Meowth laughed. “Jimmy, tell her.”

“Jessie, you tell her.”

“Tell me what?!” Iris whipped her head around to face them, annoyed at the secrecy. She hardly noticed the claws gently grazing the fabric stuck to her leg.

“These things? These cute, tiny, precious darlings?” Her expression darkened. “Dragon killers.”

The young girl froze, peering into Jessie. “What do you mean…?”

“For the longest time, it was a universally accepted truth that dragons could only be felled properly by ice, and other dragons,” James explained. “But then, fairy types started popping up. Mostly in Kalos. And it threw the type chart into complete chaos.”

“You mean…?”
“Yeah,” Meowth affirmed. “Fairy types are majorly effective against dragons in battle. It threw everyone for a loop.”

Iris looked to them, then to the fluttering of pokémon, then back to them, her eyes and mouth opened and unchanging. It was a good thirty seconds before she said a word.

“THOSE things?!” She questioned. “They’re so small! How? What—?!”

“I feel like I’m witnessing a truly life-changing moment, here,” Jessie observed. “I’m honoured to be a part of this.”

Iris stayed staring, trying to take the information in. It was then that she was hit with vague waves of heavy emotion, snapping her out of the aporetic trance. Suddenly, she became very aware of a small pain near her feet.

Fraxure was beside her, his claws trembling and affixed to her leg. She’d been so caught up in the spectacle, she didn’t notice that he was frightened from the beginning. Any disbelief she had washed away the second she saw his face—fearing the unknown and suddenly unsure of his abilities.

Iris wanted to lean down, to caress her partner, to speak calmly and kindly and let him know that these pokémon wouldn’t hurt them so long as they didn’t provoke anything. Before she could do anything, however, a looming presence began to tower over the lot of them. Iris’ eyes made their way downwards, almost mechanically so, and when she registered the shadow painted on the ground below, her stomach sank for reasons she could not comprehend.

There was no reason for her to fear what she could not see. But Fraxure was still shaking, and his fear bled into her tenfold. She desperately gathered up every ounce of courage that she had and stuttered her head around to face what had come upon them.

She didn’t recognize the elegant terror of a pokémon in the slightest, but she didn’t need to. Her escorts were there, their words aghast in their wisdom.

“That’s…”

“Florges!”

“Oh, man.”

There was no time to think about what Iris wanted to do. Florges ignored the girl entirely, her sights set on the former Rockets.

With an ear-piercing cry, the pokémon began to glow with a burning rose-coloured light, it’s brilliance positively blinding, challenging the sun itself. Iris nearly cursed under her breath—the idiots weren’t doing anything! They were sitting there, paralyzed in fear, clinging to each other like a helpless group of children.

Not that I’m much better, The thought assaulted her. Ugh, fine!

She broke free of Fraxure, who uttered his name in worried dismay. Channeling all her strength into her next move, the dragoness leapt across the divide, ramming into the trio at full force and knocking them clean over. It was then that Florges fired off her attack, searing beams of moonlight cascading across the wetlands and scarring blackened trails into its previously murky waters.

She and her escorts went tumbling out of the blast radius, unharmed, and had little time to celebrate their spared lives. Fraxure had run right after his trainer, and she could hear him agonizing for her as
she blinked her eyes open. Caked in mud and fully soaked, she saw the florges advancing towards all of them, unconcerned with anything that wasn’t taking out the people she was lying weakly on top of.

They pulled themselves up with relative ease given the circumstances, and to Iris’ surprise, immediately lowered themselves, again. Their hands in front of them, their heads bowed, their knees bent into the soft earth—Iris couldn’t believe what she was seeing. It was as if they cared nothing for their lives. This pokémon wasn’t going to hold back, they needed to run—

Words failed the former Rockets. They hoped, at the heart of things, that actions could speak better. Under the surface, all of them shared a core belief in that moment— if this is a blast-off, we’ll take it as atonement.

The sickly pink light returned, enveloping all that it touched. Iris jumped to her knees, her arms outstretched and shielding the others, hoping to every god she knew that Florges would take mercy on her, a stranger to whatever happened in these lands all those years ago. Instead, the pokémon paid Iris no mind, her goals clear and the anger in her heart all-encompassing.

The girl wanted to step forward. Wanted to defend. Wanted to fight back with her team. But despite all the friends she had, despite some diversity in her team, she could not escape the throes of her empathy. Fraxure’s fear was her fear, his uncertainty her own. If he wasn’t confident, if he wasn’t brave, she had twice as many hurdles to overcome. The ability to love vastly and completely was both a blessing and a curse. No matter how much she wanted to become his strength, her body would not move.

It felt blazing, now—the light all around them. If you asked Iris how she thought she would go, she probably never would have told you ‘hanging out with old enemies, moonblasted into the sky.’ Life, however, is full of surprises.

The girl shut her eyes, arms shaking, legs glued to the ground. The moonlight was warm, growing warmer—

Iris heard the explosion, the impact. She felt nothing but a pang of something unidentifiable as it struck her spirit. Her heart sank and her eyes snapped open, wondering what had spared her. She couldn’t make out the silhouette in front of her—towering and lavender and glistening with moisture despite the burning air all around them—but thankfully, pokémon had a habit of introducing themselves unintentionally.

“Goo-DRA!” It roared, in a voice that sounded like it wasn’t meant for such an action. Despite this fact, the florges opposite to it seemed to falter, her previously steadfast demeanour falling from her stance.

Florges’ response was frenzied, manic, desperate. As if she was begging for something. Goodra’s was far more composed, its voice authoritative, but calm. As if it simultaneously sought to protect both her, and the humans she had set her heart on ruining. The flabebe and floette hung on the breeze, chattering nervously, watching.

Iris turned swiftly around and gripped at Meowth’s shoulder. “Hey, master negotiator! You still in there? What’s going on?”

Still looking dazed, he shook the shock from his spinning head, focusing.

“Uh, well—” He stuttered. “Florges is askin’: ‘How can you stand dere an’ protect dese guys, when dey pitted us together all those years ago? When dey nearly tore dese lands apart with their wicked
deeds?’”

“You weren’t kidding! Geez!” Iris flinched. “And the… other one?”

“Goodra… Goodra’s sayin’ dere’s no use in fightin’ you, twoipette, ‘cause you didn’t do anyt’ing wrong. And Florges is mad, she’s sayin’ dat it doesn’t matter, cause if you’re wit’ us, den you’re an enemy too.”

The larger pokémon stomped its foot, then, shouting its name with conviction.

“It says… ‘Stand down. If dere is injustice in dese wetlands, I alone will deal wit’ it. An’ should I need help, I promise I will not hesitate to call upon you.’”

Iris felt powerless in the face of the argument, and it completely tore at her. She simply watched as Goodra continued to stand its ground, its tone constantly fluctuating between firm and sympathetic, lilting. There was a pregnant pause, suddenly, the absence of sound in the air absolutely chilling Iris and the former Rockets to their cores.

Florges’ eyes moved away from Goodra, and she made a noise of bitter resignation. Motions looking heavy, she turned and began to float away.

The fairy disappeared onto the horizon. No human in the vicinity felt safe moving until they saw her silhouette disappear. When she was surely gone, Goodra slowly shifted its body around, expression rigid as it sized Iris up. She sensed the pokémon was going to say something, but the former Rockets behind her spoke before it could.

“That’s it,” Jessie noted. “That pokémon. Goodra is the dragon type we took you here to see. It lives here in the wetlands and keeps the peace after we… uh… after we did what we used to do.”

Iris stared at them, expression slightly awed. “This… this is a dragon?”

“One of the strongest in Kalos,” James said. “It used to travel with the twerp. He caught it when it was just a tot, completely unevolved.”

They could’ve predicted what she was about to say when she swiveled around at a breakneck pace to face them, but never how loud and flabbergasted her tone actually ended up being.

“I’m sorry. Ash? Ash Ketchum? We’re talking about the same Ash, right? He caught, tamed, and evolved fully one of the strongest dragon types in the entire Kalos region? ” She kept on. “The same Ash who I once witnessed choke on air for a solid ten seconds because he was talking about pokémon with too much enthusiasm?! The Ash who once described a flock of pidove as ‘good fluffy boys’?! That Ash?! ”

“Yeah, twoip really cleaned his act up in Kalos…”

Iris turned back around. Goodra seemed to have softened a little at the mention of its trainer, but she could see that it still carried suspicion in its heart. She reached out—hoping to touch a hand to its face, to connect with it better—but it pulled away, defensive. Iris saw this, lowered her arm, and took a step back.

“Hi, Goodra,” She said, voice soft, inviting. “My name is Iris. This is my partner, Fraxure. I used to travel with your trainer, a long long time ago.”

It tilted its head, curious. “Googoodra…?”
“Yeah!” She made some vague hand motions, imitating the aforementioned. “Immature, messy hair. Always wearing a dorky hat. Ends up going on five-minute long tangents about his dreams even when no one asks? Ash and I go way back.”

A sparkle entered the dragon’s eyes, and most of the apprehension that was previously there seemed to vanish. The trio behind Iris watched, mystified at her as she spoke.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m with Team Rocket, huh?” She said. “I go way back with them, too. I’ve witnessed firsthand the terrible things they’ve done to people like you and your friends here. I need you to believe me when I say those people are not the people I stand beside.”

“Dra…?” The pokémon inquired, and Iris understood what it meant.

“The truth is, they’ve been working hard to make up for the bad things they’ve done,” Iris explained. “I didn’t believe it at first either! But they took me all the way out here to see you because they knew I wanted to meet more dragon types. And they were on their way out here even before then, because they wanted to come apologize to you and everyone they hurt.”

Goodra’s eyes grew larger, and it peered into Iris.

“You don’t have to forgive them, I’m sure,” She turned to them, and they nodded towards her and Goodra in affirmation. “But that’s why they’re here. Not to hurt anyone. And I’m here because… because I heard some amazing things about you.”

Carefully, she stepped forward again, raising her hand slowly. This time, Goodra did not flinch. It let her bring her hand, calloused and worn but somehow comforting as could be, to its face. Her instinct was almost to recoil at the texture of the pokémon—slimy and viscous and so different from the sturdy feeling of scales and fire she was used to—but instead she focused inward. Her touch washing over it, Goodra leaned its head down to meet hers, and when she closed her eyes, it soon followed.

Iris willed her heart to become one with its. No words were spoken. She was at the doors to Goodra’s spirit, and they were tightly shackled with thick, heavy chains. She did not dare rattle them, did not dare disturb them where they resided. One by one, in her patience, she watched them slowly unlock and fall to the floor. She pushed the doors open and stepped inside.

These visions were never something of clarity, to her. But she learned to understand patterns in them, over time. For instance, the occasional red flash—where everything drained of colour—told her that these were demons Goodra still struggled with, at times. She saw the pokémon there, a minuscule lump of goo, eyes thankful but tainted with fear. Felt how that fear paralyzed it, how all it took was the sight of a single dapple of pink fur to send the small dragon reeling back into its memories, where it could not escape back to the present. And Ash. Iris saw Ash, smile bright as ever, heart never faltering. In Goodra’s memories, the boy was enveloped in a light that was warm like a fire on a winter’s night. Rapturous, and positively brilliant.

The snapshots of the pokémon’s life started in colour and faded to an angry crimson. When Ash stepped into them, the colours quietly made their way back one by one.

Iris shut the door on the way out, careful to reposition all the locks before leaving. When she felt she had done a sufficient job, she bowed in reverence, and walked away. Her eyes opened, slowly.

Goodra pulled its face away from hers, gently, a string of moisture forming in the separation between them. Iris met eyes with it, her voice more calm than anything Goodra had ever heard in its life.

“Good child…” She cooed. “Gosh, you’ve hurt so much for one so young, huh?”
From behind her, the former Rockets whispered, voices hushed and awed.

“What a transformation…”

“That’s the same kid who was loudly chiding us a mere day ago?!”

“Ya definitely gotta hand it to her. She’s got a heck of a heart.”

Iris didn’t hear them, paid no mind, her hands still trailing across Goodra’s face. “You were scared of fairy types, too, huh? I don’t blame you! I only just met some for the first time and they kinda give me the creeps…”

The pokémon uttered a bit in response. She nodded sweetly.

“It was still very brave of you to stand up for me like that,” Iris smiled. “Thank you so much for your courage.”

Goodra was completely soft now, the tension in its stance gone, the hint of a smile forming on its face clear as day. Iris pulled her hand away, and the all-encompassing serenity within her began to subside. She was suddenly very aware of the slime and mire and overall poor state of her clothes, and she shuddered with an unflattering noise.

Shaking the discomfort, she spoke again.

“Team Rocket!” She called to them. “You guys okay back there? Sorry if I blinked out for a second, there.”

“We’re fine.” James affirmed.

“Speak for yourself,” Jessie shoved him lightly. “My hair is ruined.”

“My toe beans are wet…” Meowth wailed, scrambling onto James’ shoulder.

Iris rolled her eyes, and turned back around.

“Goodra, I know you might not trust me still after all you’ve been through. But I honestly just came here to get to know you!” She watched the pokémon blush, slightly, and carried on. “Would you mind showing me what your life is like here? Your friends, your favourite places? If not, I understand that, too.”

Having mingled their souls for that brief moment, Goodra had no hesitation in its answer. It immediately raised its arms up excitedly, babbling its name and eager to introduce its world to her own.

“Really?” She beamed. “Thank you!”

A breeze kicked up, passing across her cheek and reminding her with a shiver that she was absolutely covered in mess from head to toe. She let out a pained laugh, frozen there.

“Frax?” Her partner inquired.

“...but first, pitstop back to the balloon. We should probably change clothes.”

The former Rockets let out a collective sigh of relief.
It was late afternoon when it happened.

They’d definitely been enjoying themselves. Despite Goodra’s continuing distrust of the trio, it knew genuinely that if anything went down, the combination between it and Iris would be more than enough to take them on.

The dragon had shown them the warden’s house, introduced them to Quagsire, watched intently as they did their bows and apologies, offering themselves up for any manual labour that could be done. The warden definitely had some for them, and as they got to it, Iris and Goodra had continued to wander and see the sights. The language barrier wasn’t too much of a problem, when it came to dragon types. Iris adored that about them.

The group had reunited, after a few hours, and presently they were perched atop one of the various cliffs that sheltered the wetlands within their walls. They’d been chatting idly, waiting for the sunset to dye the sky and give them the ok to set up a camp and view the stars, untainted by the city lights.

Their peaceful morale was shattered at the sound—panicked shrieking, not one voice but many. It was one of the more eerie things the group had ever heard, collectively, and rather than let it startle them, they sat there with the ominous feeling it brought bleeding into their bones.

Goodra shot up, and the rest of them soon followed, anxiety gripping their hearts as they walked towards the untethered noise. In the soon darkening horizon, they made out the shape of a mass caught constantly in motion, hovering several feet off the ground, approaching rapidly. As it neared, Fraxure took an involuntary step back, and that compared with the sight of flower petals blurring into focus led Iris to the conclusion of what the object was.

It wasn’t until Goodra broke into a run towards it that they were able to see it clearly. Likely the same masses of fairy type Pokémon from earlier, and on top of them—Florges, the blue crown of petals around her looking wilted and her expression painted with agony.

The fey were near inconsolable as they twittered to Goodra, tears in their eyes and worry falling hard off the sound of their names. Iris could feel entirely the indescribable amount of pain the dragon was in as it gently picked up Florges, its heart heavy with concern. Meowth was at Goodra’s side, facing the hysterical mob, his words exasperated.

“Listen, I need ya to speak slower! And one at a time!” He instructed. “No one can understand what you’re sayin’, and we can’t help if ya don’t!”

A single floette stepped forward, her composure there, but with glaring cracks littered across it. She spoke urgently, her arms thrown into motion, her flower swung around like a weapon.

Goodra was receptive, nodding, pushing away the anguish gripping it as it listened. Meowth turned to the humans, quickly digesting the important details and working out how to phrase them correctly.

“She says dat Florges was on her way back home when dey was ambushed by an angry scollipede,” He relayed. “An’ it came for da floette, but Florges protected her an’ took da attack full force.”

“That’s not regular poisoning,” Jessie cursed. “That’s a toxic attack. This could be bad.”

Iris bit her lip. “What can we do? There’s not a pecha plant for miles. Who knows if we’d even find one if we went looking?”

“What about the spring?” James inquired. “Isn’t it capable of healing pretty much anything?”
“Goodra says we’re too far from da spring for it to be safe,” Meowth translated. “Not ta mention it’ll be dark before we get there. Even in da balloon, it’d be too risky.”

“Risking it is still better than just lying around hoping Florges makes it through!” Iris declared, rising to her feet. “What better option is there other than to try?”

Jessie had been oddly quiet the entire time they were wildly brainstorming, her eyes surveying the damage on the pokémon with unbreakable focus. Before the hysteria could reach its peak from around her, she turned to her comrades, expression staunch as she cut through their panic.

“James, get me your pocket database.”

“Uh,” he responded, but didn’t question it. “Yeah, sure.”

It was a device they’d kept on them for quite a few years. A small, electronic notebook full of information on flora and fauna around them, if one was looking for the technical definition. If one was short on time, “bootleg Pokédex” would do just fine. Meowth had taken it upon himself to acquire one, much to the chagrin of James, who was perfectly comfortable lugging around pounds upon pounds of flashcards constantly.

Jessie was flitting through it intently, brow furrowed in concentration, clearly looking for something. James noted, quietly, that to say technology was not her forte would be a severe understatement. It seemed that when the going got tough, however, she was able to turn herself into the ultimate jack of all trades. She navigated the menus and submenus with an ease he’d never seen in her before.

“Ah-ha!” She interjected. “Look.”

She brandished the notebook, where a multitude of photographs littered the page, rich with information. It was a plant, stuck in some vertical stone, with bell-shaped petals that glowed a luminous pink in the moonlight.

“See these? They’re called nightcress,” Jessie explained. “They grow on cliffsides like the one we’re on right now, and they’re ridiculously easy to spot in the dark because they glow. They can be used as an anti-venom in a pinch, effective enough that we’ll be able to keep the little sprout alive long enough to get to the spring.”

“How did you…” Iris marveled at her.

“Not important, I’ll tell you all about how brilliant and talented I am when there aren’t lives on the line,” she responded, and then turned to Goodra. “Have you seen this around? Is there any nearby that you could take us to?”

The pokémon seemed hesitant, its previously confident eyes now downcast, but it eventually nodded.

“If cliffsides need to be scaled, leave it to me!” Iris boasted, grinning. “That’s my element!”

“One of us can stay here, someone should probably keep an eye on Florges—”

Before James could finish the thought, the pokémon in question roared past her pain, voice dripping bitter resent and arms struggling to bring herself up. Her words were barely coherent, but the anger in her eyes was apparent to everyone there.
“Translation?”

“She’s ticked.”

“Yeah, I got that, genius!” Jessie told Meowth. “But why?”

“Ain’t it obvious?” He said. “She doesn’t wanna be left alone wit’ us! Ya really expect her to hang around some people who sat by manipulatin’ her while her family was in da same kinda peril?”

“Well we can’t just leave her here,” James noted. “Even if she’s fine suffering rather than risking being looked after in the hands of enemies, I’m not fine with that.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over them, punctuated by the slowly sinking sun into the mouth of the world’s edge. They stared into their predicament—the helpless, vengeful pokémon as it lay there in pain—agonizing over what solutions there were. The sound of claws on grass broke them from the trance, their eyes traveling downwards.

“Fra~xure!” The pokémon said, fists balled and chest broad.

His stance was strong, but his tiny legs were shaking, and Iris crouched down to meet his eyes.

“You wanna stay?”

“Frax.” He affirmed.

“Are you sure?” She asked. “I can tell you still don’t feel a hundred percent confident around fairies. Can you handle it?”

She could easily see he was nervous, and willing every part of himself to be brave. He nodded, refusing to back down, eyes fierce despite the underlying uncertainty. Iris knew she had to have faith in her friends—in her pokémon—but there was a part of her that knew she would never forgive herself if he suffered any lasting damage just because she wasn’t diligent enough in protecting him.

A splash of light against the fading dusk around them brought Wobbuffet to life, interrupting their internal monologues, as he was often known to. He enthusiastically introduced himself, a contrast against the intensity of the situation. His trainer turned to him.

“What, you?”

“Wobba!”

“...wait. That’s actually a good idea.”

Jessie kneeled down besides Florges, whose eyes were bleary and dilated as they moved up to hers. Had the fairy not been so weak, Jessie was certain she would’ve gotten a swift attack to the face. She let her words come out firm, certain, and hopefully—hard not to put faith in.

“Wobbuffet is one of us,” She noted. “But he can’t attack you unless you attack him first. Understand? He’s literally incapable of taking advantage of you in any way.”

From beside her, the patient pokémon saluted. Fraxure stepped closer to him, feeling much more confident not going it alone. The combination was ideal—Fraxure had some semblance of trustworthiness in him, if Goodra approved of him. Wobbuffet was not only a pacifist, but a willing and eager shield of protection.

Whether or not Florges was happy about the arrangement was debatable, as her expression was
equal parts scorn and misery, but she definitely wasn’t foaming at the mouth and teeth bared, anymore. Taking it as a good sign, Jessie rose to her feet, nodding at the rest of the group.

Iris looked to Goodra, and Goodra looked to Florges. It spoke a few sentiments of comfort, expression soft and accommodating. Meowth didn’t need to translate—they all understood what the sentiment was.


Fraxure smacked the scales on his brandished chest with a balled fist, confident. Wobbuffet saluted, expression same as always.

She wasn’t exactly in the best hands. But they certainly were hands.

The cliffside that bore the nightcress wasn’t far from the one they’d been resting on—the tree they’d been sitting under previously was still a speck on the horizon—but it was steep. Not even the slightest hint of an incline within it.

They’d had to go on foot in order for Goodra to direct them, and right about now they were regretting it more than ever—it would have been so easy to lower the balloon and yank it off the cliff. Iris, on the other hand, didn’t waste any time regretting, let alone thinking. She saw the lustrous flora like a badge of honour against the drab grey stone and practically backflipped off the edge of the earth, movements agile and hands working alongside nothing but the rugged feeling of nature.

“Twerpette!” James practically yelped after her, worried. “Be careful!”

“I’m fine!” She grinned, slowly lowering herself. “I do this all the time!”

Goodra loomed at the top of the cliff with the others, nervously watching her as she worked. Thankfully for Iris, it wasn’t too pristine of a cliff. There were plenty of rocks jutting out that she could easily get a hold of, and she had definitely encountered more difficult terrain in her lifetime.

The girl had the plant in her sights, now, but the distance of the closest rock to it still meant she was going to have to stretch to her limits in order to reach it. Eyes lit with perseverance, she angled her body and extended her arm as far as she possibly could, her muscles nearly screaming at her to stop as she contorted. Her hands grasped air, and air, and air, and she closed her eyes, pushing further…

“Almost… almost…”

Iris’ fingertips grazed green, and she immediately yanked, pulling the nightcress out of the rocks where it was nestled, and reveling completely in the feeling of relief as it came over her. She smiled up at Goodra and the former Rockets, waving her catch excitedly in the night air as she called up to them.

“I got it, you guys!”

From above her, the group cheered, happy to see the success so swiftly.

“Alright, getcha butt back up here!” Meowth beamed. “We got work ta do!”

“On it!”

She steadied her grip, wriggling around as she attempted to shove the plant into her pocket. When it
was safely secured, Iris pushed her feet forward and made a motion to grab the next rock in line, feeling confident in her abilities. She reached her hand up, the top of the cliff seeming mere inches away, and gripped the outcropping with all she could muster.

It made contact with her hand, where it sat for a moment, before promptly crumbling into nothing.

Quick as Iris’ reflexes were, there was nothing for her there. The cliff’s steepness made it impossible to grapple to another raise, and there were no loose vines, nothing but her and the air and the deep chasm she was bound for. She pawed blindly at the pokéballs in her pocket in that split second, her hands running over their energies, desperate to find her dragonite’s— with each passing second she grew more and more convinced that this was it, this was it—

The sudden lack of gravity hit Iris full force, so hard she nearly winded herself. She was no longer falling. Her eyes shot open, and she hadn’t even realized she had closed them. There was a discomfort up her whole arm, but as she looked up to the source of it she told herself she would take the feeling a thousand times if it meant never having to feel the impact of the ground.

James had dove after her, both his hands wrapped tightly around her free arm. Jessie had come after him, halfway off the cliff herself. Meowth was last, of course, his strength only making the smallest difference, but still giving it his all.

“Don’t you dare, twerpette!” Jessie shouted through gritted teeth.

“We had a rule in Team Rocket and we have it still!” James added.

“Eit’er we all survive,” Meowth said. “Or none of us do!”

Goodra stood a distance from them, seemingly stuck in place. Its eyes were transfixed on the struggling trio, its expression unreadable. After a moment, as if being snapped out of a trance, it shook the awe from its face and stumbled over quickly, arms tugging at Jessie’s waist.

The added strength was enough despite the dragon’s slippery grip—with one final shove, the entire group was pulled up the cliffside, their bodies piling on top of each other roughly and uncomfortably. They all stayed there, for a moment, the urgency of their circumstances momentarily pushed from their heads. Iris was the first to roll herself over, checking her pockets to make sure everything and everyone was still accounted for. James soon followed, much more gracefully. Jessie stayed where she was.

“Get off!” Meowth cried. “Yer crushin me ta death!”

She rolled over, adrenaline slowly pouring out of her, movements more fluid and tired. Iris laughed, and thanked them for saving her, and took their scoldings to be more careful next time with surprising grace. Then, she beckoned them forward, back to where the pokémon in trouble was.

Goodra’s eyes stayed on the former Rockets as it walked them back, a distant galaxy inside them silently exploding.

It was hours later, in the spring, and the crew of humans and pokémon were awoken by the sound of Florges’ name. They gradually blinked their eyes back open to see her there, making her way over to Goodra. She was on her feet—or, rather, as on your feet as you can be when your primary method of transportation is floating—looking a lot better as she curled up tenderly besides the dragon, not
bothered at all by slime in her petals. The group was eased to see her, for once, and they fell back into dreams.

When they opened their eyes again, it was nearly noon, and Goodra was at the mouth of the cave, watching nature as it breathed alongside Iris, Fraxure, and Florges. They began their morning routines, with Jessie practically leaping out of bed and the boys lethargically following behind her, before deciding it was time for them to set off.

Iris had elected to walk them back to the balloon, at the very least—she was worried about their reputation amongst any pokémon who didn’t know of their reformation. She stood there with them as they were about to make their trek back, listening intently to what they had to say.

Jessie was leaning down to meet Florges’ eyes now, and Iris found it curious that she was the one initiating. Of all the Rockets, the redhead had definitely seemed the least unlike her old self—same old typical egomaniac villainess with a temper—but every once in a while, the storming waters parted and something grossly unseen revealed itself to the world.

“Florges, listen,” She started, and Florges did not turn away. “What we did to you and Floette long ago is unforgivable. What we did to everyone here, really.”

The pokémon stared at her, eyes unmoving, ears open.

“Humans are selfish beings,” Jessie continued. “Capable of cataclysmic mistakes. Life-altering ones. Mistakes that oftentimes are undeserving of forgiveness.

“Despite these truths… some sentimental humans will still offer their apologies up, gaining nothing from it, in the hopes that it might help guide their victims to serenity.”

The pokémon’s eyes widened. Jessie could feel Florges’ gaze on her heart.

“Humans are selfish beings, capable of incredible mistakes, and I’m sorry we had to be the humans that made you aware of this all those years ago,” She finally said. “We all are.”

Florges’ gaze was not necessarily one of forgiveness—but intensity, gratitude, and understanding.

The four of them bowed—to her, then to Goodra, offering it many similar words—and set off, their hearts feeling full at the smile that the dragon wore as it waved from behind them. Whether or not anyone in the wetlands had forgiven them was up in the air; but it was also irrelevant. The reformed Rockets had done what they could, they had put their skills to work, they had helped someone they previously wronged. It wasn’t a failure, so by definition, it was a victory. That was simply the quartet’s way.

From beside them, Iris noted this, her hands behind her head as she walked, her smile serene.

“I guess you were genuine, Team Rocket,” She said. “You really are trying, huh? Guess I’ll have to try twice as hard, then!”

“Just try ‘n’ keep up, twoipette.” Meowth grinned, elbowing her playfully.

“You’re on!”

“In any case,” James interrupted the friendly fire. “Thanks for giving us a chance. Knowing you, we were pretty sure we were going to leave that cave in a blast of neon fire.”

“Eh, risks are what make life fun,” Iris told him. “And you guys helped me out a lot, so I don’t regret
it. But y’know…”

Jessie looked to her, curious. “Hm?”

“Goodra wasn’t the dragon type I was initially talking about.”

The four beside her nearly fell flat on their faces at the statement. Iris almost flinched at the collective noise of awed confusion they made, her eyes wide and her hands raised in defense and hoping she hadn’t ruined their uplifted mood.

“What do you mean ?!”

“Why didn’t you say something?!”

“What o’er dragon types even fit dat bill?!”

“Wobbu~wobbuffet?!”

She laughed nervously, eyes closed now, trying to reassure them.

“You guys seemed so excited! I didn’t know how to bring it up! And by the time we’d gotten here, you’d already gone so out of your way, and—”

Iris paused, composed herself, and pressed on.

“The dragon I was looking for was strong like Goodra. And it definitely maintained order like Goodra. So I understand why you mighta went to it in your heads first!” She explained, and their expressions softened to curiosity. “But this one had no trainer, certainly not Ash. It was virtually untamed. The closest thing it had to a trainer was a single human friend.

“That friend, she was a little girl… even younger than I was, when I started my training! And somehow, fate brought her into the hands of this massive beast.

“They became very close, and later on when the dragon ended up on a rampage that tore through the city, and threatened to swallow the whole world… the girl calmed it. With nothing but love and a voice that dared to pierce through the fear… she called out to the pokémon and healed its pain. She saved the world with her kindness and understanding for this single dragon in its most raw and terrifying form.”

The former Rockets shared shaken, knowing glances, their jaws hanging wide open as Iris continued.

“I haven’t ever seen what it looks like myself,” She said. “I just know it’s massive, and a brilliant green, and snake-like, with scales that kinda seem to… blink in and out of existence. No one ever really seems able to describe it.”

They’d had enough. They spoke loudly, in unison, and unrestrained.

“SQUI—?!” A pause, then a re-do. “ZYGARDE?!”

“Zygarde…” Iris repeated. “Is that its name?”

“Kid,” Meowth started. “We know dat one, too.”

“You what ?!” Iris marveled. “Okay, now I know you guys are messing with me!”
“Take into account our circumstances!” James reasoned. “Has half as much strangeness happened to you this year, or last year, than the year that you were traveling with the twerp?”

“...Oh man, no—”

“There’s something about that boy, I swear,” He continued. “He just attracts wild adventure to him like cutiefly to honey.”

“It’s annoying,” Jessie added. “Sometimes I want my life to be a little relaxing, believe it or not.”

“Wow…” Iris said, ignoring her. “You’ve seen Zygarde… what was it like?”

“I’ll do you one better,” Jessie informed. “Stop back by Sycamore’s lab when you get the chance, understand? Ask if he knows where Malva is. Or if he knows anyone who has the tapes from the Great Kalos Crisis. I don’t know if they’re on lockdown.”

“Tapes… tapes?!” She beamed. “Are you saying there’s video of Zygarde? Are you saying that I might get to see it in action?!”

“Provided you know the right people, yes,” Jessie grinned. “Try not to fall too in love with the beautiful newscaster relaying the information, though. I hear she isn’t on T.V. nearly as much as she should be.”

Meowth rolled his eyes. James’ were half-lidded, a smile painted on him, humouring the statement.

“Were you guys… there in the crisis?”

“Up close and personal,” James said. “We more or less saw everything.”

“So the girl who traveled with Zygarde… did you…?”

“Oh yeah, we knew dat one,” Meowth immediately answered. “Long before she ever met da t’ing. Feisty little blonde, dat kid. Waaaay too much spunk in her tiny body. Her brot’ers’ da geeky twerp runnin’ Lumiose’s gym. If we see her around on dis humble pilgrimage, we can let her know yer lookin’ for her.”

Iris’ head spun. She couldn’t believe how much more information she suddenly had, and she worried she wouldn’t remember it all. Dark as Team Rocket’s path was, they certainly picked the right person to follow around—the scope of their lives seemed ridiculously lush with experiences.

“Guess I’m heading to Lumiose after this!” She cheered. “Ugh, I hate trying to navigate that city, I feel like everyone’s looking at me knowing I’m a tourist, and the cabs are so expensive—! But if anything’s worth it, it’s Zygarde...!”

“Best of luck.” James told her, extending a hand.

“Thanks!” She said, shaking it. “Seriously, I know we got off to a rough start, but I’m leaving here with a world of direction, and before I had none! I can’t wait to see what else is out there.”

“Least we could do after all we put you and ya friends t’rough,” Meowth nodded, arms crossed. “Take care, awright?”

She smiled, and laughed quietly in affirmation, before waving wholeheartedly and setting back off to camp. As she disappeared into the horizon, all of them could see her wings—brilliant and decorated in scales and growing stronger every day.
They ascended over the marsh’s surface, air clear and skies blue and hearts feeling light with the promise of tomorrow, drifting across the lands that had been their home for the last handful of hours. It was strange, but every single one of them knew they would miss the unremarkable wetlands as they passed them by.

“Y’know,” Jessie said, breaking a comfortable silence. “Lemondrop and dragon twerpette are actually way too similar in personality. Do you think they’d even get along in the first place?”

“Who knows?” James responded. “Let’s hope the answer is yes, for the world’s sake.”

“Lest we perish in da fires of an unholy collision between opposite dragon rage.”

Meowth said it with a paw raised, eyes closed, dramatic air; and the group dissolved into laughter after a beat. All of them were imagining the spectacle, no doubt.

The wind felt divine as it reached down and brushed their faces, offering them solace from the burning sun above. Smiles unwavering, they thanked it for its service in carrying them onward towards their next adventure.

Chapter End Notes

...woo! I felt kinda apprehensive about this, but I really wanted to give Iris the Kalos cameo she never got. It was petty and maybe just a little bit racist to give her the shaft when every other pokegirl got their day in the sun. So I knew that as soon as I had the opportunity I was gonna try.

That being said, I hope I characterized her okay! I was very nervous about getting that right. Pokeani has so many spunky female leads, I really worry about them all bleeding together... I'm nervous that Bonnie and Dawn in particular will just feel the same as how I wrote Iris, here ^^;; I even watched an episode of BW dubbed to get her mannerisms down--which is saying something, cause I dislike BW and I /really/ dislike the dub :P

Nevertheless, I'm proud of how this chapter ended up, and I hope you guys are too! Thanks a ton to all my followers on tumblr who listened to me complain about how I'm trying to write but I keep getting distracted by Magikarp Jump. Thanks a super ton to Ven as always for beta'ing this for me. You're the Frost to my Lynch.

Most of all, thank you, readers! Wouldn't have the confidence to do this without ya.

As always, I will continue to do my best!
The former Rockets had planned on having a normal lunch. Really, they had. Just like any other day, seated in an open clearing in the Kalosian forests, choosing to forego the allure of the city and instead experience the home cooking they so rarely got on their journeys as criminals. All of them were talented in the culinary arts, and the meal was shaping up to look positively sublime as it began to take form. Things were going well, the sun was out, the day was drifting by, and the quartet were happy to enjoy what life was throwing at them.

That was until a drooling, euphoric Chespin ended up bolting out of the bushes, shoving about half of their ingredients into its mouth, and making a complete mess out of most of their supplies. The event was so sudden and so completely alien that none of them had the time to register or process it, and when they finally did, they just ended up screaming complete gibberish in the Pokémon’s general direction.

The Chespin—also now aware of the circumstances—jolted out of the blissful reverie and faced their wrath, its conscience a second too late and its words mangled and frantic and apologetic but not that apologetic in lieu of its full stomach.

“What do ya mean you couldn’t control yaself?!?” Meowth practically hissed at the creature. “Who just does dat?!!?!”

It was on the ground, now apologizing more profusely, when another rustling of the bushes caught Meowth’s ear. He suddenly stopped his scolding, looked back to where the Chespin had emerged from, and squinted as a much taller figure took form, a minuscule Pokémon perched atop her shoulder. As she spoke, Chespin slowly turned around, easily recognizing her voice as a calm oasis of familiarity.

“Geez, Chespin!” The figure added to the scolding—golden hair and shimmering barrette sparkling as the sunlight filtering into the clearing hit them. “You can’t keep running off like this! What happens when someday someone’s set a trap, and you run into some really…”

She registered the former Rockets, now, looking up from Chespin to them. Her eyes widened as her sentence trailed off, from a chiding mother to a lost child.
There was silence, for a sweet, sweet moment. That was always the quartet’s favourite part, but it often left so soon. Unfortunately, today was no exception.

“TEAM ROCKET?!”

“Oh, lemon twerpette!” They said in unison, which was then followed by a much more panicked tone. “OH, LEMON TWERPETTE—”

“Let’s go, Squishy!” She declared fiercely and without any further thought, punctuated by a pokéball being thrown into the crisp air.

The former Rockets barely had time to breathe. “SQUISHY?!”

Crystal blue shimmers flew out of the ball, but their time in the sunlight was immediately smothered by a sickly green hue that absolutely permeated every inch of the clearing. The trees and grass grew more vibrant, the sky fell viridian, the very air around them was suffocated in the colour. The quartet swore they could feel it in their lungs. There was a roar so booming it shook them to their cores, unlike anything they’d heard in a long time. From behind Bonnie, the zygarde’s towering serpentine form nearly eclipsed the sun, its hexagonal eyes flickering with… something. Malice? Revenge? A rage entirely different? Whatever the circumstances, they were suddenly very convinced this baby-faced child and her pet cryptid were going to actually kill them.

Jessie and James were clinging to each other with such ferocity that Meowth feared they would become a single entity. Chespin had used the lightshow to slowly slip to the other side of the clearing, peering out from behind its trainer’s leg. It was only when James yelped out an unflattering noise of terror that the cat snapped out of his own cowardice and shouted at the annoyances across the clearing who had so rudely interrupted their afternoon.

“Hold it!” He yelled. “What on eart’ did we even do ta warrant dis?!”

Bonnie was unmoved. “Oh please! I know you guys are up to no good!”

“I’m sorry, did da definition of ‘up t’ no good’ change recently?!” Meowth countered. “We was tryin’ to eat our lunch when your chespin came in here an’ started flat robbin’ us!”

“You probably deserved it!”

“Oh yeah?! Prove it!”

“Save it, furball!” She spat, and Dedenne mirrored her vitriol. “You guys are up to no good because you’re always up to no good!”

James was angry too, now. “Unbelievable! You go years without seeing us and your first course of action is to make claims on who we are now—”

“Squishy,” Bonnie crossed her arms, a terrifying apathy hitting her words. “Dragon Pulse.”

Squishy roared again, its voice filling the still air, throbbing in their ears, agonizing. Bonnie barely moved, a stark contrast to the quartet, who had their eyes shut tight in fearful apprehension and had gone back to grappling at each other for dear life, all thinking the same thing— if she would just give us five seconds...

“Squishy?” They heard her say, softly and tenderly, and the change in tone pulled their eyes back
open. “What’s wrong?”

The beast rumbled lowly, slithering beside her and lowering its head. Bonnie reached out a hand, placing it on the side of the pokémon’s face, tilting her head. It continued to speak to her, and Meowth was mystified as he watched her listen intently. He was picking up on every other word of Squishy’s dialect, but Bonnie understood it clear as day.

“Are you saying you believe them?” She said in hushed awe.

Squishy nodded slowly, looking back across the clearing at the former Rockets.

The young girl looked like she was going to say more as she followed its line of sight to them. Before she could, however, a third clamor arose from the bushes, and three more trainers Bonnie’s age ran up beside her, paying no mind to the massive legendary pokémon as it towered there.

“Bonnie, is everything okay?” The redhead inquired.

“Yeah!” Said a heavier boy, his eyes shining with concern. “We heard a commodity!”

“...Commotion,” The third corrected, adjusting his glasses. “I’m pretty sure Kye means commotion.”

“Oh, hey guys,” Bonnie said, far too nonchalantly. “Yeah, I’m alright. I found Team Rocket!”

“Team Rocket?” Asked Jay, the bookish one.

“Right, you didn’t have to deal with them twenty-four-seven like me,” Bonnie rolled her eyes. “They were the ones who tried to kidnap Lapras while we were helping it back to the sea! They’re bad guys who always try to steal others’ pokémon.”

“If you would just—” Jessie spoke up, but Bonnie ignored her.

“But Squishy won’t attack them,” She explained. “It says we shouldn’t jump to conclusions.”

“Denene…” The pokémon that had been spectating on her shoulder spoke up.

“I know you’d attack them,” She smirked, scratching Dedenne’s head. “But if Squishy isn’t on board, maybe we should listen to it?”

“I mean, are you sure?” Heidi—the redhead—asked. “They still seem pretty rotten to me…”

“For da love of—” Meowth’s sentence angrily sputtered to a halt, and he quickly and violently turned to James and swiped something out of the man’s pocket.

“Meowth!” His companion shouted, annoyed.

“Cool it, Jimmy,” He retorted, trudging across the clearing and brandishing the stolen wallet in the twerps’ general direction. “Look, kid.”

The leather treasure trove flipped itself open, folds cascading downwards, each displaying a new picture the former Rockets had taken with various individuals throughout what could easily be determined as recent months. Bonnie and her crew gazed upon them, more faces they didn’t recognize than did. The blonde’s eyes locked onto the very top of the photos, where Ash was smiling his golden smile next to some very unsure Rockets. As she traveled downwards, her heart leapt when she saw her brother—this time, he was the unsure one, and the Rockets were positively vibrant besides him as he desperately avoided looking directly into the camera.
“I don’t get it…” Bonnie nearly whispered. “What are all these? How did you…?”

“We turned a new leaf, twerpette,” Jessie announced, arms crossed. “Your brother says hi.”

“You… turned a new… that means… you…” The girl’s thoughts slowly jerked along, and after a moment of her almost hypnotically staring into the photos, she let out a disappointed wail.

“Aw, MAN!”

“I don’t get it,” Kye said. “Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I waited years to become a pokémon trainer,” Bonnie practically had tears in her eyes. “With the hopes that someday I’d get to blast you jerks off myself! And now of all times you choose to switch sides?!”

James actually snorted at the comment, stifling his laughter. Wobbuffet, who had been mostly quiet, was waltzing over to Bonnie’s side to offer her comfort in the form of gentle shoulder pats.

“Well, this is happening, I suppose,” Jessie noted, and then followed the usual script. “Twerps, why don’t you come sit with us for lunch? We’ll make it extra delicious and tell you everything that’s been going on, so long as lemondrop there promises not to sic her legendary beast on us again.”

Bonnie sat there, still processing, unable to answer the request despite her friends’ worried prodding.

Chespin was already halfway across the clearing.

Is his workplace still a mess? Did he blow something up when you were staying there? Is he still alive even? I feel like he’d starve to death without me always reminding him to eat and breathe and sleep and like, be a person.”

“Yes, yes, somehow yes,” James answered, swallowing his food. “He probably invented a machine to remind him.”

“Alas, poor Bonnie, replaced by a robot with a stupid name,” She said with mock-sadness, then giggled. “Sounds about right!”

“Although,” Jessie added. “He did almost die when we were in the cave. Like he might have not come out of that one alive if we didn’t escort him.”

“Typical Clemont.” Bonnie rolled her eyes.

From both sides of her, her friends shifted, a little out of place. They had far less stories to tell, and far less background to know entirely what was being discussed—but they sat enthralled nonetheless. Since the day they’d met her, they’d all been more than a little jealous of how rich with experience Bonnie’s young life was in comparison to their own. In hearing her stories, though, they felt like they were really there alongside her and her companions.

“You made it, though!” Jessie clapped her hands together, legs tucked under her. “That’s got to feel divine. How are you spending your time as a trainer?”

It was a question that James knew meant ‘So… Showcases?’

Bonnie’s eyes lit up, and she dug around in her bag wordlessly, pulling out a small plastic case and showing it off confidently.
“Check it out!”

From inside, four gym badges shimmered to life, not a single scratch or mark adorning them. James could immediately tell from their finish that Bonnie had polished them more than once.

“One, two, three…” He counted, trailing off. “Oh man.”

“Are ya about ta go pummel yer brot’er?” Meowth grinned.

“I was planning on saving him for last, but…” She closed her badge case. “What can I say? I miss home.”

“She’s been talking about it all week,” Jay mentioned. “Always running off with Heidi to train…”

“We get lonely, you know!” Kye added.

“Sorry, sorry!” Bonnie raised her hands up apologetically. “I’m just so determined to get stronger! I want to absolutely destroy Clemont.”

“Why do ya even need t’ train?” Meowth inquired. “Ya have a zygarde.”

“Pfft!” She laughed. “Could you imagine how boring that would be? Just sweeping gyms left and right with Squishy? No thanks. The fun in battling isn’t the win, it’s the battle itself!”

The former Rockets shared a look, their thoughts completely aligned without a single word spoken between them.

“Good grief.” James smiled.

“Right?” Jessie turned to Bonnie. “You ended up a blonde little clone of the Twerp.”

“Wobbuffet~!”

“Ha! Good!” She stuck her tongue out, and Dedenne followed. “I’m lucky if I could be half the trainer Ash is!”

Rather than arguing, the former Rockets mirrored her joy, and the rest of the kids voiced their own thoughts.

“I think Bonnie’s even better than Ash!”

“Me too!”

“Alright, then!” Said Jessie. “If you’re so strong, how about a battle?”

Bonnie shot them an accusatory look. “Are you gonna play fair?”

“Of course!” James answered. “We’re changed people, you know!”

“Well then, James,” Bonnie smirked. “Wanna make it a double?”

He clapped his hands together joyfully, smiling in bemusement. “Double battle it is!”

“Hey, genius,” Meowth chimed in. “We only gat one pokémon.”

Bonnie just looked directly at him, and uttered a single word, her voice low.
“Buddy.”

He was silent for far too long before letting out a defeated “Ah, man.”

As the blonde rose to her feet excitedly, her friends spoke back up.

“What you gonna pick to be your patron?”

Partner, Kye,” Jay said. “And isn’t it obvious? Of course she’s picking Heidi.”

Kye giggled in response to this, and Jessie took note of it, raising an eyebrow. She elected not to ask what was so funny.

“Quit laughing back there!” Heidi scolded, then turned to Bonnie. “Are we on?”

Bonnie’s smile softened a little, something unidentifiable entering it. There was a slight glow to her when she answered, her voice an octave too high.

“Yeah! Let’s kick some butt!”

“Two on two!” Jay announced from the sidelines. “First team with both their pokémon down is out! Ready?”

“Let’s do this!” Bonnie cheered, and layered over her voice was the sound of her chespin and Heidi’s fennekin eager to begin.

“I really don’t wanna do dis…” Meowth mumbled, out of earshot. “…but I s’pose we owe it.”

“Wobba...” His partner agreed, softly.

“All good here!” James affirmed.

“Alright!” Jay called. “Battle… start!”

Bonnie and Heidi were on it practically the second the words left his mouth. What threw the former Rockets immediately for a loop was how Chespin jumped in front of Fennekin without being told.

“Chespin!” Bonnie shouted. “Pin Missile on Wobbuffet!”

“Fennekin! Howl!”

Chespin ran forward and leapt into the air as it fired off a barrage of needles, and Jessie’s reflexes snapped to it as she threw her hand forward.

“Wobbuffet! You know what to do!”

The attack pushed him back a generous deal, but it was nothing the pokémon couldn’t easily take. Wobbuffet’s tail shot up, his body aglow with a fierce orange light, and he mirrored his trainer’s gesture as he sent the spines flying back at Chespin.

From beside him, Meowth had charged into the opening in Fennekin’s defenses, landing a nasty Scratch directly into its side. The fox reeled back in pain, breaking its stance and falling backwards. Meowth kicked off the ground, flipping back in front of James, looking surprised that he’d managed to get a hit in.
“Nice work,” James said, sounding just as surprised. “Keep it up!”

“You too, Wobbles!” Jessie praised, and her pokémon saluted blissfully back at her.

“Chespin!” Bonnie called, noticing immediately how hard the Counter had hit it. “Are you okay? Can you keep going?”

“Che… es…!” It struggled, standing up with balled fists, still raring to go.

“What about you, Fennekin?” Heidi said.

Fennekin’s response was much quicker as it jumped back to its feet. “Fen!”

“All right!” The redhead told it. “This time it’s you! Launch an Ember at Wobbuffet!”

“Meowth!” James called. “Get Chespin while it’s recovering from that last one!”

“Roger!” Meowth responded, leaping forward and just a tad miffed that he was in an actual pokémon battle and his best friend was actually talking to him like an actual pokémon. He raised his claws, but the temporary divulge into his annoyances chipped at his focus, enough that Chespin was able to dodge his attack and slam a Tackle right into him. He tumbled backwards, landing on all fours—thank you, genes—feeling winded, and more than a little eager to take his frustration regarding the battle out on the spiny little rat staring him down.

Wobbuffet was halfway through a Mirror Coat as he fired Fennekin’s fresh blazes back at it. The offending-turned-defending pokémon took the hit head on, paws digging into the grass below, teeth gritted. Wobbuffet barely had a scratch on him.

“We gotta take that one out,” Heidi said to Bonnie, her eyes locked on the battlefield. “He doesn’t even look phased.”

Bonnie nodded, making a small noise in affirmation. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

Heidi moved to meet her gaze, fire alight in both their eyes. “It’s worth a shot.”

Meowth and Chespin were still going toe to toe, Vine Whips torn to ribbons against sharp claws. Heidi called off another Ember, and Jessie called off another ‘I’ll count on you!’ which translated to ‘Mirror Coat,’ and Fennekin took another hard hit, enduring it.

Another Ember, and Jessie almost wanted to break the friendly competition and trash talk, because what was this girl doing? The Embers were barely whittling down Wobbuffet’s hit points, and they were hitting Fennekin for twice the damage. There wasn’t a lot she understood about how Wobbuffet battled, but it didn’t take a genius to know that the redheaded twerpette was digging her own grave. Frankly, Jessie expected more.

“Fennekin!” Heidi shouted. “Let’s go again! Ember!”

Jessie’s stance was rigid and bored, and she motioned wordlessly to Wobbuffet. He glittered with a plethora of colour that sent the Ember back, and it became less and less elegant and special each time. This time, as the flames went fluttering towards their conjuror, Wobbuffet suddenly doubled over in pain, an arm on the ground and an arm cradling the fresh burn on his chest.

“Yes!” Heidi cheered. “Fennekin, you did it!”

Her pokémon looked back to her, face pulled into a vulpine grin, and made a noise of pride and
accomplishment. The joy was doomed to be short-lived, though—and Fennekin’s eyes shut tight as the pain from the last Mirror Coat hit it full force, its legs giving out from underneath it.

“Fennekin is unable to battle!” Jay called from the sidelines.

“Shoot,” Heidi said, returning it to its ball, talking softly to it in her hand. “I hope I didn’t push you too hard, Fennekin. Go ahead and rest.”

“Alright, Chespin, it’s all up to us now!” Bonnie announced. “Hit Wobbuffet with a Leech Seed!”

“Oh no you don’t!” Jessie called. “Wobbuffet, dodge that—”

Neither of them were fast enough—Chespin had read its trainer’s thoughts and responded early, shooting a mass of seeds down at Wobbuffet, which sprouted angry red vines and completely entangled him. Before Bonnie could call off another attack, however, Meowth was on Chespin again, claws bared.

“It’s two against one, short stuff!” He said, shredding into Chespin with Fury Swipes. The grass-type fell to its knees in lieu of the attack, barely moving, and Jay leaned over the invisible boundaries of the battlefield in an attempt to read the status of the pokémon. Bonnie’s heart lurched, and she focused all her hope into Chespin’s endurance.

Meowth heard a thud behind him.

“Wobbuffet is unable to battle!”

Chespin rose mere seconds after the call was made, wiping dirt from its cheek and staring down Meowth with an eager look that screamed \textit{try me}. The cat watched as a scratch or two quietly faded from the smaller pokémon’s body.

Jessie was now frantically at Wobbuffet’s side, cradling him like a mother, talking so tenderly that Meowth and James were left to momentarily wonder \textit{who she was}. She sang some praises and returned him to his ball, and the battle raged on.

“I’ll avenge ya, buddy.” Meowth said as he saw the glow of crimson flash from behind him.

Chespin heard this, and motioned him forward with a single paw, grin undeterred.

“Let’s finish this!”

The cat jumped forward, mustering all his strength into his next attack. Bonnie called off a Vine Whip, and Chespin had it readied before it even hit the leap. They collided in midair, eclipsing the vibrant sun, striking each other with all they had and landing perfectly on their feet, the seconds feeling like hours as they stood there, facing away from each other on opposite ends of the battlefield.

Chespin faltered, its legs growing weak, its stance wobbling—

“Meowth is unable to battle!” Jay called, and the relief sent Chespin tumbling into the cool grass. “Heidi and Bonnie are the winners!”

As the words rested on the breeze, there was a moment of pause. Bonnie’s eyes slowly began to fill with stars, and finally, she broke the silence with a cheer as she bounded over to her pokémon. She held it in her arms, gently speaking to it as she thanked it for its hard work, returning it to his ball. Heidi was by her side in an instant, equally jubilant in the face of their victory, and when Bonnie
rose back to her feet the shorter girl grabbed her hands and joined in the celebration.

“You were amazing, Bonnie!” She praised. “We really creamed them!”

“Please! Not half as amazing as you!” Bonnie responded, a weak blush on her cheeks. “You and Fennekin are so in sync!”

From the other side of the battlefield, the former Rockets accepted their defeat gracefully. Defeat was something they’d come to enjoy in recent months, the feeling of being able to choose their battles and fight them for fun rather than to survive. Losing no longer meant starving, losing no longer meant a trip through the stratosphere and an uncomfortable crash landing. It felt good to lose and even better to win.

Jessie and James were kneeled down next to Meowth, offering him generous handfuls of sitrus berries, surprisingly tender in their own right.

“That was big of you.” James told him, and the cat practically yanked one of the berries from his hands.

“And surprisingly effective,” Jessie noted. “Have you always been that hardy?”

Meowth was touched by the praise, and ultimately too exhausted to complain about the circumstances. “Maybe dis new life has made gettin’ to my roots a little easier.”

Jessie smirked. “Or you were just that decent all along and too lazy to utilize it.”

“Betrayed by a dear friend… a priceless companion… how could ya do me-owth like dis?”

He was halfway through dramatically throwing his paw over his forehead when she dropped him, got up, and left her last berry on the ground beside him. He made a noise and Bonnie laughed from across the divide, and Meowth found it curious how there was no humiliation in the aftermath, only a strangely new sense of pride.

Jessie was on the other side of the expanse, now, talking to Bonnie with an approving grin on her face, hands on her hips.

“My Wobbuffet held his own against the Twerp more than once, you know,” She said. “If you took him down, I don’t doubt you’ll easily beat your brother.”

Bonnie looked to Heidi, then back to Jessie, her teeth showing and her cheeks bunched up and her heart absolutely soaring. It wasn’t something she was inclined to say, but it had been one of the more interesting battles she’d had since setting off.

“So I have to ask…”

Jessie’s voice broke through the silence, initiating the pre-sunset talk. The sky was turning a beautiful shade that lined the few clouds as they hung there, and as the air cooled down, the group began to drift away alongside them.

“…you seem the type, have you ever tried performing?”

Bonnie made a noise of apathy, and the words that followed the less-than-positive sound were surprising. “Oh yeah. I definitely tried.”

Before she could elaborate, Heidi crossed her arms defiantly. “We’ve sworn off it!”
Jessie took her eyes off the sunset, now very interested. She rested her elbow on her leg and turned with her face in her hand, eager. “Oh my. There’s a story here, isn’t there?”

Bonnie immediately shot a questioning look at Kye, who seemed to affirm something with his own gesture. It was a soft moment, lacking in words but rich in understanding, something visible enough to any outsider. Turning back to Jessie, she spoke.

“This story has two parts to it!” She announced.

The former Rockets all nodded, peering into her.

“The first part is,” Bonnie started. “They wouldn’t let me register my Squishy!”

Jessie had to hold back a laugh. Of course.

“Said that it was too big for the auditorium, that it might ‘compromise the stage,’ all this junk!” She ranted. “What kind of excuse is that? Those stages are big! And if not, they should make them bigger! I don’t understand why only tiny pokémon seem to matter, when all pokémon are cute!”

“That’s definitely a fair assessment.” James added.

“I didn’t want to perform if I couldn’t use all my pokémon,” Bonnie added. “I still considered Showcases even if I couldn’t perform alongside Squishy, but…”

“But?”

“Well… here’s the other thing I don’t think I like very much about Showcases,” She threw her arms up in the air, frustrated just at the thought. “It’s all girls!”

The former Rockets blinked a little, confused.

“Yeah?” Meowth said.

“That’s not fair!”

They softened a little as the implications started to hit them. Oh.

“Kye really wants to perform, too!” Bonnie said, and the normally confident boy began to fidget adjacent to her. “And he’s really good at what he does! He could stand onstage and go toe-to-toe with any Kalos Queen some day, but just because he’s a boy, he’s not allowed?!”

“And when I asked why they had that stupid rule, they told me it was because performing was a hobby for girls!” She continued. “What kind of backwards thinking even is that?! If it’s for girls, why is Kye so good at it?! If it’s for girls, why do hundreds of boys show up to every Showcase?!”

Heidi and Jay both had their fists clenched now, too. Bonnie’s passion had easily bled over into them, and looking at them, the former Rockets saw a fiery bond not easily broken. The blonde kept on.

“It made me sad, but more than anything, it made me angry,” She said, momentarily softening. “Catching Kye one night alone with his pokémon practicing. Him getting embarrassed and begging me not to make fun of him for what he dreamt about when no one was looking.”

There was a stillness in the air, and her voice was as gentle as it could be, empathy and protection coating it like honey.
“No one should ever feel that way,” She finally said, shaking her head. “Absolutely no one.”

Jay chimed in. “So we all swore off performing.”

“Off doing it ourselves, off going to showcases,” Heidi added. “Off even talking about it. Until they get it together and fix things.”

Jessie sat there on the end of their impassioned dialogue, lost in thought. It was never something she had considered, and she felt bad about that for a moment. The kids were absolutely right—being on stage was a joy unlike any other, something that no one should ever be barred from.

“Dat’s a reason if I ever hoid one,” Meowth interrupted her reflection. “Stick it to da man.”

James, conversely, had become predictably emotional over their conviction and was sitting there with fists balled and tears streaming from his eyes. His voice was shaky and taken, and when he spoke it was more of a moved shout than a sentence.

“Alright!” He sobbed, and pointed in Kye’s direction. “Showcase twerp, are you ready to make your dreams come true?!”

Kye was caught off guard at the outburst, knowing precisely what the answer to that question was but completely unsure at how this relative stranger was going to carry it to fruition.

“I—I guess?”

James wiped his streaming face, stood up with drive and confidence, and beckoned the boy forwards. Sun still descending around them, they disappeared towards the balloon, their friends all looking on in curiosity and bemusement as no words passed anyone’s lips.

Not much later, Kye was invited back out of the cover of the bushes, nervously inquiring at James beforehand—

“Are you sure about this…?”

In response, the man’s voice was soft, and without hesitation. “Absolutely. I’m good at what I do, I assure you.”

There was a pause, then a shuffling noise, and then the boy emerged from the bushes, face flushed and stance reserved. He was wearing cascades of brilliant frills that rested just at his knees, his hair long and dark and flawlessly cropped, the makeup on his face bubbly and charismatic and warm. Every thread of the outfit lay perfectly in place, every contour painted on him done with perfect detail—there was not a single part of the transformation that didn’t complement everything Kye was wonderfully.

Jay adjusted his glasses at the sight, awed, and Bonnie and Heidi were linked at heart, their smiles wide and proud and amazed and absolutely stoked.

“Kye!” Bonnie practically shouted, hand hovering an inch from her mouth. “You look incredible!”

“You think…?” He regarded them with uncharacteristic meekness. “You’re not just saying that, right?”
James sensed his apprehension and stepped over to him, holding out a hand mirror and giving the boy free reign to examine himself. When he caught his reflection, his jaw pulled open in hushed disbelief, and he slowly put his free hand up to his face.

“Oh, wow…” He whispered. “I look like a completely different person…”

James crossed his arms and nodded, proud of his work. Disguises were child’s play, and it definitely wasn’t the first time they’d transformed a twerp into a princess.

“I told you, I’m a professional.”

“Do you really think… this’ll change anything, though?” Kye suddenly said, unsure.

“Listen up, twerps,” Jessie retorted intensely, as if she was waiting for the question. “As someone who has been professionally screwing with the system since before I was out of grade school, I’ll let you in on a little advice.

“Boycotts are good for making noise, but they rarely get any change done, nowadays,” She said. “Aim higher, you hear me?”

Kye looked up at her, hands limp at his sides. “What do you mean?”

Jessie leaned down to his level, eyes positively on fire.

“You go to those Showcases,” She began. “You win. You win. You win your way all to the top. And when—not if—you become Kalos Queen, when you’re standing on that stage with deafening applause ready to accept your new title, you rip your wig off and you tell them who you really are with the biggest, brightest smile on your face.”

Kye’s eyes grew wide as saucers, taken with the way she spoke so freely and confidently. Like it was the easiest thing in the world, like she’d never known doubt a day in her life. He wanted nothing more than to know how to feel that way, himself.

“You let them know the boy whose charisma they fell for. You stand there with their love and adoration and you demand change,” Jessie said. “And maybe it won’t change anything. Maybe this region is just hopelessly broken in its ideas and it’s not ready to evolve. But won’t the experience of all that pull you closer to where you need to be?”

“Yeah!” His voice answered involuntarily, a fire having started somewhere inside him.

“And isn’t that better than just sitting here hoping?!”

“Yeah!” He pumped his fist in the air, his locks bouncing alongside it. “I’m gonna show everyone that boys are just as cute and talented as girls!”

“And, spoilers?” Jessie added, nonchalantly. “Even if by some oversight you don’t become Kalos Queen… there are other regions where they have a type of performance called a Pokémon Contest, and over there? They don’t give a bidoof’s behind if you’re a girl or not.”

“Wh…” Kye started, positively dazzled. “What…? For real?”

Jessie grinned. “You have my word. If you want, I can always give you tips on performing!”

Bonnie suddenly interrupted. “Geez, Jessie! You sure know a ridiculous amount of stuff about this for someone who I never even saw attend a Kalos Showcase…”
“Oh…” Jessie retorted, playfully, and she ran a hand through her hair, loosing her bangs and letting a large chunk of them fall down in front of her right eye. “…are you sure?”

There was a pause while she crossed her arms, regarding Bonnie. Hilariously enough, both the blonde and Kye registered the statement at near the same time, their voices overlapping in frantic excitement while their friends stared on, out of the loop.

“ARE YOU—”

“YOU MEAN—?”

“JESSILEE?”

“I’VE BEEN SITTING HERE TALKING WITH JESSILEE FOR hours now?!”

Jessie was caught halfway between the unfamiliar feeling of the doting praise she’d always wanted, alongside the sudden realization that she was wholly unprepared to actually receive it. She almost laughed nervously, heart betraying her, but ultimately kept her composure.

“The one and only.” She finally said.

“Ugh, you so should’ve won that Anistar Showcase!” Kye blurted out. “I’ve been bitter about it since I saw it on T.V.!”

“I know, right?!” Meowth agreed. “Dat was one of her best!”

“Pff,” Jessie added, smoothing her hair back out. “You’re not wrong.”

Heidi and Jay had been completely lost during this entire charade, and as Jessie instructed Kye on stronger poses and better group techniques, James merely smiled in their general direction and waved off the confusion.

“I’ll tell you later tonight.” He simply offered, and they had the feeling that was probably for the better.

Bonnie was blanketed by the still night air and the expanse of galaxies glimmering freely above her, legs pulled tightly against her chest and face resting against cooled scales. Fingertips tracing the indents where scale met scale, she crooned her heart with a loving voice, cherishing the feeling of her dear friend’s chest rising and falling as it breathed.

“How I wish I understood where you came from… and the way you get all your food from the sun…”

Jessie kept light on her feet as she neared the sound, familiar with the art of the midnight reverie under the stars and not wanting to intrude upon any important reflection. It probably wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for Bonnie, either, but Jessie felt oddly inclined to keep an eye on her after the former Rockets had befriended her brother.

“Mysterious Squishy, how I love you… come home please, won’t you please tell me some more…”

Jessie found her voice, and Bonnie nearly jumped when it filled the pause in between lyrics.

“Quite the pair, you two.”

“O-Oh!” Bonnie stammered, still reeling a tad. “Yeah, we’ve seen a lot of battles together!”
“Sorry to interrupt,” Jessie blurted, slightly embarrassed. “You’d been gone a while, so I figured I’d come looking for you.”

“It’s no problem!” She said. “Sometimes it just does me some good to enjoy nature with my pokémon, you know?”

“I do.”

“I was gonna head back soon anyways,” Bonnie added. “But you’re free to join me until then?”

“I’ll take you up on that!” Jessie affirmed, but then looked a little unsure at how she was going to fit in the picture. “Uh…”

“Oh, whoops,” Bonnie said, forgetting she had a serpent the size of a house coiled loosely around her. “Hey, Squishy, can Jessie come sit?”

The pokémon drifted back into sentience, lazily looking up at her. In a ridiculously casual manner, it began to glow with the same green light as before—this time much less frightening and much warmer. Blinding streams began to shoot off it like comets, and Jessie stood mystified as she watched it happen. Bonnie paid no mind to it, and the woman felt a slight pang of jealousy that one so small had been part of a destiny cosmic enough that an earth shattering display of power was nothing more to her than yep, that’s my bestest friend!

Squishy, now the simple creature Jessie was more used to seeing, leapt into Bonnie’s bag and hung its head over the mouth, its single eye shut as she scratched its neck and thanked it for its hospitality.

Jessie shook herself out of the natural awe that came with watching a legendary beast separate hundreds of cells and dropped down beside Bonnie, letting the grass cool her arms as she rested them behind her head and counted the stars above.

“So,” Jessie said, after a while. “How did this humble little arrangement come to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“You, your pokémon, your friends…” Jessie answered. “I mean, how on earth did you find your legendary again?”

“Well, weirdly enough, it wasn’t hard at all…” Bonnie looked at her feet, smiling. “Clemont gave me Dedenne. It was always meant to be mine. Chespin pretty much demanded to come along with me, no doubt feeling cooped up in the tower all day.”

Jessie nodded. Easy enough, that was true.

“Squishy… I didn’t really know for sure if I was gonna find it again, but... I had a feeling that no matter where I was, it was always kind of… with me?” She said, trying to find her words. “I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

“Honestly, twerpette—what about half the mysteries of this strange and vast world have ever made sense?”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Bonnie responded. “It’s a little silly to explain, but when I got out of Lumiose, I just kinda wandered in the forest. Didn’t really know where I was going, just that I wanted to go. And as soon as I hit trees, I felt compelled to… well, to sing.”

“That song you were singing earlier?”
She nodded. “I made it up when I was little. I’m always singing strange things when I’m lost in thought or lost in a moment, but Squishy’s Song has meaning, I mean, I…”

Bonnie blushed a little, as if she was almost embarrassed in what she said next.

“I think that song saved the world?”

Jessie shot her a look, affirmative and understanding. Instantly, Bonnie felt more confident in what she was disclosing, and she continued.

“So I sang. I sat beneath a tree with the sunlight in my eyes, and I just sang. I stayed there for a while, and I guess staying up all excitedly the night before turned out to be a good idea, because I dozed off at some point and… when I woke up, Squishy was in its long form, just kinda wrapped around me like before.”

The girl’s voice was absolutely painted with admiration. There wasn’t a single part of her, Jessie could tell, that took the life she had been given for granted any longer. In the time they had been apart, Bonnie had definitely matured. She was so much less a gym leader’s loud little sister and so much more a genuine hero.

“It’s funny,” She added. “Clemont always told me that to catch a legendary, even the best trainers shell out tons of money for hundreds of pokéballs. That’s how many it takes to even attempt to capture and tame a pokémon with that kind of power.

“But Squishy…? Squishy only took one. I just held it up in my hands and it touched his nose to it and became my official partner. All I had to do was ask.”

“Good grief,” Jessie smiled, shaking her head. “You really do have more adventure in you at age ten than I ever did.”

“I suppose so!” Bonnie laughed, then continued. “And then I traveled on my own for a while, only to find that the Lapras Defense Force were all out on their own adventures too! We decided to travel together, since they were a little unsure of what to do and where to go and I really wanted to help. I was kind of a pro after traveling with Ash and Serena and Clemont. It’s been really fun! I really like them all, even if me and Heidi butted heads a lot at first.”

“That Heidi,” Jessie said. “You’re sweet on her, aren’t you?”

Bonnie made an unflattering, choking squeak in response to this question, and promptly left the planet, her eyes wide open and her composure shattered. Dedenne had jolted awake at this sound and blearily poked at its trainer, chattering in concern.

“Oh, oopsie,” The redhead offered semi-apologetically. “Am I wrong? I seemed to sense a vibe, is all—”

“Oh man,” Bonnie muttered. “Oh man, oh man, oh man—”

“Did I break you?” Jessie inquired, waving a hand in front of her face. “Twerpette?”

“This explains everything!” The girl suddenly shouted. “Why didn’t I think about it harder?! I sat here for months making fun of Ash for being so dense, and now I’m the dense one?! How did I—?!”

Jessie couldn’t help it, she absolutely burst out laughing at the reaction to her simple question, amused at the luck of getting to witness such a big moment for the young one. She tried to pick her words carefully, but there was definitely a point she wanted to articulate as she stared at Bonnie, red-
faced and stammering and hopeless in love.

“I’m seeing some definite family resemblance here.”

Bonnie was completely unphased by this comment, but continued screaming.

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU’RE THE ONE WHO MADE ME REALIZE THIS!” She said, panicked. “Jessie what do I DO?! I talk a big game but I don’t know anything about love!”

“Pff. My opinions on love range from borderline toxic romanticism to ideas way too cynical for a little girl to hear, with basically no in-between.”

“Ah, geez…”

“But listen,” Jessie added. “You’ll probably feel better if you tell her, you know? Get rid of some unnecessary tension. You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take, as they say.”

She realized almost as soon as she said it how seldom she followed her own advice in recent years.

“Ugh, you’re right,” Said Bonnie. “I can barely stand to think about how completely annoying it was to watch Serena and Clemont sit around madly in love with Ash and never say a word to him. It was the worst soap opera I ever watched and I didn’t even have the choice to change the channel.”

Jessie stifled a laugh. “Oh man, the twerpette, too? Honestly, is there anyone not crushing on that boy?”

“Besides me? No idea,” Bonnie answered. “Boys are mediocre, anyway.”

“Hear hear,” Jessie agreed. “Better off without them. Wish yours was a life I could lead, but alas, they pull me in with their sultry voices and dreamy eyes.”

“Yuck,” She stuck her tongue out. “Though I suppose James is pretty cute. He could be an easy exception to the rule.”

“Alright!” The redhead suddenly said, louder than normal as she shot upwards. “Bed time, let’s go!”

“Oooooh!” Bonnie taunted. “Did I unearth something here?!”

“Keep dreaming, lemondrop,” Jessie scoffed, making her way back toward camp. “C’mon.”

Bonnie simply kept the mischievous grin that had found its way to her, bounding after Jessie and wondering if, perhaps, both of them had managed to get something interesting out of their starlight dialogue.

“We probably should head out soon.” James said, eyes on the sky as the sun slowly made its way across.

“Aw…” Bonnie pouted. “Already?”

“We gat a lotta ground ta cover,” Meowth answered. “Lotta people to find and talk with.”

The former Rockets never really wanted to end a small leg of their adventure, either. Strange as it was, they were beginning to feel very genuine bonds with the people they met over the course of their travels. Every parting got more difficult, every little day with former enemies gave them more reason to continue onward. It was an unfortunate paradox.
“Listen, Kye,” Jessie said as she loaded the last of their gear into the balloon, her expression firm. “You take the stage and set Kalos ablaze with your hard work, alright? Those clothes are yours so long as you use them to chase your dreams.”

He nodded, jaw tight, as if he were keeping tears down. A former stranger he’d watched with adoration through a screen was inches away from him now, telling him to persevere. Kye couldn’t have told you if he believed in destiny before that moment—but there was no doubt in his mind about what it was he had to do now.

“An’ Bonnie?” Meowth said, a little taken aback at how her name felt on his tongue. “You march right up to Prism Tower an’ kick your brot’er’s butt. Don’t tell him, but I’m rootin’ for ya.”

“Get to a pokémon center and call the poor boy first, though,” James added, crossing his arms. “You didn’t hear it from us, but he’s up there in that tower right now sulking more than usual because he misses your company a tad too much.”

“...really?”

“Are you surprised?”

“Ha! Not at all, I guess,” She laughed. “Geez, Clemont. I guess I have to call you more often if you’re gonna be a crybaby about it...”

She scratched at her cheek, abashed, but everyone there could tell she was touched to hear that she had been missed back home.

“Anyways...” Jessie said. “It’s been real, twerpette. Win the Kalos League so you can rub it in the Twerp’s face, alright?”

“I will!”

As they turned to board their ride, Kye frantically interrupted their walk backwards, suddenly panicking and trying to piece his words together in a coherent manner before they were gone.

“Wait, wait, wait!” He said. “We can’t just let you guys leave with nothing? You’ve been so cool!”

“Well...” James began. “We were pretty rotten, in the past. A big part of this pretty pilgrimage is trying to be more cool. It’s par for the redemption arc course, really.”

“Still!”

“Wait,” Jay offered. “I have an idea?”

He went for his bag back over by the camp, running up to the former Rockets with it in hand. Catching his breath, the boy pulled the trove open, revealing to them an absolute cornucopia of sparkling, otherworldly stones, each colour more vivid and striking than the last.

“Jay, are you crazy?!” Heidi said as soon as she realized what he was offering. “Your evolutionary stone collection? You’ve worked so hard on it.”

“I mean, not all of them,” He told her. “But after all they did for Kye, I don’t really mind parting with just one. Who knows, maybe they might find a cool pokémon they wanna evolve on their journeys?”

“Twerp, ya can’t be serious...” Meowth said, taken aback. “Evolutionary stones are worth a pretty
“He does have a point…” James added. “We couldn’t possibly accept—”

“Cha-ching!” Jessie chimed, grabbing the single firestone out of the bag and kissing it exuberantly. “Flareon, here I come! I knew you’d be mine some day!”

“...guess that answers that.” Heidi smirked.

“Jessie!” James scolded.

“What? Speak for yourself,” She retorted. “If someone goes out of their way to thank you, you accept what they’re giving!”

“No changin’ her.” Meowth said, rolling his eyes.

Bonnie, who had been oddly quiet for this entire exchange, suddenly let loose with one of her world-famous shouts of emotional processing.

“Ahhhh! That’s it! I’ve made up my mind!”

The group, including her own friends, blinked at her, waiting for an explanation. She exhaled hard.

“You said you guys were going to Pallet, right?”

“That’s the plan.” James affirmed.

“Okay,” She breathed in. “Okay.”

Bonnie then dug into her bag, finding a single pokéball and throwing it high into the air, the companion dwelling inside it sparkling to life before them. When the pokémon took shape, the former Rockets stood awed, unable to believe their eyes.

“Greninja,” Bonnie said, addressing it. “Remember what we talked about last night?”

Greninja, always the stoic, nodded sagely towards her, a faint glint of something undetectable in its eye.

“It took me a long while to think about it,” Bonnie told it. “But I’m going to let these guys keep you, for now. And eventually, they’re going to take you home to Ash. Right?!"

The last word was accompanied by the blonde sharply turning her head, eyes burning into the former Rockets. They snapped back to the present, looked at her frantically, and when their words came they were unsure and panicked and worried.

“D-Don’t get us wrong, twoipette, we absolutely can, but—” Meowth looked towards his feet. “Are ya sure we’re trustwoithy enough? Ya really gonna do dat after only a day with us, just put dat kinda faith in us?”

Bonnie took in another breath, closing her eyes as she did so.

“Clemont trusts you. Ash trusts you,” She said, opening them back up. “More than anything, Squishy trusts you. And besides…”

She turned to Greninja, who had its arms crossed, towering over her with its powerful and intimidating presence.
“This is Ash’s greninja,” Bonnie added. “Not like it couldn’t kick you guys into tomorrow if you tried anything!”

Jessie looked off to the side, at nothing in particular. “Why is a running theme on this journey the fact that no one’s afraid of us being hardened criminals because we’re apparently no good at battling?”

In response to this, James just laughed. “You tell me, Jess.”

They were pulled out of their grievances by Greninja offering them its hand, and still unsure if they were deserving, they nervously exchanged a look before grabbing the webbed appendage in unison, their hands a united pile atop each others’.

“Greninja is picky in who it battles alongside,” Bonnie then explained. “I never got to have many battles with it, if I’m being honest… but it’s a true friend and I believe it will be there for you so long as you do the right thing when the going gets tough.”

The pokémon’s gaze stayed on them, intense and passionate and lawful as it made a noise of affirmation that both comforted the trio and shook them with just the slightest bit of fear. The knowledge suddenly intruded into their heads that maybe, for once, that was less of a them problem and more of a Greninja problem.

“Be sure to treat it kindly, okay?”

“We promise.” James finally said, after a beat of uncertainty.

In the wake of this, Bonnie’s expression fell a bit, and before any of them could ask her if everything was alright, she voiced the humble insecurities without flinching—

“Me and the Kalos League…” She started. “Do you think I can actually do it?”

Jessie stepped forward, barely even taking the time to think, and leaned over to rest a hand on the young girl’s shoulder. When she spoke, her voice was kinder than Bonnie imagined it could be, the unshakable confidence Jessie had always worn proudly desperately trying to reach the trainer in her overwhelming—albeit temporary—cloud of doubt.

“We met a trainer who the Twerp used to travel with. A young little firecracker in training to be a dragon master,” Jessie said. “Years of experience under her belt, taming the most wild and vibrant beasts. And do you know who she left us talking fondly about, dreaming she could meet?”

Bonnie seemed genuinely enthralled. “Who?”

“You.”

The blonde stuttered back, eyes darting, confused more than anything. “What—I—why? I haven’t accomplished anything yet!”

“You saved the world,” James told her. “With nothing but love and courage. There are people out in the big wide universe this very second singing your praises.”

“Enough people talkin’ dat word traveled,” Meowth added. “Can’t ya see? You don’t have t’ worry for a second. Ya always been a little ball o’ spunk.”

Kye decided it was time to chime in, then, punching Bonnie’s arm playfully and letting her know. “Yeah, Bonnie! You’re the straightest!”
Jay, thankfully, was not drinking anything, otherwise he would have shot it halfway across the clearing as soon as the words left Kye’s mouth.

“Oh my god, Kye. Greatest. You mean greatest.”

Heidi had her hands on Bonnie shoulders now, whipping her around so they could meet each other's eyes. Her words had a ferocity to them, and the fire that they held within them kept Bonnie warmer than anything she’d ever known in her life.

“If anyone can do this, it’s you,” The redhead said. “Quit doubting yourself so much when you and I both know you’re better than half the league! We’re gonna keep on getting stronger together, okay?”

Bonnie’s cheeks were burning red, and when she finally moved her eyes back to Heidi’s, it felt as if her heart would never slow down and let her breathe. It was an alien feeling—the concept of pleasantly suffocating—but eventually, her voice pushed past the butterfree in her stomach and returned the sentiment.

“You guys are right!” She said, hoping that if she voiced it, she would soon grow to believe it. “Let’s all reach our dreams together!”

“Hopefully some of that dutiful hard work rubs off on us, twerpette,” Jessie said. “Take care.”

“You too, jerks!” Bonnie said, playfully sticking her tongue out, and it felt a million times more welcoming and kind than any nice thing she’d said or done for them all day.

They boarded the balloon, new pokémon in tow, and Jessie managed to catch the silhouette of the young group as they walked off into the dapple of sunlight and shade that filtered through the clearing. Bonnie and Heidi had fallen back behind their friends, and Jay had his pokédex out, ever the dutiful navigator. The two girls shared a look while their crew chattered about whatever was on their minds this time, and Jessie’s heart soared with an unfamiliar sense of pride when she focused her attention and was struck with the realization that ceaseless heartbreak would never shake her from being a romantic at her core.

The sun felt like shelter as the former Rockets slowly hovered away.

Bonnie and Heidi tightly held each other’s hands.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so, a few thoughts:

I sincerely hope this chapter was ok! I had so many worries about hyping it up too much, or about it being too crowded, or just about what to /do/ with it. But after the undertaking that was last week's chapter, I just kind of wanted to write something more calm with a much more friendly air. less high stakes, you know? Especially after this little kid was a total badass the entire run of the anime, I just kinda feel like she deserves a break.

In all honesty, these are the kinda chapters I prefer writing, I just don't think it makes for terribly interesting fic xD
And now, the bigger announcement: This is it for Kalos... for now. Allow me to explain! You might remember that originally, I asked you guys if I should do this in chronological order. Most of you said I don't have to, but I'm actually thinking I want to, now! So I have a document typed up of all my ideas, in detail, for every single region. Three chapters per region, save for Kanto, which I have... way too many plans for.

But please don't fret if your favourite character hasn't appeared by the time a region ends! Because after this main fic is done, I am planning on starting kind of a "side stories" fic where I explore ideas that I couldn't fit into a whole chapter, or ideas I didn't think of at the time, or ideas I was too scared to write for fear of throwing canon-compliance out the window (example: I have a whole Bewear chapter in my head. I can't write it, because we're like 30 episodes into SM, and who knows if canon will shatter it mere months after I write it? That's the kinda thing that would end up in this side project.)

For now, I'm dedicating all of my resources and time into DTE, though I'm not above maybe writing cute little unrelated one-offs on the side (my tumblr is always around for drabbles and for discussing this fic, hint hint) but once it's done, I'll work more casually on the side stories, so you all can stay in the world with me for a little longer. I hope that's okay!

Next up is obviously Unova, which I will admit, might take a little while longer. Out of all the regions, that's the one I have the least amount of ideas for, since the Rockets were so different! Don't panic in the mean time while I write it. I know I'm historically flaky when it comes to abandoning projects, but I've put a lot of work & time into planning this one out to its end, and mark my words, I intend to finish it and make it as good as I can.

So anyways, if you're still reading, thank you for being patient with me! As always, I will do my best.

(And yes, Bonnie absolutely grabbed Heidi's hand in their tent one night and told her she was a keeper ;3c)
Lightning Never Strikes Twice

Chapter Notes

Longest chapter yet!!! I don't know how this keeps happening!! Hopefully its to your liking.

Per request, the episodes alluded to in this chapter are:

-AG109 (Do I Hear a Ralts?)

And, briefly:
-XY131 (Down to the Fiery Finish!)

You don't exactly need them to understand the story, but if you want a refresher, there you go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They’d pulled into the harbour of Nuvema Town on a sunny afternoon, and the smell of ocean salt and stinging air felt divine as it danced alongside the sun’s rays. The former Rockets had expected their first few footsteps on Unovan soil to chill them—all of them were acutely aware of the heaviness of their misdeeds across the region—but the cold guilt didn’t creep, merely rested. It was present, but not all-encompassing, and they felt its sharp claws fade from their hearts every time they saw just how lively the population remained, despite everything.

The resilience of people had formerly been both their worst enemy and best friend. Their own resilience moving them forward. The Twerp’s resilience keeping them at bay. It was pleasant, now, to consider the lasting will of both humankind and monsterkind, and not be forced to feel a twinge of resentment alongside it.

When they’d pulled in, a dark thundercloud was hanging over the town, and it was easy for them in all their luck to fear the worst as their ferry neared it. Despite the rotten odds they were so used to, they watched it slowly dissipate the closer they got, an omen that perhaps today was going to treat them well.

Now, the quartet were seated outdoors, sipping their Sawsbucks Coffee, their silhouettes carving stylish apertures in the picturesque ocean behind them. Sparkles shimmered on its surface as the waves hit the shore beneath them, and their souls slowly drifted away into the feeling of it. They were sharing an overpriced slice of cake, digging their forks into it from all sides, and the delectable taste of it almost made them forget the holes in their collective wallet.

Yes, as they closed their eyes and focused on the sound of crashing waves and errant wind, on the feeling of sun on their skin and delicious food in their stomachs, it almost felt as if they were floating off. Along the breeze, over the railing, across the sea, drifting away into the great blue yonder…

Wait.

Wait.

“Guys?! Guys! ”
Meowth’s panicked voice snapped the other three members of the team out of their reverie, and they were shocked to discover that the feeling of being petals on the wind wasn’t just a gentle mirage they’d drifted into. Beneath their feet, the previously peaceful ocean looked violent, threatening to swallow them up as they were raised higher and higher above it.

The group shrieked in unison, their heads whipping around wildly, their bodies unable to gain traction against the air in their state of antigravity. Desperate, their eyes darted, looking for anything that could lessen the severity of the situation, provide them answers. Jessie squinted at the small scene that had formed over where they had been sitting, cursing her pathetic excuse for eyesight, and barely made out the outline of a glowing, white-coloured figure. She strained further, mouth hanging open in concentration, before James interrupted her focus.

“Is—that’s—?!” He practically swam through the air, undignified in both actions and words. “Is that a gardevoir?!”

“A WHAT?!” Meowth responded. “Did we ever piss off a gardevoir in Unova?!”

“I don’t know!” Jessie told him. “My memory has a bad habit of completely disappearing when I’m about to be mercilessly thrown into the blasted depths!”

“Wobbuffet!” Their fourth added firmly, as if to punctuate his trainer’s defense.

The gardevoir’s stance was powerful if not for the cracks in it—James could see the pokémon was too angry to remain fully composed, and a psychic type lacking in composure was almost scarier than the cold and calculating nature they normally wore. Gardevoir roared its name, eyes absolutely drenching the Rockets with vengeance, and they were halfway between object fear and burning curiosity. None of them recognized the face of the pokémon, but all of them knew they had done something typical of their usual past actions for it to be this unhinged, ready to cast them into the angry sea.

“It’d be nice to know what we did so’s we can at least feel bad for it!” Meowth cried.

It raised its arms again, body aglow in a terrible azure light and voice at a pitch that grasped their hearts and squeezed tightly. The four of them yelped out again, wondering why no one was helping, wondering why karma chose that day to not be on their side, wondering if it was really written all over them that they were people undeserving of mercy. It’s not that they weren’t willing to atone for what they’d done—it was moreso that there was no point in a lesson if they didn’t know what those misdeeds were.

They shut their eyes, all at once. Ridiculous as it was, the first thought on Wobbuffet’s mind was how badly he wanted to finish that cake.

“Gardevoir! Stop! Put them down!”

They didn’t recognize the voice, and it added another layer of confusion and desperation to their already shaken hearts. Why weren’t they used to this, yet? How many times had they been on the ensuing end of a deadly attack? One by one, they began to open their eyes again, suspended there in the ominous ocean air.

The gardevoir jolted a bit at the sound of what was likely its trainer’s voice. He ran up to his pokémon, struggling to catch his breath, lab coat thrown over his shoulder hastily. The former Rockets squinted at the boy as he looked at his embarrassed partner through thick-rimmed lenses.

“C’mon!” He said, flustered.
“G… gard…” It stuttered back to him, slowly hovering the quartet back over the edge of the harbour, dropping them roughly back onto the concrete. The noise they made was halfway relieved, halfway pained, almost comical. It wasn’t until their eyes focused properly and the fear wore off that they realized who it was commanding the pokémon, and everything else immediately clicked into place.

Max stood there, eyes burning up at his friend, chiding it for what it had done. The pokémon looked incredibly upset at the scolding it was receiving, its lips pulled back in stress, its expression caught somewhere between anger and humiliation.

“What’s gotten into you, Gardevoir! You can’t just go around using Psychic on strangers! Apologize to these people now!”

“Wait,” Jessie rose to her feet, stepping forward. “Wait. It’s not its fault.”

She undid the band tying her bun up, loosing a comet trail of crimson and magenta behind her. As she removed her sunglasses, the others got up and followed suit, and Max’s eyes slowly widened, his expression catching up with the knowledge his pokémon had already snuffed out.

“Team Rocket?!” He shouted, and some patrons of the café murmured apprehensively. “What are you doing here?! What kinda things are you plotting?!”

Max’s stance became defensive immediately, and it struck the four of them all at once just how much growing he had done. His voice an octave deeper, his eyes strong in the face of potential threat, his glasses framing shaggy, ebony bangs. He’d ditched the shorts in favour of khakis, a look far more dignified than any of them ever would’ve imagined him in. His gardevoir was surprisingly unchanged by his sudden flip to revenge mode—it sat there, still looking timid and ashamed in contrast to its trainer’s heart.

“Hold on, twoip,” Meowth diffused. “We’re not plannin’ anyt’ing, coitainly not a fight.”

The boy relaxed slightly, but they could all tell he was still all in for a battle.

“I do gotta ask, t’ough…” The cat continued. “Dis gardevoir… it couldn’t be…?”

The gears in his head turned, remembering that the former Rockets were part of this equation. He loosened, more.

“Oh, yeah, it’s…”

Just as quickly as he had calmed down, Max got worked up again, his voice high and frantic as he moved his hands wildly.

“Augh, geez, I don’t have time for this!” He stammered, gathering his things. “I have to get back to the lab pronto! I’m gonna miss it again!”

James raised an eyebrow. “Lab?”

Max was running in place now, eager to hit the emergency exit on the conversation as he wordlessly returned his pokémon to its ball.

“Look, I’m going back to Juniper’s, okay?!” He began to speed off, calling back to them with his fingers dug into his lab coat and his free hand waving them off. “Whatever trouble you guys are planning, I’ll fight you later!”
Just as quickly as he had darted onto the scene, he was gone. Slowly, they watched him disappear from view as the wind continued to blow past, as people continued to whisper around them.


“Just follow the script.” Jessie responded, walking off in the same direction as Max had, motioning the rest of her team forward.

“Wobbuffet~!”

The building before was large and imposing—towering over the quartet, nearly rivaling Kalos’—despite the small town it dwelled in. The aides who answered the door were clearly not expecting a visit from tourists that day, their expressions entirely lost when the former Rockets arrived at the door.

“Uh, hello!” A tiny girl with bright pink hair answered. “Can we help you?”

“A little pidgey told us to drop by here.” James said, putting on his customer service voice.

Pink Hair stared at the other aide, who would hereby be known as ‘Pigtails,’ her expression blank.

“...foreign expression? They look like foreigners.”

Jessie’s eyebrow twitched in irritation, and she crossed her arms at the nerve of them. Twerpettes or not, they could stand to learn some manners. James sensed her temper slowly building to a loss, and pressed on in an attempt to assuage any damage before it happened.

“What I mean to say is…” He elaborated. “Is glasses twer—Is Max here? There was a bit of a commotion and he sped off in this direction. Might we ask Professor Juniper if it’s okay to confer with him?”

The girls shared another look, this time looking slightly relieved to have an out of a situation they obviously weren’t taught to handle. Jessie absentmindedly tapped her foot, and Meowth kept quiet beside her, really not feeling like having the ‘woah, a talking meowth!’ conversation after how hectic and tiring their morning had been. His eyes weren’t on the aides as they nodded and dove back inside, Juniper’s tall frame taking their place after a brief moment.

“Afternoon,” She said, regarding them. “And what brings you four here today?”

James and Wobbuffet bowed, almost instantly, and the other two snapped into it after a moment’s delay, realizing they were supposed to be in Respect Mode now.

“Sorry for intruding,” James lead. “We’re looking for Max?”

“He’s my aide,” Juniper said matter-of-factly. “But who are you?”

“If we’re being honest,” Jessie said, taking the load off her teammate. “We’re old enemies on a quest for better karma.”

“Interesting,” the professor responded, arms crossed, searching their faces for something. “Go on.”

Meowth decided to bite the bullet and make himself relevant. “We don’t actually know if da kid wants ta see us. But it’ll get at us if we don’t at least try.”

“Well…” she said, leaning her head back. “I can ask him. But given the circumstances, I don’t know
how receptive he’ll be.”

They nodded, wanting to know what ‘the circumstances’ were, but biting their tongues in an attempt to be more pleasant. When she did finally call Max over, the boy was gloomy, a haze hanging over him and coating his words with a pronounced sulk. He brought his eyes to the former Rockets, lacking the exuberance they’d seen when he first sped by.

“Oh, great,” he said, dripping sarcasm as he stared them down. “You guys followed me here. Just what I need.”

“Twerp,” Jessie said, cutting through his attitude. “We meant what we said about not looking for a fight. We only have so many years to apologize to everyone we’ve wronged before we keel over, you hear?”

“Okay, good story. But have you considered that I’ve got bigger things on my plate right now than making you three annoyances feel better?”

“Could ya be any more selfish?!?” Meowth suddenly spoke up. “So ya don’t want an apology from us—fine. But ya don’t even t’ink to ask your gardevoir how it feels about da matter?!”

Max’s apathetic stance grew tenser, then, and he realized all at once that he’d been so caught up in his own feelings, he didn’t even take the time to consider the way his partner had been acting.

“What would you know about Gardevoir’s feelings?!”

Meowth took a step forward, his tone unchanging. “I know dat it was ticked enough ta try and drown us! It obviously has some unchecked baggage about us tryin’ ta steal it when it was a small, helpless ralts!”

“I don’t understand!” Max said, frustrated at how much sense they were making. “Since when have you guys ever cared about apologies before?!”

“We’ve been on quite the journey since we last saw you,” James explained. “And it looks as though you have, as well.”

“All the way out here in Unova?” Jessie added, sounding impressed.

“Max,” Juniper interrupted, feeling a touch uncomfortable at the spectacle. “Who are these people?”

The boy sighed in response, more tired at this point than anything.

“Professor, it’s such a long story,” He said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose as he adjusted his glasses. “To be honest, they seem way different from the people I used to know back in the day.”

“Is what they’re saying making sense?”

“In most regards? No,” he began. “In the ones I’m invested in? Unfortunately, yes.”

“Enough to necessitate hearing them out?”

The former Rockets sat there, appearing more timid than they ever had, shooting Max a look. What they were trying to communicate was, we understand why you might feel apprehensive about this, but please try and suspend your disbelief for now. Whether or not that feeling came across was entirely up in the air. Mostly, Jessie just worried they looked a touch too pitiful.

“Yeah, I suppose I owe it to Gardevoir,” Max responded. “Let them in. But keep an eye on them.”
Juniper turned from her aide back to the quartet. “Fair?”

They blinked, then nodded, smiles finding their way to their faces.

To say the professor was perplexed was an understatement, but she trusted Max and had yet to see his heart lead him astray. Still, there was a feeling of ominous discomfort resting in the pit of her stomach, an instinct she could not put her finger on, a constant itch to keep her hand within reach of a pokéball.

She walked behind the quartet as Max lead them down the hall.

The lab was… well, it was a lab, alright. Cold tile floors, machines beeping and whirring, a technological myriad of years upon years of hard work and research. As they passed by the enclosure and watched the abundance of pokémon running across its open, secure fields, the intrusive thoughts ran wild in their heads. That was the thing that surprised them the most—no matter how much they were over doing wicked things, the thoughts that kept them surviving on the streets still lingered, unchanging.

Realistically speaking, it made sense—when you live a certain way for so long, it’s hard to reprogram your brain to stop thinking that way. They wondered if that voice had always been there in their heads—and when had each of them started listening to it? It was a small shock, was all. That you don’t just decide to be good, one day. It’s a long, long staircase with many steps, and no elevator in sight.

_The first thought you have, no matter how unkind, is only the truth that the world around you has forced you to believe_, said a figure buried deep in Jessie’s memory, her voice soft and wise and her face blotted out to save the redhead the pain. _The second thought, Jessica, is what you actually believe in your heart._

She blinked the memory away as she continued down the alabaster halls.

Tiles on their knees weren’t the most pleasant, but it was a small price to pay, all things considered. Max’s gardevoir watched them kneeling there, its expression calmer than it had previously been but still laced with simmering anger. They no longer feared it—the thought of it attacking them again was unheard of unless they did something deserving of it—but they still felt the need to pick their words as carefully as they possibly could.

“Gardevoir,” Jessie began. “We used to do some pretty bad things. To people and pokémon alike. What’s worse, we used to absolutely thrive in those wretched deeds. You wouldn’t have found anyone happier to be wicked than us.”

“I dunno if it’s somet’in’ dat shows,” Meowth added. “But we been tryin’ our best to change dat.”

It regarded them, eyes narrowed, expression unmoved. Looking up at the pokémon, they felt absolutely minuscule.

“It wasn’t wrong of you to snap at us like that,” Jessie said. “Honestly, I would’ve done the same exact thing in your position.”

Slowly, Gardevoir’s eyes lost their tenseness, and it tilted its head, waiting almost eagerly on their words.

“We’re sorry for the things we did when you were a small, sick, defenseless ralts,” James told it. “I hope… you can find solace in the fact that we haven’t done that to another living creature in a long,
Wobbuffet was on the end of the line-up, whispering his name quietly when he was sure the others had finished.

*We promise.* He said to it.

Gardevoir continued to peer into them, saying nothing, willing its empathy to move past the barrier of revenge clouding its vision. Somewhere inside, it found its center, and the four of them watched as it closed its eyes and nodded sagely at them.

Before they were able to thank the pokémon for its change of heart, Max interrupted, his voice shaking slightly as he spoke.

“Gardevoir, I’m sorry too,” he told his friend. “I was so eager to get back here after what happened, I didn’t even try to ask you how you felt or what was going through your head…”

Grown up or not, Max’s heart still had moments where it remained soft and empathetic, frustrated with the weight of his own emotions. Everyone there could see that there were tears threatening his eyes and tightening his throat as he talked.

“I just got mad at you—I was only thinking about myself and what I wanted, and I—”

Gracefully, Gardevoir turned so that its whole body was facing him. Eyes tender and understanding, Max watched as it brought one hand to his shoulder and another to his cheek, brushing away one of the freshly-fallen tears resting there. The pokémon’s touch calmed him, he felt his breathing realign almost instantly, and when it spoke to him, he had no problem at all understanding the reassurance its voice carried.

“Allright,” He said, quietly, then inhaled deeply. “Alright. But still. Next time, I’ll ask you why instead of just getting upset, okay?”

The pokémon nodded, a sympathetic smile painted on its face. Removing his glasses and wiping at his eyes, Max composed himself and turned to the former Rockets, eager to move on from the momentary slew of emotions.

“So,” he said. “Team Rocket.”

Juniper’s entire body locked up when she heard him say the words so casually, so lacking in weight. Team Rocket. *Team Rocket.* Her heart sunk, into some deep recess of her being that she couldn’t identify. Sheer, object horror—and the discomfort of being trapped. What on *earth* was going on? Who had she let into her home?

“What other reason did you come here?” Max said, nonchalantly as ever, like there weren’t global terrorists standing three feet away from him, making their way to the couch he ate breakfast on.

“Whaddya mean, kid?” Meowth inquired.

“You really think I’m gonna believe that you just happened to see me in Unova, and followed me in order to repay an old debt?”

“Uh…” James started. “Yes, maybe a tad.”

He raised an eyebrow, not buying it. “Did you guys get stupider in your old age?”
Jessie and James both immediately turned into human fireballs. Max could practically hear the flames crackling and hissing as they flung off the two. A tirade was definitely about to happen at the comment, but the only word they could get out was a simultaneous “OLD?!” before Meowth and Wobbuffet dove across the divide to cover their Dumb Human Mouths.

“What dey MEAN is…” Meowth said while James struggled and clawed at the cat’s paws. “Dere’s a lot more to it dan just, one day we just up ‘n’ decided we was gonna be good guys.”

James managed to break free as soon as the sentence left Meowth, but thankfully his demeanor had calmed in the ten seconds it took him to get there.

“That’s right!” He affirmed, and from beside him, Jessie managed to jerk away from her pokémon, as well. “We were just as rotten as ever for quite a while longer! But time does have a way of making fools of us all.”

“Surely you can understand that much, lab twerp,” Jessie added. “You’re a long way from the Hoenn League.”

Max looked away, his words coming out in a quiet mutter that the former Rockets could barely make out.

“I came in top sixteen in the Hoenn league, so…”

“And we watched a beautifully symbolic sunrise with a twerp in a dorky hat who came in top eight.” James retorted.

Meowth stared at him, mouth pulled open in a half amazed, half disturbed expression. “It concoins me a great deal dat ya just knew dat number off da toppa ya head.”

“What?” He responded. “We’re you rooting for him at all those leagues, too?”

“Not to that extent!” Jessie said, only lying a little.

“Y’know how most people, they lose their point, and describe it like their train of thought just collided with a mountain?” Max interjected. “I think your train just kinda speeds off the rails and keeps rolling down a hill. And every time you think it’s gonna stop, it finds a way to keep going, even though it’s literally on fire.”

“Kid,” Meowth said, exhausted. “Ya poiceptiveness is hittin’ a little too close ta home, and I’m gonna need ya t’ roll it back a smidge.”

“Wobba.”

“Anyways.” Jessie said.

“Right,” Max affirmed. “Anyways.”

“What we mean to say is,” She continued. “If it’s believable that you’re all the way out here in Unova, working under the widely respected professor Juniper, when the last time we saw you, you were a tiny little twerp in ridiculously short pants…”

“Is it really so hard to believe that we’ve been to many new places, both morally and physically, as well?”

“S’pose not. And maybe I’m a little curious…” Max responded. “But can we save catching up for
later? No offense, but I’m hardly caught up with my life right now.”

“She should hang around, or…” Jessie inquired, suddenly a little embarrassed.

“Yes,” Juniper said without Max’s input, firmly. “But in our sights.”

There was something in her voice beyond suspicion, and it felt like an icicle piercing the quartet’s collective heart. Juniper didn’t seem to remember them—it made sense, they only interacted once or twice. Yet, the more time passed, the more the threat of her snapping to it began to feel like walls closing in on them entirely.

“Fair.” James muttered, and the other three nodded in agreement.

“You had to have seen the stormcloud, then?”

“The… oh! The stormcloud,” James suddenly phased back into reality, remembering that had been a thing. “Right. We barely had time to take it in before this twerp’s tumultuous teammate sent us toppling.”

Max shot a look at the professor, as if reading her expression for something without words. She nodded to him once before speaking.

“You can tell them. It’s gone, after all.”

The boy’s expression seemed to falter a bit at the statement, but he pressed on regardless, eager to recount the events, hoping the action would remedy the feeling of not getting to experience them. As he spoke, he leaned forward in his chair, flitting back and forth through static effigies as they blinked on and off of the computer screen in front of them all.

“Well… we only have fuzzy images of what made that thundercloud…” He explained. “But given events that have happened prior, and analytics of the pokémon’s cry… we’re pretty sure it was Zekrom.”

“Zekrom…”? Jessie echoed.

“Isn’t that a legendary pokémon?” James added.

Juniper nodded. “It wouldn’t be the first time it’s been sighted down in Unova. But this is the second time it’s vexed Nuvema Town in a week.”

Her words left a bitter taste in the former Rockets’ mouths, the same thought chiming in succession through all their heads: wait. We’ve been here for exactly a week.

“It’s driving me crazy!” Max suddenly shouted, interrupting their collective anxiety.

“How come?” Jessie asked. “Of all people, I figure a twerp like you would want to see a legendary the most?”

“That’s just it!” He told her. “By some awful coincidence, it only drops by when I’m far away! The one day I get to step away from my duties here and check out the battle club in the town over, it goes for my home, and—”

He stopped, taking a moment to compose himself. The rest of the room waited quietly, patiently, before he continued.
“I feel like the universe is testing me,” Max said. “It’s not just that I want to see it. I’m frustrated that even in everything I’ve learned about Unova and its pokémon, I can’t make sense of Zekrom’s actions.”

He balled his fists from where they were resting on his thighs, looking down at nothing in particular. The quartet leaned in, becoming drawn into the vortex of the mystery themselves.

“It shows up here in short intervals, rarely doing anything other than hovering around the lab,” The boy explained. “Striking with lightning, but never enough to do damage. Does it want our attention? Does it want a challenge? What if it’s in some kind of pain, what if it needs our help?”

“Slow down, kid,” Meowth interrupted. “I met a few legendaries, and if you was friends with the Twoip, yous had to have, too. Sometimes dere ain’t no rhyme or reason to why dey do what dey do. Ya have to know dat?”

“Yes…” Max said, his voice crescendoing into the slightly condescending tone he used when he was about to school someone. “But that sort of fickle behaviour is way more common in mythicals than it is in legendaries. Legendaries rarely engage humans like this without meaning…”

“Uh.” was all Meowth could offer in response.

Max was staring directly at his confused expression, his voice flat. “Don’t tell me you don’t know the difference.”

“In any case, Max…” Juniper butted in, and the boy brought his eyes to hers. “A roadblock doesn’t definitively mean a failure! Even if it does, a failure doesn’t mean a lack of growth.”

The professor pushed herself from the wall of computers, her chair emitting a quiet roll as it drifted backwards. Standing, she continued to speak.

“Why don’t you relax, clear your head, catch up with your…?” she paused. “... friends, and try to tackle it again tomorrow?”

It wasn’t really a question—if Max wasn’t working, he wasn’t exactly content, and Juniper knew that better than anyone there. She saw his expression prickle at the question, and knew that much about him wasn’t changing any time soon. Despite what his instincts told him, Max had recently learned to find value in the opinions and wisdom of others, rather than follow his impulse to shut them down when they didn’t make logical sense in his head.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“That’s… pretty unbelievable, and yet here I am, believing it.”

“Well then! Sell us yours! What are you doing away from the tropical countryside, brainy twerp?”

The former Rockets were eyeing Max with an expression that could only really be described as ravenous, and he adjusted his glasses nervously, struck with the sudden realization that not only had he never told the story before, he had absolutely no idea where to begin.

“I suppose my story starts… in the small gap after I…” his sentence stuttered, a bit. “... left the Hoenn League.”

You mean after you lost, Meowth wanted to quip, but for once, he wisely bit his tongue.
“Let me guess!” James offered, noticing the sudden timidness in Max’s usually confident front. “You did some soul searching?”

“Ugh, I can’t hide it,” The boy responded. “Yeah, okay, I took the loss worse than I thought I would. I guess May got tired of me sulking so loudly around her all week, cause she shelled out a ridiculous amount of contest winnings to buy us a vacation in Alola.”

“Alola?!” they all said in unison, and Jessie carried on the train of thought with stars swimming in her eyes.

“Oh, there’s a wave of nostalgic bliss I could ride until I drowned in it!” She clasped her hands together, voice lilted in joy. “The sun, the sands, the sea!”

“Your sister must adore you.” James added, sounding similarly smitten.

“Yeah, it was…” Max continued. “ Weirdly nice of her. So we were in Alola, and…”

The second Max had stepped off the boat, he was shaken with the adamant, unwavering feeling that he had not truly been home until that very moment.

The boy never disliked Hoenn. In fact, he adored it—humble countrysides, air that could be both crisp and enveloping, lush trees that lined both spacious beaches and darkened forests. Oceans as far as the eye could see, a brilliant blend, a painter’s mixed media where land and sea embraced, lovingly. He longed for adventure, but the soil beneath his feet back home felt just as wonderful as it would have anywhere.

Or so he thought.

Alola stirred things in his heart he was near incapable of understanding. The Alolan sun shone so much brighter, yet its rays did not scald him like the rays of home often did. The sands were whiter, softer, kinder to his bare feet. The waves on its shores seemed to sing a different key, whispering quiet ballads of the things they had seen. In Akala’s towering volcano he saw a more rigid Chimney, in Hau’oli’s bustling shopping districts and gentle seafront he saw a more lively Lilycove.

The people were what got him most. Not a single smile went faked in the tropical paradise. The citizens smiled, the pokémon smiled, the universe smiled. He never felt an outsider, never felt like the word ‘tourist’ was painted all over him like an angry red sign.

The familiarity of home, undaunting—but the adventure of a new world that was open and huge and aching to be explored. He wondered if this was what all people who traveled there felt like, grinning pilgrims wandering across Alola with the sun on their skin.

It was hard for Max to complain—even when May was darting back and forth between sections at the clothes shops, indecisive as ever, completely oblivious to the fact that her brother could really care less. After her fifth food truck stop, he’d learned that peace could be found if he simply shut his eyes and let the sound of waves take him away. May paid, after all—even if he could find it in himself to be annoyed with her, it wouldn’t have entirely been fair.

May was ordering everything in the Malasada Shop, presently. Her second run through the Hoenn Contest Circuit had left her pockets lined with indefinite hubris, and Max knew she was about thirteen donuts away from her wax wings melting off and sending her crashing down into Melemele’s vast sea. The sea that he couldn’t drift off to the sound of right now, because they were inside a bakery, blocked off from nature. It was stifling, to say the least, so the boy let his eyes crawl out the window and to the open skies.
A sudden blur of ebony moved in his peripheral, and he quickly darted his gaze down to the bushel of grass directly outside the shop. There, a wingull sat defensively with its feathers ruffled beyond repair, trying to look bigger than it was. Staring it down was a rattata—probably?—it didn’t look like any rattata Max had ever seen before, but he was also struck with the irrefutable knowledge that it couldn’t possibly be anything else.

It got on all fours and hissed wildly at the wingull, who Max then noticed had a tattered bit of malasada hanging from its beak. He was suddenly very acutely aware that he was about to witness an entirely natural pokémon battle—devoid of human interference, if he stayed low—and his feet practically moved on their own.

He barely cast a glance back at the doors as he rushed out of them, dropping down to a crouch a fair distance away from the dispute, turning down the volume on his pokédex to an absolute low as he aimed it squarely at the jet black rattata. The knowledge it fed him only made his heart burn with more exuberant curiosity—“Alolan form”? How many more Alolan variances existed? How many more existed in regions far from Alola?

Max was so completely immersed in the changing of his personal axis that he almost lost his focus on the battle in front of him. The rattata lunged forward, emitting another wild hiss as it sunk its fangs into the other pokémon’s wing. In response, the wingull took flight and shook it off violently, using the opening as the rattata struggled to get back to its feet to slam a Wing Attack into its shot defenses.

The boy could see the disadvantage clearly as he spectated—with the food in its mouth, Wingull couldn’t use some of its best attacks properly. A Water Gun or a Supersonic could’ve easily changed the tides of this battle, but if it were to drop its food there was a chance the rattata could play dirty and make off with it. As it was right now, the wingull couldn’t even get a Growl off on its opponent.

True to his prediction, Rattata was able to jump back to its feet, this time positioning itself on its hind legs and leaping for the airborne pokémon. With all the momentum it could muster, the rattata shrieked out its name in defiance and slammed an open palm into the wingull—hard. The wingull reeled back, losing its grasp on the tepid air. Before it had any time to recover, Rattata hit it with another, kicking off the impact and flipping backwards onto the ground, its balance shaking as it landed.

The wingull fell back, flipping in midair and nosediving out of the sky, and the rattata took another shaky jump to snatch the precious relic of sugar and dough out of the air as it toppled down. Without even hesitating, the winning pokémon began to nibble the donut down into crumbs.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Max slowly made his way out of the bushes, feet darting towards the strange pokémon and smile absolutely bursting with enthusiasm for its win. As he approached, the rattata dropped to all fours, its eyes narrowing and its razor teeth exposed, clearly ready for another fight if need be. Max threw his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

“I don’t wanna fight, rattata, don’t worry!” He said, voice much louder than he was hoping it’d be. “I was watching that battle! You were so cool!”

The pokémon’s stance became curious, lost its edge. Max continued.

“What was that move you used to finish it off?!” He practically beamed. “It looked really strong! Can you use it on me?!”

Rattata, who even the kindhearted, nature-loving people of Alola tended to view as a pest, was suddenly overtaken with emotion at the idea of a human stranger offering it praise. Its confusion and
apprehension quickly melted away and revealed instead an eagerness to please this Nice Human. Naturally, then, the pokémon lunged towards Max with an angry, blackened hand.

“Max!” May shouted, running to the commotion with a shopping bag full of malasada. “Really, Max?! Really?!”

Her brother was lying practically comatose next to a very proud-looking rattata, eyes swimming and limbs pretty much paralyzed in shock from the impact. Despite the circumstances, the smile on his face was bright as ever as he looked towards the azure sky with unfocused vision.

“Honestly, Max…” May sighed, dropping to her knees and cradling his torso in her arms. “Can you go like five minutes without inviting a pokémon to beat you up?”

“Wow…” was all Max uttered in the daze, following it up with “I don’t know what move that was… but it was really strong… I’m so honoured…!”

May rolled her eyes. Whatever makes him happy, I guess.

A quiet laugh in the distance behind them pulled her out of her thoughts, and the voice that came after it set the both of them at indescribable ease. Playful wisdom—that was the only way to describe the way the man who rounded the corner then seemed to carry himself. Hands dug in his pockets, he made his way over to the scene, kneeling down next to the rattata.

“That attack was called Assurance,” he explained, not facing the kids as he spoke to them. “It tends to do better if you’ve taken a hit already. Good thinking for this guy to use it as a counterattack!”

From his lab coat, he produced an oran berry, and placed it on the ground as he looked at the pokémon.

“You pack quite the punch, for a little one!” He told it. “Keep getting stronger, yeah?”

The rattata tilted its head, and the man nodded at it once more. Words unspoken but somehow understood, it picked the berry up between its fangs and scurried off, content.

The siblings stayed in their positions, watching then as he scooted over to the wingull, cradling it, and placed another berry at the tip of its long beak. The rich smell of it swayed the pokémon awake, and it slowly began to nibble. May and Max looked onward, mystified, as the pokémon’s munching became more ravenous and its strength sputtered back in short bursts. As it finished, it jumped in the air, fluffing up its feathers and flying to a perch on its caretaker’s outstretched arm.

“There you go!” He said. “Take the loss gracefully, alright? Come back twice as powerful, next time!”

Wingull chirped its name joyously, easily a promise to take the words to heart. Quickly as it had come, the three of them watched as it flew off into the vast, cloudless sky.

“Hey, uh…” May said, willing the peaceful silence to be broken. “Are we... making a scene at all?”

“Not at all,” The stranger said. “The streets of Alola have seen far busier events, I’m sure!”

She sighed in relief at the sound of those words.

“Sorry, but…” Max finally spoke. “Who are you?”

“Ha! Where are my manners?” The man responded. “Name’s Kukui. I’m Alola’s resident
Pokémon Professor.”

*The sound of it made Max’s heart lift. A Pokémon Professor I haven’t even heard of…?*

“And what are your names?”

“Oh! I’m May.”

“My name is Max… wow, it’s an honour to meet a Pokémon Professor, Mr. Kukui!”

He smiled, one eye closed, hand scratching the back of his head somewhat sheepishly. His laughter was contagious, his kind vibes absolutely permeating, and the two of them felt positively light as they finally got up off the ground to address him.

“May, Max…” he began. “In all honesty, I couldn’t help come over here because the smile you wore as you took that Assurance made me nostalgic for my youth.”

Max’s eyes held galaxies within them. “Really?!”

Kukui nodded, his words confident and proud. “You didn’t flinch for a second! And for someone so young!”

“Pff, it’s not that strange,” May was almost brushing him off. “Max has always been like that, ever since he was a little kid.”

“Well yeah,” Max retorted, sarcastically. “Can you think of a better way to get to know a pokémon’s strength?”

Kukui stood there, eyes on this boy, flowers blooming from somewhere inside of him. He was having trouble looking at Max and seeing Max, and it made him feel a twinge of guilt—the boy’s eyes burned with the same passionate curiosity that his own once had, his voice carried sentiment that Kukui himself had tried fiercely to hold onto no matter how many years passed. If there was such a thing as a fateful encounter, the professor was sure this was one, a beautiful moment he willed himself to keep in his memory.

Pride. Sheer, complete pride. Sudden, and beautiful, and all-encompassing.

“Max…” he said, aloud. “A name that hits you fast and hard, like a Quick Attack.”

The boy felt his cheeks gain colour, and he smiled, unsure of what to say in response.

“No matter where you go and what you see…” Kukui began. “Keep that Flare Blitz burning, you hear?”

“Uh… o-okay!” Max affirmed, caught off guard, still, at the sudden praise from someone so important. “I will!”

The professor began to walk away, opposite of the direction he came, but not before turning over his shoulder to address the boy one final time.

“The world would be a much more exciting place if it saw trainers the likes of you,” Kukui said, and then turned back towards the shimmering sea. “I hope our paths cross again some Sunny Day.”

He strolled off, and in his silhouette against the breathing waves, Max saw shoulders that were broad and carried worlds upon them, pointed downwards in a contagious relaxation that made the boy forget he had been hit with a full-force attack mere moments ago.
“That was weird.” May said far too nonchalantly, and Max adjusted his glasses almost incredulously, wondering if something had happened to him, wondering if he was seeing Alola through a completely different window than everyone around him. His words were lost somewhere inside of him, where he stood unable to shake the feeling of quiet kismet that hung over his heart.

“Max?”

May’s voice was having trouble reaching him, where he was. His eyes stayed fixed on Kukui’s back as the professor disappeared from sight.

All Max could hear was the waves.

“When I got to my hotel that night, I still couldn’t shake the feeling that something about that simple meeting was meant to be significant.”

Max’s eyes were tender as he spoke, and it was near impossible for the quartet to not be hanging on his every word.

“That night, I stayed up until the sun rose, just reading up on Kukui and all the research that’d been attributed to him over the years,” he explained. “I never thought my fascination towards pokémon moves was anything out of the ordinary! But as it turns out, that’s what Professor Kukui’s dedicated his entire life to. Just like me, he loved experiencing them firsthand… considered it one of his greatest strengths.

“That’s when I decided,” Max said, suddenly looking more intense. “Being a trainer had always been my dream. Traveling, collecting badges, taking on leagues… I knew that some people who had heard me talk that dream up were probably going to tease me for suddenly changing over one small event, but…”

The boy moved his gaze—from his tightened fists as they rested there, to the former enemies staring intently at him, eyes wide.

“Professor Kukui’s research completely entranced me,” He told them. “All I’ve cared about from that point on is learning to see the world through his eyes.

“I was going to find Alola again, some day. Not as a tourist trying to forget a rough loss, but as a trainer adept in knowledge of the pokémon world. I was going to march right up to Kukui’s door and ask to be his aide, to study under him.”

“We’re following you so far…” James mentioned, when he was sure there was a break in the heartfelt monologue. “But there appears to be a problem…”

“Is it just me, or are ya a few regions off?”

“Observant of you,” Max deadpanned. “I wasn’t going to just roll up to his lab and ask!”

“…and why not?” Jessie inquired.

“How many times do you think a professor as talented as Kukui gets requests like that? I have to pad my resume, obviously!” Max told them, determination lacing his every word. “Professor Birch is a friend of the family, so I studied under him for a pretty long time. He got me in contact with Juniper, and here I am, trying to expand my horizons. I need to travel to as many places as I possibly can and learn as much as I possibly can! I need to dazzle Kukui!
“It’s not enough to just want a dream,” The boy said, voice quieter, now. “You have to work for it, too.”

Jessie’s eyes were closed, deep in thought, soaking in what Max was saying as he said it. There was a conviction to his words she deeply admired, and it ran wild in conflict with the pang of jealousy she felt every time she saw a young, bright eyed child lucky enough to have not been turned hard and disillusioned by the world.

When she opened her eyes, however, she knew she wouldn’t find visible sympathy towards those feelings in her team. All three of the boys were sitting there with clenched fists, tears streaming down their faces, moved entirely by Max’s impassioned speech.

“Ya got some real grit, kid!” Meowth practically shouted, choked up. “Ya toined out wondahful!”

The female member of the group rolled her eyes. “Sorry about them.”

“No, you know what?” Max responded. “This feels great! I never got to tell anyone that story before. I get why Ash is always going on about his dreams, now!”

Wobbuffet nodded at the boy, through his own tears, whimpering his name in affirmation. Jessie wanted to roll her eyes again at the cheesiness of the whole situation, but she swallowed her instincts and turned the petty gesture into a bemused grin, instead. Max took a deep breath, and when he exhaled, it seemed that the stress of the morning left alongside it.

“Anyways…” He said, changing the subject. “Have you guys really made a living off battling…? Last time we met you kinda sucked at that.”

“Would it kill you to drop a ‘no offense’ in front of that?” Jessie chided.

“Haha! Nah. Full offense.”

“Why, you—!”

“I mean!” He interrupted her. “Meowth and Wobbuffet are all you have? Jessie, do you even know how to battle with a wobbuffet?”

“What do you mean?” She said, sounding offended. “He battles just fine!”

Meowth chuckled, his mouth pulled into a fanged grin. “Nah, she’s totally clueless. Jess doesn’t undahstand da physical-special split.”

“Because every time you lot try and explain it you stop speaking proper language about halfway through!”

“Low blow, brah!” Meowth retorted. “I’m very prouda my ability ta speak all proper-like!”

“It’s not that complicated, Jess.” James added.

“H’s right, you know,” Max said, eager to be expository. “All pokémon moves are categorized as either physical or special.”

Jessie nodded, following. “Yeah, I got that much.”

“Physical moves are like Mega Punches, Headbutts, anything that makes contact!” The boy explained. “Special moves have to do with more unique abilities to a pokémon. Stuff like Flamethrowers, Water Guns, Thunderbolts. There are weird exceptions, like Earthquake being
physical for some reason? But for the most part it’s pretty straightforward…”

The redhead blinked, oddly present during the explanation. “Well, that’s surprisingly easy logic to follow.”

Max brightened, happy to have educated where others could not. “Then you’re fine! Just use Mirror Coat for special attacks, and Counter for physical ones!”

“Eh…” Jessie made a noise, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. “...how do I remember which is which?”

“It’s easy! You just…” Max suddenly paused, his train of thought leaving him. “You just, uh…”

She peered into him, hoping for an equally coherent answer.

“...you just… kinda… learn?”

Jessie sighed and hung her head, and James mirrored the action, speaking up.

“It’s a hopeless endeavor, twerp,” he said. “She never remembers when it really matters.”

Jessie shot him a look that told him he was pushing it, but the fact of the matter was that he wasn’t wrong. It wasn’t a debate that needed to happen, because it wasn’t a fault, and Jessie always ended it with the same sentence—

“I don’t need to remember,” she said, now and so many times before. “My wobbuffet is self-sufficient! He knows which attacks to use himself and he has no problem using them.”

“That’s… really cool, actually,” Max leaned down to the eye level of the pokémon in question, talking directly to him. “You’re an obedient one, huh?”

Jessie literally snorted at the comment, completely caught off guard at the insinuation. Wobbuffet just saluted happily at the praise, expression same as always.

“Still…” Max continued. “Impressive that you’ve been able to win more battles than not with what little pokémon you have.”

“Well…” James began. “We do have another. But as far as battles go, it seems to prefer its trainer.”

“What kinda pokémon is it?” Max asked, and then, eyes narrowed: “Did you guys steal it?”

“Did ya listen ta anything we said?!” Meowth said, incredulously. “We ain’t stealin’ no more!”

“It was given to us by a colleague of the Twerp,” James told him. “And we’re going to take it home to him when we reach Pallet.”

“A pokémon of Ash’s?!” He switched back to excitement almost instantly. “Show me!”

The four of them shared a look, then a nod, and James went digging around in his bag, producing the pokéball and tossing it gently. Greninja sparkled into form, fingers pressed firmly into the sigil it was so fond of. Its eyes came into focus slowly, morphing from horizontal lines to rounded pupils, and it fluidly took in its surroundings, quietly making sense of them.

Greninja sensed no hostility in the situation. Nevertheless, it still hadn’t gotten accustomed to the individuals it was traveling with. Casually, the pokémon broke its sigil and crossed its arms, and Max was absolutely glimmering with enthusiasm as he stood up and darted around the pokémon,
observing it from all sides.

“Woah!” He beamed. “That’s a greninja!”

Then, after a slight pause, his voice shot up an octave.

“Wait. WAIT.” Max said, eyes growing wider. “Is this… is this the greninja that Ash used AT THE
KALOS LEAGUE?!?”

“Da one and only.” Meowth affirmed.

Greninja stirred, slightly, not expecting to hear its most treasured partner’s name from a total stranger. It had known, logically, that there were people in the world who had seen those battles, but to be up close to one…

Max stood at eye level with the pokémon, grin insurmountable as he gently took its hands in his own, voice carrying with it nothing but respect and admiration.

“It’s so cool to meet you, Greninja! I used to travel with your trainer!” He said. “I watched you on
T.V. when you were competing at the League finals! You really held your own against Alain’s mega charizard! And that transformation you and Ash do together—what is that?! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

Greninja was looking a little overwhelmed in the face of all the flattery, and Meowth was sure the pokémon would have been blushing, had its tongue not been concealing its cheeks. Max seemed to pick up on this too, letting go of the pokémon’s webbed hands and stepping back, a little embarrassed himself.

“Ah, I’m sorry! I’m just so starstruck by this,” Max told it. “You like battles, right? Can I ask for one? I know Ash isn’t here, and I know my gardevoir is no mega charizard, but you have to feel a little eager to stretch your legs, right?”

There was a quiet moment, where Greninja stood regarding the boy as he smiled up at it, hands clasped together. It sensed nothing unkind in Max—and he did have a point. To say Greninja wasn’t thrilled about being under the former Rockets’ companionship would have been the understatement of the century—but the pokémon was feeling cramped, and stifled, and only a little bit depressed at the lack of battles it had seen in recent months.

Battling under Jessie or James was a concept it didn’t want to consider. Battling by its own accord, however, sounded like an absolute dream, only short of battling alongside its dearest master. It missed the feeling of the fight more than anything, all things considered.

Breaking from its thoughts, Greninja met Max’s gaze and gave him a firm nod, croaking a bit of its name in a deep and certain voice.

“Yes!” Max cheered, excitement shooting back upwards. “Thank you, Greninja! I can’t wait to see what you’re like battling in person!”

“There’s no promises!” Jessie said as Max was tossing his lab coat off, grabbing a pokéball out of its pocket. “We do have to bring it back to the Twerp in one piece.”

“No promises!” He shouted, carefree as ever, running out the nearby door with smirk in tact.

“Well,” James said as Max disappeared into the back yard. “Growing up certainly didn’t impede his excitable enthusiasm.”
Juniper took the end of their conversation as a sign to get to know their guests herself, rolling her chair back and walking over to the quartet. As she spoke, her eyes stayed on the glass windows that made up the western wall of the lab. Beyond it, Gardevoir and Greninja took no time at all to become fierce in the tides of battle, and Max looked as if he were glowing.

“He’s grown in better ways,” Juniper said. “Bit of a know-it-all when he got here…”

“Ya don’t have to tell us dat much.”

“Now, though…” She continued. “Well, it’s been interesting to watch him learn to be excited about things he doesn’t know. Before, it almost seemed like he resented them.”

A gentle quiet came over the group. All of them sat watching the battle, for a while, its details blocked out by the noise barrier, a silent film taking shape before their very eyes.

Juniper waited. She waited until the silence permeated each one of them, waited until she was certain that what she was about to say could not go ignored. Waited until her words were fully charged, dark and strong and unshakable.

“I hope you know the scope of the things you have done, Team Rocket.”

None of them were looking at her, their eyes fixed on the tussle outside. There was an indescribable dread hanging over the group once the words hit the air, and it both started and ended at Juniper’s absolute brazenness. She waited. She backed them into a corner, where they could not escape. She held them accountable.

It was something they had expected all along, but were surprised to have not received until that moment. Fearfully, mechanically, they all turned around to face her, and her eyes were full of flames, mouth pressed into a firm line.

Juniper seemed to be waiting for something, and James could practically feel the gathered nerves of everyone in the room. It was absolutely maddening, and it bloomed rafflesias in the center of his aching chest. The tone she wore, the look on her face, everything screamed at him to run—instead, he swallowed hard, steadying his breathing, trying to employ calm—

“U-uh—well, yes—we do know that we’ve done some pretty bad things,” his voice shook. “Which is why we’re—”

Juniper was persistent. She did not let him finish.


Their words vanished, their courage snuffed out. She did not take her eyes off them. Under his breath, James quietly mimed the word—lives.

“I witnessed your destruction firsthand. Your organization’s name was spoken in hushed whispers across the country. For years, your influence left Unova in fear.”

“Our organization is nothing, anymore,” Jessie retorted, far less confident than she wanted to sound. “It’s gone.”

“Gone,” The professor echoed. “And still so undeniably, crushingly present in the disquieted hearts of this region’s citizens.”
James blinked his eyes back open, and his hands were far away when he looked down at them, growing farther as he felt his blood thinning. He willed there to be words inside of him, but they did not come, and he was not sure, in that moment, who he even was. He envisioned himself existing far above his body, but the team did not bring any attention to this fact—so it was clear to him that it was a trick of his mind—same as ever.

Meowth was the one who kept the words he wanted to say within. Thankfully, the cat was able to speak freely, unhindered by anxiety.

“Haven’t ya considered we’ve guilted ourselves enough over dese actions?” He said, standing his ground despite everything. “Haven’t ya considered da amount of pain t’ree people would have ta experience in order ta do t’ings so vile, so wicked?”

“Pain is inevitable,” Juniper said, instantly, unflinching. “Pain is a test on the souls of the living, a trial they must overcome, a cycle they must break.”

Their teeth were clenched so tightly, the quartet felt they would shatter. Balled fists, white knuckles. They could not bring themselves to meet her gaze again as she spoke.

“You failed.”

Thunder exploded around them, shaking the walls, sending loose papers cascading onto the linoleum. Any light that had been filtering in through the windows vanished in an instant. It wasn’t until the former Rockets locked onto Juniper’s awed, near-paralyzed expression that they realize the atmosphere was in fact real, and not a collective hallucination in the fear of the moment.

The interior reverberated once more after a sickly roar, and Juniper dropped her qualms, immediately making a beeline for the door, practically leaping over the obstacles that separated her from it. Outside, past the windows, the former Rockets saw Max, Gardevoir, and Greninja—their heads all turned upward and agape with shock.

The quartet swallowed their fright. They ran after.

Outside, the sky above was a churning, unnatural abyss. Greninja and Gardevoir both had jumped fiercely in front of Max, shielding him from the noxious cloud cover and the threat housed within it. The blackness continued to swim with every thunderclap that it produced, sending tremors across the town and into the hearts of everyone below it. After an agonizing moment, the source revealed itself—an ebony dragon, immeasurable in size, tail lit in an ethereal blue glow, eyes dyed blood red and locked on the humans below, nothing but durant beneath its feet.

“Is… is that…” Jessie whispered, and there was no way Max could have heard her, but his words still answered.

“Zekrom…” he said as wind whipped fiercely around him.

The pokémon thundered out another petrifying roar, electricity making Max’s hair stand on end with every beat and breath of it. He closed his eyes, then opened them. The red of Zekrom’s gaze was one of the most penetrating, most terrifying things he had ever encountered, and his legs wobbled fiercely as he took a single step forward. A part of him wanted to stay alive, to see another day. It was outclassed by the part of him who feared for the pokémon’s life, as well.

“Zekrom, please!” The boy shouted, and his voice felt so small when up against such an otherworldly force. “You have to tell us why you’ve shown up here! If you need something, we want to help you! But there’s no way we can know if you don’t show us!”
It screamed again, and thunder crashed, and Max shielded his ears with his hands, eyes shut tight, fearing his entire body might break in two.

Its cry echoed across the sky, and the former Rockets noticed that the beast seemed to be... searching for something? Its confident, benumbing provocation lingered, but as they squinted and peered into its scarlet eyes, they saw something far more seeking and curious, devoid of the malice its tone carried.

Then, at once, its head snapped towards them and the flaming red of its sight glared daggers into the quartet. They could feel the bullet holes on their soul, the cracks in their defenses. There was nothing separating them from it. Nothing separating them from recompense at its hands.

Piercing. Absolutely **piercing**.

Max, Juniper, Gardevoir, and Greninja noticed it too. That the pokémon could not take its eyes off the gang. Juniper was the first to move, taking a wide step back from them as she registered what was about to happen. Greninja and Gardevoir followed. Max stood there, his view darting back and forth between the beast and the quartet, heart stuck in a greyed swamp that was murky and suffocating and hellish to navigate.

“Meowth, anything?!” James yelped, and the cat shook his head, terrified.

“I can’t undahstand its dialect!” He responded. “I can barely undahstand its *tone*!”

Another echoing roar, deep and merciless and with its eyes still ripping their souls into ugly shreds. All of them were struck at once with the realization that the legendary monstrosity fully intended to kill them where they stood. Zekrom’s presence and voice shook the open air, filling it with static, blackening the world around them. In its wake, all they could do was hold onto each other with tears in their tightly-shut eyes, hoping their end would come quick and without pain.

Jessie’s fingers were dug into James’ hair, her face buried in his neck. She could feel him trembling, and strangely enough, the only thought running through her head was that if this was the end, at least she could be by the side of people she loved.

Seconds ticked by, agonizingly, each feeling longer than the last. Fear had ways of teleporting one to a different place, giving them a safe haven to comfortably exist in that is kinder than their present reality. Given these truths, it was no wonder that the former Rockets didn’t notice the sky lightening beyond their shut eyelids, didn’t feel the currents of ominous electricity dissipating quietly from the air, didn’t notice the wind skitter to a gentle halt. It wasn’t until the sudden lack of noise—where there had previously been almost nothing but—set in, that they were able to open their eyes back up and move them, agonizingly, to Zekrom.

The pokémon’s obsidian body was brilliantly ghastly against the sky and its reunited clear blue, and Zekrom’s piercing crimson glare remained. Unchanging, unyielding... yet, when the quartet looked upon it, the fear from before had vanished somewhere, dissolving into nothing alongside the clouds and sparks and thunder.

Deep in the heart of their being, they were simultaneously overcome with a curious feeling—indescribable, absolutely **copious** pride.

And just like that, without saying anything more, Zekrom swished itself around, soaring freely back up into the clouds, its tail blinking out like a fading satellite behind it. Quickly as the encounter had began, it was unremarkably over.
Slowly, Jessie and James sunk to their knees, overwhelmed, refusing to let go of each other. Meowth quietly took a step away from his hiding place behind a still-shaking Wobbuffet, mouth open as he continued staring at the spot where Zekrom was mere seconds ago.

They sat there, dumbstruck, unable to comprehend anything, questions bouncing around their skulls—what had brought the pokemon there? What had attracted it to them? What had saved them from that fatal attraction? These thoughts held no hope for them, of course. It was as Max had initially said—they had no answers.

Juniper’s brow was furrowed in deep thought as she regained her composure and beckoned everyone back inside.

The former Rockets were surprised—**scared**, even—when Juniper invited them to stay another night, with an expression on her face that was largely indecipherable. There was a part of them, collectively, that wanted to decline—half convinced she would turn them over to the authorities while they slept with one eye open. Miraculously, though, the night went by without any such dealings, and though anxiety over the matters kept the quartet awake far into the early hours of the morning, it had gotten to a point where they were just happy to be alive and free despite everything.

Now, they were facing down both her and Max, ready to set off once again and see what that freedom had in store for them. Goodbyes were never easy, but despite the pleasant feeling Zekrom had initially given them when it vanished, there were far too many worries hanging on their guilty minds, and those grievances were making it hard for them to know exactly what to say, and how to say it.

A bow to Gardevoir, thanking it for its understanding. A promise to Max—to put in a good word with Elm, with Rowan, with Oak. Smiles all around, some more genuine than others.

Juniper hung back slightly, and Max had started to notice that there was something about her general aura the last few hours that had unsettled him, just a bit. The things she didn’t say perplexed him, and he so badly wanted to know what was going through her head. It took everything in him to be polite and leave it all be.

Wordlessly, Juniper outstretched her arm, beckoning for a handshake, and James was the one who took the initiative and accepted it, the other three members of the group layering their hands over his and the professor’s, united. She held her gaze with the quartet, looking each one of them down with that same burning sense of justice in her eyes. When she spoke, finally, her words held the same conviction they did prior—

“A roadblock doesn’t mean a failure. But a failure often means a roadblock.”

Max turned slightly to look towards her, a touch confused as to who exactly she was addressing, if anyone. There was a warmness to her voice, and it danced differently with the lawful nature of her words than the talking-to they’d been on the other end of, previously.

“What you do now is up to you. The consequences will remain. You can choose to keep taking them in stride, or to try and justify them in your minds,” she explained. “A leisurely road that ends in a leap off a canyon, posed against a road paved with broken glass and ending with bright, warm light.”
Juniper’s ferocity in holding them accountable for their wrongdoings had awoken something visceral and unpretty in them, the day before. When they began the journey, they convinced themselves that they would take whatever consequences came with the things they had done in their troublous past. That was what they told themselves, at least.

The world the former Rockets had lived in, they had found in their quest for redemption, was soft. Was kind. Few people actually wanted to take revenge on them, after hearing that they had been working to amend their misdeeds. It was something they didn’t want to acknowledge, before—if the universe was so forgiving, why was it so unforgiving to them growing up? As children, when they had done no wrong? Where was the everlasting kindness of humanity then, when they needed it most?

The answer, of course, came back to patience. Karma worked on patience. Good things, a good life came to those who waited. Most importantly, good things came to good people. As they reflected on that moment, where Meowth spoke what they all wanted to say— we only did it because we were hurting immeasurably, how could you tell us we were wrong?! —they realized the paradox in everything: they wanted the world to be unkind to justify the things they had done, and they also wanted it to be soft so that they would not have to suffer any more.

This revelation frustrated them, yes—but it also planted a seed in their hearts, one that whispered to them a sobering, grounding truth: you are ever-changing, ever-learning.

Something about that concept was comforting. They wondered if Juniper’s tone had changed, or if it was them who had began to see her words in a kinder light.

“I’m eager to see where you go from here.” She told them, and they were struck with the realization that they agreed, wholeheartedly.

The quartet were a culmination of specks on the horizon before the professor or her aide said a word in their wake. Max’s wave petered out, and he dropped his raised hand back down to his side, watching the professor do the same. A comfortable silence passed for a moment before the boy spoke to her.

“You’re really not going to tell them what we figured out last night, professor?” He asked, mystified. “About how Zekrom’s consistently been described as appearing before those who show unimaginable strength in their own ideals?”

Juniper kept her eyes on their distant backs as they disappeared into the burning sun on the horizon. In her smile, she carried a wisdom that Max hoped he, too, could attain in the brightened future.

“If that truly is what Zekrom saw in them…” she began, voice undoubtedly certain.

“...I’m confident it’s a truth they’ll come into on their own, some day.”

As the quartet made their way onward, there was not a single cloud hanging in Nuvema’s sky.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Unova. The beautiful bustling region that I....... never played the games for and
slunked through the anime about. Hilariously enough, almost none of the Unova chapters I have planned really center around characters /from/ Unova.

You know what was fun? Getting in the place to write this one. I swear, if there's anything I can hand to this fanfic, it's been getting me emotionally invested in characters I previously thought nothing of. First Iris, then the Lapras Kids, now Max. Max was 100% the traveling companion I cared about least before this chapter, now I'm sitting here pissed off like "WHY CAN'T ASH BE HERE?? HE NEEDS TO BATTLE ASH!!! THEIR STYLES ARE SO DIFFERENT, IT WOULD BE SO GOOD--" and crying a little.

...ANYWAYS. Like I said last chapter, Unova's taking a while and I don't suspect that'll change, because I do have to do extra work on these chapters to make sure I'm confident in writing them. But hopefully that's ok! Who knows, I might surprise myself. I'm kind of a machine when I actually get to writing.

As a reminder, my tumblr url is sonansu, and over there I'm always down to take prompts/talk about DTE/update anyone on my progress! I even have a whole liveblogging tag over there for when I'm writing it. Check it out, if you ever want a cool companion piece to this fic :P

Thank you all for reading and reviewing!! The comments you leave literally keep me going, and I try to respond to all of them! I'm so excited every time I have a new chapter of this story for you guys.

As always, I will do my best!
Butch was getting tired of his cellmate’s yapping.

Unovan jails were the absolute pits. He didn’t know if they were all like this, or if it was just Castelia—but between the lack of a comfortable surface to sit on, the far-too-chatty nature of the rando sharing his space, and the unfortunate reality of being separated from his partner, his patience was wearing thin.

The reality hadn’t really set with him, yet. He was expecting, in all honesty, the world to come crashing down around him as soon as the cell door slammed, but it refused to unearth itself. He was still lost in the moods of his previous life—daring escapes, a boss who favoured him and never hesitated to bail him out, the feeling of being unconquerable. As such, the urge to run and save his skin never hit him, nor Cassidy. Not even when Jenny was putting them in handcuffs, not even when her herdier was snarling at their feet, not even when she was taking names and prints.

It was supposed to hit him any minute now, right? The realization that he was actually in jail, for real? That there was literally no sign of escape? He wondered how Cassidy was faring, if at all. Was she dissociated through their dire circumstances, too? Was she clawing her cell apart in rage, or was she analyzing how best to escape? And if she found a way… would she think twice about busting him out, as well?
Oh, there it was. There was the awful, all-encompassing feeling of dread. It grappled at Butch’s feet and suddenly he was wondering why he wanted this, rather than the feeling of numbness that had permeated everything before it. It was so agonizing that he almost didn’t notice the clang of the cell door opening again, almost didn’t register Jenny’s voice as it beckoned in his general direction.

“Let’s go, Hutch,” she told him. “Someone bailed you and blondie out.”

“My name—” he started, snapping back to reality, and then stopped himself. “Wait, what?”

“Oh your feet.” Jenny ordered, not answering his question before she guided him down the dilapidated halls.

Giovanni…? Was the only thought that kept repeating in Butch’s swimming head. There was no way… right? But who else could it have been? Neither of them had family, nor friends, nor any other connections. They prioritized their work as thieves over all else, leaving almost no room for non-Rocket ties. Team Rocket was gone. So what the hell is going on?

Sitting dejectedly in the waiting area was Cassidy, who looked far too unhappy for someone who was being bailed out of jail by some benevolent force. The look she wore didn’t at all mirror the pleasant confusion that Butch had on, and it left a feeling in his stomach that didn’t sit well at all.

Their eyes met, briefly, and Cassidy rolled hers, annoyed. She must have seen the curious expression on her partner’s face, because immediately after, she nudged her head in the direction adjacent from him, her lips pulled into an irritated line.

Butch followed the gesture, unsure if he was prepared for whatever it was that had soured such a lucky break for the both of them. As soon as his eyes rested on the culprit of his partner’s disdain, everything began to regrettably fall into place.

Oh.

Jessie and James—plus their talking abomination—were saluting the officers from behind smiles, a sentiment that seemed far too genuine and made Butch’s gorge rise. Of all the people, he definitely wasn’t expecting them—but the only question it really answered was why Cassidy was so pissed off. It still didn’t explain why they were bailing the duo out, how they were in such good shape when their organization was in ugly shreds at their feet, and most importantly how they had the money.

Sure, it wasn’t like Butch and Cassidy been arrested for anything Rocket-related—petty theft, in a moment of hunger—but the price would still be daunting for anyone who wasn’t well-financed.

Their old rivals gathered the duo’s confiscated items back from the front desk, then motioned them forward as they headed in the direction of the doors, saying nothing. Butch couldn’t read their vibe, but he wasn’t exactly one to look a gift rapidash in the mouth. Cassidy, on the other hand, was biting her tongue harder than he’d ever witnessed in his life. To anyone else, she might have seemed perfectly calm, if not a little annoyed. To him, it was obvious that she was humiliated to be seen in a moment of weakness by the likes of Jessie, let alone to be given salvation by her.

He’d witnessed the two of them often enough, throughout the years—a pair of hot-tempered harpies with far too much stamina for pettiness—and had wondered how they managed to keep those grudges burning for as long as they had. James was an idiot who tried too hard to press Butch’s buttons, but he felt like the two of them could at least share a space and ignore each other for a few minutes. The same really couldn’t be said about their respective partners.

Which is why it was unsettling how quiet they were, currently. The cracks in Cassidy’s demeanour might have been visible to him, but whether or not Jessie could see them was anyone’s guess. He
knew what she was doing. The blonde was planning, more than anything—pushing past her knee-jerk reaction to haughtily laugh Jessie’s help off. More than likely, when they finished the incredibly awkward walk down the streets of Castelia, she would gracefully accept the redhead’s assistance without a word of complaint, entirely on the basis that it would infuriate her.

That was the difference between Jessie and Cassidy—Cassidy was able to keep her temper in check to max out her pettiness element. Jessie was too easily taken by her emotions. She didn’t feel emotions, she became them.

It wasn’t until they were halfway across Skyarrow that James finally broke the silence and fell back behind the group to address Butch.

“It’s been awhile, Bill,” he grinned, and Butch so badly wanted to wipe the smirk off his face. Instead, he took a note from Cassidy’s book.

“Good to see you again, John.”

It was going to be a long day.

The facade of civility was hanging over them all like some kind of ugly cloud, and at this point it was anyone’s guess who was being genuine and who was trying to gain the upper hand in Mind Game Bingo.

The sequence of events on its own was confusing enough. The former Rockets had bailed the pseudo-Rockets out of jail, escorted them to Pinwheel Forest, invited them to have lunch, and started talking to them as if there was absolutely nothing strange about this situation. In fact, the things that weren’t completely ridiculous about it could be counted on one hand.

They’d played along, easily—Cassidy out of spite, Butch out of hunger—and even joined in the conversation that Jessie, James, and Meowth had eerily prompted. If the three of them were playing some kind of game of manipulation, it was astounding how far into it they’d managed to get. There was definitely a slight waver in Jessie’s overall mood, but neither of them could really tell if it was because of the circumstance or because something about her had changed since they’d last met up.

This wasn’t a lunch. It was a masquerade.

“And what on earth brings you out to a place like Unova?” Cassidy inquired sweetly after downing her drink. Jessie’s painted smile didn’t falter.

“Well, you know,” she offered. “What better time to vacation than after the complete collapse of your financial stability?”

Cassidy let out a painfully over-the-top laugh, and Jessie echoed it with ease, and Butch shot a look to James, who looked equally as terrified that a nuclear explosion was on the horizon. It was then that the both of them realized that neither of them were playing, or if they were, no one was expecting the girls to ascend to a completely incomprehensible plane of tension.

“In any case, da Team Rocket life is behind us,” Meowth butted in, trying to diffuse whatever was happening, there. “It was a tearful goodbye… but a big, brighter future was beckonin’ us.”

“It’s not like you had a choice,” Cassidy responded. “But it is admirable that you three have managed to stay out of jail. I suppose there’s something to be said for that!”

“Well, you know!” Jessie told her. “It’s much more admirable to avoid it entirely than to be
constantly waiting for the boss to bail us out as if we were his irresponsible children!”

They dissolved into uproarious laughter again. It was absolutely ghastly. They were insulting each other with the biggest, brightest smiles on their faces. Jessie and Cassidy never looked more like something out of a horror movie than they did now.

“Anyways,” Cassidy started. “Before the fuzz got her ugly manicure all over us, we were planning on heading to Nacrene for a heist. We owe you one for bailing us out, care to split the work and spoils?”

“**What**, now?” James inquired.

“Sixty-forty, but only because we found the buyer,” she continued. “It’s the least we could do for your generosity, though!”

“Did ya not hear a word we said?” Meowth deadpanned. “Dem days is behind us.”

“I heard you loud and clear,” Cassidy kept right on. “It’s heartbreaking! The boss gets shut down and you three throw away the only thing you were even kind of good at? You’re never going to be on our level if you just throw in the towel.”

The tension was starting to come to a head, and James crossed his arms as he responded. Butch shoved his face further into his rice.

“If you’re so above us,” James began. “Then why not buzz off and handle it on your own? Your pity really isn’t necessary, where we’re going.”

In response to this, Cassidy inched across the divide between her and James, audaciously placing a hand on his chest, her words sickeningly sweet and baby-soft.

“Oh, James…” she chided, lightly. “Come on! The boss might not have favoured you, but that only made you stronger. I’ve heard the things they said about you at HQ, how you had that reputation for building mechs from scratch when he’d de-fund you…”

A nervous blush crept onto his face, and as soon as he felt it there he was absolutely disgusted with himself. He knew what she was doing, and the praise definitely rang pleasantly in his ears, but only because of years of conditioning that kept him believing his worth was nothing. The red on his face had so much less to do with Cassidy and so much more to do with every other vile person who had come before her.

He knew it wouldn’t look that way to Jessie, though. He knew he wouldn’t be able to articulate it, either. And even if he tried, how receptive would she be? James inched away from her touch, his suspicions confirmed about the direction of the night as soon as Jessie grabbed the collar of his shirt and yanked him away.

“Paws off my partner, Cassidy,” she said, and James could hear the rancor lacing every letter, every syllable.

“Oh, lay off, Jessie-Jess,” the blonde retorted. “What’s the matter, you worried he’s going to realize how much greener the grass is and leave you?”

“Please!” She spat through gritted teeth. “As if I’d really take up the company of someone so disloyal.”

“Aaw, cute,” Cassidy cooed. “The power of love and friendship. You really ought to sharpen your
tongue, hun. It’s such a pity that you’ve lost your edge but couldn’t let go of that jealous heart!”

Several things happened, then. One, Butch quietly set his food down and started to drag himself in literally any direction that wasn’t the one the girls were currently occupying. Two, James dove into Meowth’s corner, seeking solace from the fur he was sure was going to start flying any moment now. Three, Jessie lunged forward, likely with the intent to break at least some of Cassidy’s bones. Four, Wobbuffet wisely chose this moment to greet the waking world from inside his ball, wrapping his stubby arms around his trainer and holding her back as well as he could manage.

Jessie was blazing fire, teeth bared, claws out. Cassidy, in a typical Cassidy fashion, merely stood up and walked in the opposite direction, grinning in the face of her victory, knowing she had won this one solely by the look on the redhead’s face.

“Well, we’re heading out to the location tomorrow at sunset!” Cassidy called as she waved, smile lively as ever.

Butch followed her lead, eager to be removed from the situation as soon as possible. He supposed it was time to pull his weight—free food and bailouts evidently did come with a price.

“Meet us at the entrance of the forest if you’re interested in making real money again!”

When Jessie was absolutely certain the two of them were out of earshot, she struggled to her knees on the grass and let out a piercing, unrestrained, primal scream of rage.

The moon was inching towards full, that night, and the feeling of apprehension it brought didn’t do much to assuage the former Rockets’ worries. On the soft ground of the forest, James and Meowth peered into the crackling fire, trying to keep their minds at ease. The halved nature of their group, currently, wasn’t doing much to help their rampant thoughts.

Jessie and Wobbuffet usually went on these late night outings. Meowth knew what they were about, and he’d disclosed it to James once on the condition that the man never repeat it—due to his quiet nature and comforting presence, Jessie’s star pokémon was also her only real confidante.

*Yeah, Wobb’s practically da goil’s t’erapist,* is what he’d actually said, but. Semantics.

Tonight, however, there was a feeling hanging over the group that was… uncomfortable, to say the least. The way Butch and Cassidy had proposed the idea to them was ugly, and haughty, and seemingly fruitless. And yet, all of them felt undeniably ambivalent towards the proposal as they dwelled on it. What unsettled them the most was that their knee jerk reaction was not to say no.

This, combined with how long Jessie had been out with Wobbuffet on that particular night, was paving way for a very worried James and Meowth, and words hardly had to be exchanged between the two of them before they decided to go looking.

Greninja was above them, lounging comfortably in the branches of a sturdy tree, the discomfort of the night permeating its own calm, setting it on edge. At the sound of its name, it stirred slightly from its turbulent thoughts, regarding James as he spoke up at it.

“Pardon me, Greninja,” he told it, a bit sheepishly. “Would it be alright to ask that you watch the fire while we go look for our friends?”

Greninja was quick in its response, nodding affirmatively in his direction. Feeling slightly more at ease, James thanked it and vanished alongside Meowth into the trees.
“Jess?”

At the sound of Meowth’s voice, her words stuck on her tongue, and she tensed up slightly, struck with the sudden worry that he had heard even a moment of her childishly insecure musings. Slowly, she turned around, and Wobbuffet followed suit, waving pleasantly to the other two as he uttered his name softly.

“Sorry to interrupt…” James told her.

“We was worried about ya,” Meowth added. “It was takin’ yous two longer than usual.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” she told them, rising to her feet and throwing an arm up as she stretched. “It’s been a day. Rest is probably something we could all use.”

James couldn’t help but notice the quiet serenity in her voice, and the contrast of calm waters against the fire she had been earlier both comforted and confused him. Were these talks with Wobbuffet really that therapeutic on her raging mind?

“Jess…” he offered, trying his best to read her. “You doing okay?”

She huffed, and crossed her arms, trying to put a protective guard up but far too exhausted to worry about maintaining it.

“I’ll be fine,” she told James. “Just angry at the fact that Cassidy of all people is still able to get under my skin. I’m so above her.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Meowth said. “I t’ink she’s made it her mission in life ta get under ya skin. ‘Course ya ain’t immune to it, yer too busy livin’ a life dat doesn’t revolve around her.”

“He’s onto something, you know,” James agreed. “She only gets under your skin because you’re so far above her.”

“Wooo~bbuffet!”

Jessie cracked a smile, her heart steadier, at ease. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Can’t help but wonder what dat lady’s problem is, t’ough,” the cat added. “Ya got any ideas, Jess?”

“Yes, didn’t you know her, before?” James mentioned. “Before you and I were fatefully assigned, even? Was she always… like that?”

Storm clouds came over Jessie’s eyes, their shining blue suddenly faded and listless. It wasn’t a question she was expecting.

Not now, not ever.

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*Jessie was still in the process of learning to think of the room as a home. In all honesty, she wasn’t certain that it would be one, no matter how kind the passage of time was to her while she lived within its walls. She’d heard the stories, though—a Team Rocket agent doesn’t exactly stop being one without some serious circumstance. Jessie wasn’t planning on dying or changing her identity*
any time soon. Whatever was in store for her, she couldn’t imagine it being any worse than starving on the streets with scrapes on her knees and bruises on her heart.

The white of the walls was stifling—she never knew white could be such an angry colour. The blankness of them brought out an itch within her, an absolute need to blanket their nothingness in vibrant decor. The higher-ups hadn’t said anything forbidding it, but there was another person living in the space and Jessie certainly didn’t fancy getting into an argument on her first day there. Instead, she rolled over in her cardboard-esque excuse for a bed and tried to blink out the silent screaming that the lack of colour around her emitted.

After an hour of unsuccessful sleep, the sound of an opening door stirred Jessie from her half-dazed trance. With it, she jolted upright, nearly whacking her head on the bunk above her, face reddening as she narrowly avoided disaster. Blinking herself back to reality, she stared up at the woman who had entered, wondering how she should introduce herself, if at all. No amount of socialization as a young girl really prepared her for… whatever this turn her life had suddenly taken was.

Her roommate was beautiful, to say the least—angular features, painted cherry lips, long golden hair. Jessie couldn’t tell whether or not she felt threatened by this woman or completely enamoured. She looked like she belonged in magazines, not in the mafia, and when her piercing violet eyes locked on Jessie, she could feel her heart reverberating loudly inside her.

The redhead opened her mouth to say something, trying to find the words to at least get her name out, but her charisma seemed to have left her when she needed it most. Thankfully, her roommate didn’t seem too put off by this, remarking at her simply.

“Bottom bunk is mine, Red,” she said, smiling and sipping her iced coffee through its straw. “Good to have a new roomie, finally.”

Jessie pulled herself to her feet, intent to apologize for half-snoozing in this woman’s bed, but she was interrupted again, before the words hit her tongue—

“I’m Cassidy,” the blonde told her, and her grin was confident and enveloping, and her eyes were almost hungry.

“I—eh—sorry, for…” Jessie sputtered, wondering where in the world her self-determination and allure had suddenly gone. She breathed in.

“Jessie,” she finally said. “My name’s Jessie.”

The sound of the redhead’s voice made an almost maddeningly euphoric feeling bubble up in Cassidy’s throat, and she could feel her resolute facade melt in its wake.

Oh, this… the thought came to her almost instantly. This is new.

“Jessie,” Cassidy repeated. “Now what’s a pretty girl like you doing in Team Rocket?”

She wasn’t wrong, but the sudden compliment caught Jessie off guard, especially coming from some beautiful someone she’d only just met. Men were easy to navigate—you didn’t have to try with them, you just had to look nice—women… Jessie was a little less experienced with women. She’d always made enemies of them long before anything else. She swallowed hard, willing herself to be charming, hoping if she stumbled over herself, it could at least be cute—

“I… could ask the same about you, Cassidy.”

“Ha!” Cassidy responded. “Well, what good luck we get to share a space. The higher ups clearly
knew what they were doing when they roomed us.”

“Glad they managed that part alright,” Jessie responded. “Now if only they could make the beds comfier…”

“Ugh, right?” The blonde rolled her eyes, grinning. “Though, between you and me…”

She lowered her voice an octave, eyes narrowing.

“...it’s easy to ignore when you can managed to sneak someone cute under the covers.”

The blush on Jessie’s cheeks was furious, at this point, and she knew that she must’ve looked absolutely ridiculous trying to remain confident in the wake of it. The sight of her there, red-faced and blue-eyed and expression elated but unsure—it did things to Cassidy’s heart that she hadn’t felt in quite some time.

Good god, the blonde couldn’t push the thought from her head. She’s adorable.

“Sorry, sorry,” Cassidy added. “Sometimes I come on a little strong, I’ll admit.”

“No, you’re... absolutely golden…” Jessie responded, cursing herself internally for how much she sounded like a lovestruck schoolgirl again. “And I don’t imagine you’re wrong.”

“In any case,” Cassidy strolled over to the trash, tossing her empty cup inside. “This cramped room really is going to need time to adjust to two beautiful women sharing its space. Why don’t we get some air? I can show you the ropes.”

Jessie was nearly putty in her hands, but she tried to keep some of herself in tact as she got lost in Cassidy’s eyes.

“Buy me a coffee?”

“Charming!” Cassidy laughed, and her eyes only seemed to shine more, half-shut. Her voice was like velvet on Jessie’s ears.

“Anything for you, Jessie-Jess.”

There was a poignant sunset filtering in through half-broken tin blinds, and it only served to paint the room in an even more bittersweet light. Jessie was on the floor, cross-legged, pillow shielding her chest like protective armor. Words fell off her tongue and with every new one she felt more open and vulnerable and bleeding, she wanted so badly to sew her mouth shut. There was nothing she could do, though—the sentences spilled out of her like a raging river and no matter how she willed herself to stop them, they persisted. Cassidy stopped her to ask—

“So you just left him?”

Jessie buried her head deeper into the shoddy fabric of the pillow.

“Yeah. It’s so fucked up, I hate myself for it still…”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that, though,” Cassidy told her. “Like, he cheated on
“He didn’t,” Jessie said, and her eyes went darker. “It’s… that’s making it so much more simple than it truly is.”

“How do you figure?”

“James wasn’t my boyfriend.”

“Wait, wait, what?” The blonde dropped her head to her hands as they rested on her knees. “But you make it sound like you two were all over each other!”

“There was just a level of comfort there that was unlike anything I’ve ever really had since,” Jessie responded. “There was no awkwardness in that kind of physical closeness, I suppose…”

“…for you, at least.”

“Ugh!” She buried her face in the pillow entirely. “Don’t make me think about that! I can barely handle the circumstances as they stand, if he had feelings for me I don’t know how I’d live with everything.”

“…and you didn’t have feelings for him? Really?”

“Of course not!” Jessie told her, plain as day. “He wasn’t prince charming! He was James.”

There wasn’t a giveaway on Jessie’s face—no hard lips, no flushed face. It really looked like she was telling the truth, but there were things that weren’t adding up.

“So… you saw him holding the hand of some other girl… and despite having no romantic feelings for him at all… you just lost it all over him, and the next day you were gone?”

“And the next day I was gone,” Jessie parroted back to her, voice shaking, heavy with guilt. She was waiting for Cassidy to turn on her, to tell her how wicked she was for leaving so many people alone in her dust as she sped off toward tomorrow. Instead, the blonde just crossed her arms and tried to understand, silent for a moment.

“Jess, what… were you so afraid of?”

Jessie was not a dam. She was a glacier. Cracks slowly snaked their way up her one by one as the years passed, tattooing her foundations with ominous lines. She was expecting something so much more climactic would send her fragmented and cascading into the ocean—not a simple question, not something she refused to ask herself. Bits and pieces of her began to break and hit the cold, dark waves. Sobs strangled her throat, clawing at her words.

“...I was never going to see him again.”

Cassidy was caught off guard by the statement, and the sudden presence of fresh tears in the face of a woman she’d never seen so much as flinch at the ways of the world. She wanted to comfort her, but she felt as though she couldn’t reach Jessie where she was. First, she needed to understand.

“Why would you think that?” The blonde asked her. “Did he say something?”

“No,” she shot back, and Cassidy tilted her head. “But I know how the story goes.”

“...why would he do that to you? After everything you’d been through together?”
“I don’t know,” she wavered, and more chunks of ice fell downwards. “I don’t know! I’ve never known!”

“If you were so paralyzed at the idea of him leaving,” Cassidy started. “Why did you leave him?”

“Easier,” Jessie said, running a shaky hand through her hair, blinking back tears. “Easier to leave than to... than to be left...”

“Jess...” the blonde said, watching her girlfriend’s mind slowly splinter into nothing. “Is this why —”

“Is it why I can’t keep a damned partner?!” Jessie suddenly blurted, defensive. “Yes! God, yes! I know why I’m doing it, and I still can’t stop! I don’t know why they keep me around! What good is an agent who can’t even work with anyone?! You and James are the only people I ever got along with for more than a month, and he’s gone and you’re a ticking time bomb!”

“Jessie,” Cassidy called softly, inching off the bed and onto her knees on the floor. “Hey. Am not. It takes more than a pretty face to get me to walk. Especially from someone as stunning and strong as you.”

Her hands met Jessie’s face, and she wiped at the redhead’s tears with her knuckle, cupping her cheek with her other hand. Jessie was barely receptive, a ragdoll that fell into Cassidy’s arms, shoulders heaving in between trembling words.

“Everyone leaves!” She wailed. “They all said those pathetic sentiments too, Cass! They weren’t wicked people who came into my life to hurt me, they were people who loved me genuinely and with everything they had! It would be so much easier to believe their intentions were unkind!”

She was inconsolable. Hysterical.

“But they weren’t,” Jessie continued, breath hitching, choked. “That’s what’s most terrifying. Someone can love you with everything they are and be gone the next day.”

Silence. Then, Jessie lost herself, head dropping pathetically to Cassidy’s shoulder, her tears falling down onto the blonde’s nightgown.

“Everyone leaves,” she whispered again, defeated by her past, strangled by memories that grabbed her feet like angry vines and pulled her underwater. In her voice, Cassidy heard what sounded like far too many lifetimes of pain, and she knew these were not tears she could even hope to kiss away. Nevertheless, she tried.

“Hey,” Cassidy said, inching backwards, delicately positioning Jessie’s chin in between her thumb and forefinger, willing their eyes to meet. “Hey.”

Jessie said nothing, lips quivering, eyes rimmed with a bitter scarlet. She couldn’t read Cassidy’s expression, and the anxiety it bloomed within her only added to the cracks tearing apart her structure. When her girlfriend pressed their lips together, slowly and tenderly and lingering, Jessie had to stop herself from sobbing all over again as her eyes fluttered shut. There was no point to this. She couldn’t love this golden-haired spirit of protection. She couldn’t afford the pain of falling for her soft lips and fierce eyes and watchful heart. Everyone left.

“I won’t.”

Jessie fell anyways.
Cassidy’s eyes were not on Jessie as the redhead screamed. She focused hard on her nails, unable to meet the other woman’s blazing eyes. In her head, there was a nigh unachievable proper end to this story where every single agent in the dorms didn’t know the intimate details of their breakup. Unfortunately, that timeline was far from the one they’d ended up in.

“You could’ve done it any other fucking way!” Jessie was breathing fire. “You could have just dumped me! You didn’t have to cheat on me with some... some fucking nobody!”

“As if,” Cassidy said indignantly, eyes moving upward, as if she was a child being scolded. “I absolutely could not. I’m a brave woman, but I still know when something is too much of a hassle to deal with!”

“This. THIS?” Jessie roared. “THIS is less of a hassle than just breaking up with me like a normal person?!”

“Who knows if you’d even let me break up with you?!” The blonde shouted right back. “Telling you I wasn’t feeling this whole ‘us’ thing anymore?! You would’ve fucking skewered me alive with those poisonous spikes you’re constantly wearing on your back! Just like you do whenever anything doesn’t go your way!”

“How could you say that shit to me, Cassidy?!” Jessie said, teeth bared and angry tears staining her eyes. “How the hell could you wipe my tears and adore me in the ways you did, and leave with the idea that I’m nothing but anger?! How am I nothing but rage when I loved you with everything I was?”

“Look, Jessie-Jess,” she sighed, and the pet name sounded like venom on her tongue when before it rang nothing but solace. “You were cute when you first showed up here, I’ll admit. I was willing to try. But this sudden nasty attitude and constant need for attention is wearing on me, okay? I’m your girlfriend, not your mom.”

Jessie’s closed fist met the wall behind her, and Cassidy actually flinched at the sound of the impact as it rang out in her ears. From atop the dresser near them, a single framed photo crashed to the ground below Jessie’s feet, its glass covering fragmenting into ugly splinters. The redhead’s eyes were shut agonizingly tight, her teeth clenched hard, her lips pulled back in an almost animalistic snarl. Her expression was far too primal for comprehension, halfway between shattered and deadly. Cassidy took a nervous step back, her words following suit, her sharpness fading.

“J—Jessie, I didn’t mean it li—”

“Get out.”

“Look—”

“Get. OUT. OF HERE.”

Cassidy opened her mouth again to protest, but Jessie was screaming magma and poison with every word, and the blonde could hear her throat going raw as the words left her, relentless.

“I don’t CARE where you go. I don’t CARE what you do,” she howled. “I don’t CARE ABOUT YOU ANYMORE! JUST GET OUT OF MY FUCKING SIGHTS!”
In the wake of Jessie’s piercing, blue-flamed gaze, Cassidy grit her teeth, scoffed out a noise of resignation, and shut the door behind her without looking back.

Jessie waited. How she waited with her composure the way it was, was anyone’s guess. She waited until the door was shut, she counted the errant sound of steps down the hallway, the looks Cassidy was probably receiving as she stormed through the building. In her head, she counted. Counted to safety, counted until no one could see her, no one could hear her.

The glacier exploded into nothing.

As blocks upon blocks of frozen tundra sent tsunamis raging across the sea, Jessie buried her head in her hands and wept. She wept for the words as they burned into her and became memories, she wept because she knew it would be a long time before she was given the pleasure of repressing them, she wept for knowing exactly what she was getting into and persisting with it regardless. She wept because she realized, then, that she was a soul who had done something wicked long ago—that was the only explanation, right?—and now the universe was punishing her, time and time again, for whatever deeds she’d done in however many lifetimes before.

Jessie sat there, nails dug into her scalp and jaw cramping from the desperate need to quiet her sobs as yet another person left her life. With makeup running and eyes bleary, she came to a truth she’d been pushing down for far too long—if all people are going to see when they look at me is angry, then there is no point in being anything else.

In the toppled frame beside her, a photo of her and the woman currently responsible for exhuming her tears smiled upwards like a cruel joke. It only made her want to deepen the fist-mark she’d carved into the wall above it. Gazing there at the broken shards inside of the frame, she found a kindred spirit, and she momentarily wondered why someone would date a shattered mirror and act surprised when the glass cut up their fingers.

Jessie pulled her knees inward and let her sobs peter out. Nothing about her life would let her take a vacation, after this. She’d sleep above Cassidy tonight. They’d wake up at the crack of dawn tomorrow, silence hanging over them like an ugly cloud. They’d still share this room, now as nothing but strangers with memories.

An angry, burning, corrosive hole tore away at the inside of her chest in the silence of the dorm. She was well-acquainted with its embrace, but that didn’t make her any more flame-resistant. Her thoughts weren’t any kinder to her as she slumped there, desperately trying not to unearth the memories of patient zero in the long trail of broken people she left behind her.

You’re right, Cassidy. You aren’t my mom, her sadistic musings reminded her with a flash of violet locks and turquoise eyes, and she shook her head in unhinged agony, begging her brain to force the vision away.

My mom couldn’t even handle being my mom.

Jessie’s feet carried her forwards, out of the small clearing by the river, back into the forest and towards camp. When her voice finally found the crisp night air, it was low and tired and from worlds upon worlds away.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

It was a tone James knew not to press his luck with. She definitely, definitely had an answer for them, and she would say it when—if—she was ever ready.
Meowth turned to Wobbuffet, his eyes inquiring without words. In a moment of uncharacteristic wisdom, the patient pokémon shook his head slowly.

Meowth understood.

“Really, Meowth?! After everything?!”

“Hey, don’t be like dat, Jimmy! I’m jus’ sayin’ what all of us is t’inkin!”

There was a betrayal in James’ eyes that struggled to find any trace of calm, and Meowth could tell it was because the man knew he was right. To call James angry wouldn’t have been entirely accurate—or, at the very least, if he was angry at someone, it was no one but himself. Desperate, he turned to Jessie, quietly calling her name, hoping for a moral center.

“He…” she started. “He does have a point, you know. Don’t you feel it, too?”

“Feel what?! ” James asked, but the question was ominously rhetorical.

“You know…” Jessie responded, yearning lacing her words. “...a longing. Of course those two are just as incorrigible as ever, but…”

James sighed, completing her thought. “…but what they said made some sense.”

“On da surface…” Meowth started. “It seems like dey might be tryin’ ta mess wit’ us. But dey obviously don’t need us for dis, ‘cause dey was in jail when we found ‘em…”

“...obviously up to it anyways.” Jessie finished.

“Then that means…” James said. “They really did mean what they said. About us being good at our jobs, before?”

Jessie shook her head. “It just doesn’t add up. They don’t need us. They certainly don’t want us. And they know we don’t want them. So why on earth say something like that unless it’s true? What ulterior motives could there even be?”

There was a stillness in the air, a silence that infiltrated the group’s strong and steady center, and none of them could bring themselves to a solid answer. Instead, they sat there in the quiet of the evening, watching embers float up off the campfire and into the starless night sky.

“...have we been good at much since we stahpped bein’ t’ieves?”

There was a tone to Meowth’s question that hit like daggers to their respective hearts. No one made eye contact, resting there.

Not a single member of the group was able to answer him.
James found himself unable to achieve comfort in his sleeping bag. He was too aware of where all his limbs were, too aware of his hair as it pressed uncomfortably against his neck, too aware of the skittering footsteps of the bug-types crawling all around them in the wood. With the seasons slowly transitioning into one another, he knew the nights were getting shorter, and he cursed his brain for not allowing him to experience what little sleep he was probably going to get anyways.

Meowth and Wobbuffet had long since fallen asleep—he could hear purring and snoring, respectively—but the occasional shift of Jessie’s sleeping bag mirrored his own, and her breathing remained unsteady and shuddering whenever he caught the sound of it in the silence of the evening. James felt both fearful and unsure—specifically of if she was angry with him or not—and so, mustering up his courage, he quietly called her name as he turned to face her restless form.

“What is it?” She said, her back turned, and she moved her head slightly to hear him better.

“Are you… having trouble sleeping…?”

“…yes, but that isn’t exactly new, James.”

“…well, that’s true for me as well,” he picked his words carefully. “But more so than usual, tonight.”

She sighed, and turned to face him. Jessie didn’t do the ‘vulnerability’ and ‘processing emotions’ thing well. Somewhere inside her, they usually got twisted up and lost their capability to come out as anything that wasn’t screaming.

Which was another thing Cassidy was right about, her brain shot at her, and she practically grit her teeth at how badly she wanted to carve it out of her skull and throw it into a ditch, somewhere.

James, however, had proven time and time again that he was more than capable of taking those moods in stride. Almost to a fault, both fortunately and unfortunately. Jessie had been his friend, and his enemy, and his friend again, they had known each other at their best and their worst. After knowing her worst, he still chose to follow her, and on nights like tonight—when the sky was black and foreboding and the thoughts raced madly through her head, Jessie was able to occasionally gather enough of herself to confide honestly in her partner.

“…me, too.”

James inched closer to her, hearing the weight in her voice, wanting to know which thoughts of hers mirrored his own unfriendly musings, which ones were her own entirely. Wanting to help her, wanting to help himself. He swallowed dryly.

“Are you…” his words came in short bursts, ineloquent. “…alright, I suppose? What’s on your mind?”

Jessie bit her cheek, eyes downcast.

“You know, maybe if we both talk about stuff, we’ll feel better.”

He didn’t want this to seem like he was combing her for answers. There was not an invasive muscle within him—genuinely, James just wanted the both of them to rest easier. He’d hoped that putting himself out there as well would make her feel more safe to talk openly beside him.

After a long, strained silence, she whispered to her partner.

“Do you think…” she began. “…do you think I’ve lost my edge?”
The sentence hit James, hard. The hopelessness in her voice, the way her words resonated, the forlorn look daubed across her face. There was a gentle fire burning somewhere within him, and he wanted so badly to pull her closer and draw her to its warmth, let its quiet snapping provide a white noise to drown out her broken thoughts. His voice was soft when it came, only a little pained—

“Oh, Jessie…”

Calmly and tenderly, he pulled his arms out of his sleeping bag and placed Jessie’s free hand within his own. The contrast always caught her by surprise—how soft and inviting his palm felt as it lightly held hers, calloused and worked from too many years of fighting for her life. She could only see the outline of James’ face in the darkness of the night, but she knew him well enough to translate the kindness in his voice to the expression on his face. In the light, his eyes would have been a forest of protection and encouragement, cradling her unkind thoughts, aiding them with shelter from the burning sun above.

“Just because you’re trying to be a better person,” he told her. “Doesn’t mean you’ve lost your edge. And even if you were to lose it… there’s hardly anything wrong with that.”

She was trying to keep tears from her eyes, but the feeling of his hands on hers and the way he was looking at her like she was the moon and stars and the warmth that was on every word he spoke… it brought her heart to her throat and her breath to a halt. Jessie was someone who paradoxically believed that the world owed her undying love and adoration for the things she had seen, and who froze up in fear whenever that kind of affection was genuinely thrown her way.

“But who…” she said, pausing to gather herself. “Who am I without it? Who am I without my edge?”

James closed his eyes, smiling benevolently. With an unflinching fondness, he brought the back of her hand up to his lips, kissing it softly. His eyes fluttered back open, and he laced his fingers with her own.

“So, so much more.”

Jessie’s face was burning, and her throat was tight, and she wondered—so often—why her life had made her this way, that she cried when she was angry and cried when she was happy and cried when people loved her. Undoubtedly, she thought she was better than everyone around her, so why did she have to swallow tears when this was affirmed? When people let her know her worth was there?

She didn’t have any answers, but there was a gentle stamp of euphoria radiating from her hand, now, and despite the raw emptiness that seemed to strangle her, her partner’s words had eased her. He continued, anxious at her lack of words.

“You know, when a plant grows too big for its enclosure, you have to re-pot it,” he explained. “It can be scary, to uproot it. You watch the soil fall off its ends, even when you support it. You worry you’ll mess it up, you worry that it’ll get damaged…”

She peered into him, eyes shining.

“But if you just leave it there, it’ll never grow, Jess,” James said. “A flower should never be kept from blooming. Its petals deserve to see the sunlight.”

Jessie wished, with everything she had, that his analogy could quell every worry that slept within her. That any one person in this world had the ability to calm the storms that raged inside.
“What kind of rose sheds its thorns when it blooms?” She said, almost mournful.

James was almost instant in his response, squeezing her hand tighter.

“My rose,” he said. “She’s different. But if you ask me, that only makes her more beautiful.”

Her heart lurched at the calm in his words. She deserved this. She didn’t deserve this.

“Do… do you miss it, too?” Jessie suddenly asked.

“What’s that?”

“Being a criminal.”

He tilted his head in thought. “A little, yes. I’m not sure if I miss doing bad… I think I miss being invincible, more than anything.”

“Right?” The redhead responded, grabbing his hand tighter, moving closer to him. “Nothing can hurt you when you’re evil. There’s such a resilience to the pursuit of revenge.”

James was growing increasingly aware of the lack of space between the two of them. It wasn’t unpleasant, and it was definitely something he himself had invoked, but he felt that it had suddenly gone from comforting his best friend to something more, and it stirred feelings within that he was unable to properly identify.

“The feeling of power…” he said, quietly, unable to tear his gaze away from her. “The pursuit of conquest…”

They were inches away from each other, their hands intertwined. Jessie could feel his breath hot on her own, and it sent goosebumps to her bare shoulders. When she spoke, her voice carried the same longing it had all night—though now it was heavier, more discordant. They moved closer, practically eyelash to eyelash.

“Do you ever… just once more…” Jessie began. “…want to do something really… really bad?”

His heart shivered.

“Only on nights like this.”

Jessie was practically thrown forward, her forehead colliding with James’ chest as the both of them yelped in surprise, shattering whatever it was that was happening, previously.

Wobbuffet had rolled over in his sleep, ramming into his trainer suddenly, throwing his arms around her without once waking up through the process. James called her name, worried, and she wanted so badly to seethe, to scream, to scold her pokémon for tonight’s screw-up—but she found herself completely exhausted. The fire wasn’t burning, the anger was not there, Jessie was spent. Spent after an emotional day, spent after too long dwelling on her memories, spent after everything. Instead, she slowly pulled herself off his torso, pushing hair out of her face, sighing heavily before she spoke.

“Good night, James.”

She caught a flash of sadness in his expression before she turned around, practically shoving Wobbuffet in the direction he was previously facing. It was in James’ voice, as well, and she felt a twinge of guilt knowing that his own issues were probably still unresolved. There just wasn’t enough in her to be a good friend in that moment. She barely had it in her to be good to herself.
“Good night, Jess.”

She buried her face in her Pokémon’s back and hung on for dear life.

Greninja’s Pokéball rested with their things across the now dormant firepit, its inhabitant high up in the tree, arms crossed firmly in dark contemplation as it listened to the foreboding words passing between the pair.

The sunset was a far-too sickly looking colour as it enveloped the path back through the forest. The trees hung around the former Rockets like wicked strangers, their shadows painting doubtful dapples across them. As they neared the end of the forest, all of them walked rigidly, anxiety crawling through them like a thousand durant. Around them, the tranquility of the scenery felt almost threatening.

Butch and Cassidy were two blurry shapes in the orange horizon as they neared the forest entrance, and as they registered, none of the former Rockets could really pinpoint what it was they were feeling, exactly. On top of their disquieted minds, there was an indescribable urge to prove the duo wrong. It was simultaneously what had kept them up all night, and what had carried them forwards through the woods.

“Wow, look who showed up,” Butch remarked, and he couldn’t help but notice how different the three of them looked. Unyielding, stiff, with eyes made of nothing but steel.

“After... careful consideration,” James told him. “We figured you had a point, about wasted talent and all.”

“We never did get a last mission,” Jessie followed. “Closure might... make things easier to deal with.”

“Jus’ once couldn’t hoit.”

Cassidy had her arms crossed, and as she regarded them, her expression went from boredom to amused surprise to that hungry smile Jessie had known so well.

“Ha! This is a treat,” she said. “Try to keep up then, alright? You are out of practice, hun.”

“Practice is irrelevant,” Jessie said coldly, immovable. “I was born for this.”

“I’d tell you not to get too cocky, but we’ve wasted enough time,” the blonde retorted. “Let’s head out.”

“Run us through dis,” Meowth prompted as the group moved.

“Okay, well,” Butch began. “Location is the museum. We found someone interested in an artifact there.”

“Beautifully nostalgic,” James noted. “Nacrene’s museum was one of our first heists in Unova.”

“Awww, what a precious homecoming,” Cassidy practically chirped. “Apparently it’s a fairly new
“target, too. Something Cedric Juniper brought in a few years ago.”

“And what might that be?”

“You lot ever heard of Reshiram?”

Jessie laughed, sharply, and answered Butch’s question. “Know of it? We’ve seen it in person.”

“Bullshit,” he shot back.

“Dead serious, *Banjo*.”

“That one isn’t even a name, for God’s sake!”

Cassidy didn’t let him dwell on it. “Supposedly it made contact with the people of Unova all those years ago—”

“We know,” Meowth rolled his eyes. “We was dere.”

“Wobba~”

“... *most* of us was dere.”

“You guys really don’t have to lie for attention, you know,” she continued. “Statistically, I’m sure someone out there already thinks you’re cool—”

“It was a showdown between Team Plasma, Interpol, Juniper, several trainers, and us,” James said matter-of-factly, desperately trying to shut her up. “Team Plasma had a mind-control device functional that they hoped to subdue Reshiram with. The civilians and Interpol stopped it, as well as yours truly.”

“...either you really did your homework or you *were* there.”

“I told ya, we was!” Meowth crossed his arms. “Reshiram got resurrected outta some fancy rock, tried ta kill us, ended up talkin’ to da twoips and da green-haired guy, and den it just left like nut’in happened.”

“That’s surprising,” Butch said. “Why didn’t you *guys* loot the place?”

“We didn’t exactly have stealth on our side,” Jessie told him. “Interpol was several feet away from us, and the altar was a pretty wide open space. Not ideal for looting.”

“Pity,” Cassidy said. “You could have seriously made us all some cash if you’d found this before Juniper.”

“What even is it?” James finally inquired.

“Apparentl...
This. They were good at being bad. Years ago, they’d torn apart Unova with stars in their eyes. They’d pulled heist after successful heist, utilized every resource around them, gone toe to toe with legends. What extravagance had happened in the time that they’d stopped?

A relaxing pilgrimage is nice, Jessie thought. But is it me?

Thinking back on those days, Nostalgia embraced the three of them in her warm arms and kept them safe. The days when nothing could hurt them, the days when everything was easier, when they didn’t have to struggle with their alignment, with doing the right thing, with wondering if it was enough. The days where they didn’t have to worry as much—the days when things were better. When they knew who they were and what they stood for.

“We’ll be absolutely rolling in it…” Cassidy said as she walked, her voice dripping with anticipation.

“No more hungry nights!” Butch added.

Hungry nights… the words echoed in the quartet’s heads, and they shared a nervous couple of looks.

“No more planning meals! No more sleeping on park benches!”

“Ugh, my back is KILLING me after the last few weeks.” Cassidy grinned, and did she… realize how she sounded, right now?

Nostalgia, ever the enchantress, pawed at the Rockets as she felt her grip slipping. Their steps grew less confident.

“God, I was so worried about going back into minimum wage,” the blonde continued. “Not even I can make a burger uniform look good, you know?”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

The Rockets’ collective breath caught in their throat, and thoughts swam through James’ head—

It’s just once… he told himself, and memories poked and prodded at his insides. Memories of electricity tearing into his body, memories of broken bones and unkind landings, of sleeping in playgrounds and eating from the garbage, of an emblem festooned across his chest that might as well have been written in his own blood. It’s just once, it’s just once more—

They were invaded by the memories thereafter. For every ten crying children, there was one with a bright smile and thankful eyes. For every habitat destroyed, another one thrived. Jessie thought about the firestone burning a hole through her bag, and the boy who saw enough in her to hand it over without a second thought. James could practically feel the pressure radiating off of Greninja’s pokéball.

Hungry nights, open wounds, and every once in awhile—unbridled power. Posed against grateful smiles and unflinching stability, where no one knew your name.

Nostalgia hammered down her fingernails on her desk, an impatient expression across her face.

“You four just wait,” Butch said, and the desperation in his voice was almost chilling.

“When we get this thing…” Cassidy’s tone mirrored his. “...the boss is gonna give us a huge promotion!”

The Rockets stopped dead in their tracks. They were expecting laughter. A follow up joke. Anything
But as more and more silence passed following the statement, they realized precisely what had happened. They realized that Cassidy was so far into her own fantasies, she had no idea what she’d just said. Butch paid no mind to it either, his head just as far into the clouds. The lack of sound that followed haunted them to their very bones.

The realization came slowly at first before hitting them like a freight train. These two were desperate, and hungry, and they didn’t care if punishment came—they’d be out the next day trying again. They had places they could go. They had people extending them hands they didn’t deserve. And despite it all, they chose to be… this. They chose to be pitiful.

All at once, the Rockets had the same terrified thought—

...were we like that?!

In the glamour of their memories, they were intimidating and gorgeous and crafty. Strong minds, even stronger looks. Lovely, charming villains who could tear into the hearts of all who witnessed them—Team Rocket, who tricked even the crying child without a regret in their hearts.

Is this what they had really been? Three pathetic, hungry fools, constantly thwarted by a kid and his pikachu, refusing to learn their lesson? Refusing to move onto greater things? Were they the fearsome antagonists, or the part of the episode everyone dreaded? Did anyone really fear them at all? And if so, how? How was this intimidating?

There was a truth settling in the forefront of their collective minds, then: the passage of time was artfully significant, and the way it differently touched the lives of people as they lived and breathed across the earth could only be described as astounding. In the few years they’d been away, Butch and Cassidy had not changed at all beyond falling from grace, and the former Rockets only knew this truth because they themselves had changed so much.

Jessie was well acquainted with Nostalgia, at this point, and she really should have known. Nostalgia was a dirty, cheating liar.

Good grief, Meowth pondered. The hell are we doing, right now?! How did we even get here?!

In sync as ever, none of them shared a word, and none of them moved. The absence of footsteps had finally registered with Butch and Cassidy, and the pair turned to ask the same of them.

“You losers coming? We’re gonna be late.”

The quartet shot each other another set of looks.

“Yeah, what’s the word…?” Jessie finally said. “No.”

Cassidy strided over to her, arms on her hips. “What do you mean no?”

“We mean no,” the redhead told her. “Plan’s off.”

“What’s the matter, Jessie-Jess?” She asked. “Get cold feet?”

Jessie felt anger threatening to jump from her heart straight to her mouth, and she swallowed it where it was. She inhaled. She steadied herself.

“You know, you two…” Jessie began. “I never wanted to admit it until now, but there was a part of me that was just a touch jealous of you.”
James butted in. “She’s right, you know. You may have been deplorable, but at least you were efficient.”

“ Took ya long enough to realize,” Butch rolled his eyes. “So what are you waiting for? Come be efficient with us.”

“There’s a lot of stuff I’ve come to realize as I’ve made my way across the green earth. And the hardest truth to come to?” Jessie said. “Sometimes, I’m wrong.”

Cassidy moved closer to her, a fire starting to grow in her gaze. She was giving Jessie a look that read *try me*. The redhead continued.

“You were never something to aspire towards. You were never better than us,” she said. “We were all the same scum. And you want to know the difference between you and I, Cassidy?”

“I dare you,” Cassidy said, voice dark.

“I crawled out of the stinking sewers.”

Jessie did something extraordinary, then: she turned around and began to walk away.

In the space behind her, she expected to hear screams, expected claws at her back, expected a fight she would have to will herself not to fight. There was no chaos. There was no rage. There was only the sound of Cassidy’s footsteps behind her, and as Jessie passed James, she listened to them quietly peter out.

James inhaled sharply, and Jessie’s protective instinct kicked in. She clenched her fists and fought the primal urge to whip her head around and deck Cassidy right in the face. If she had, she would’ve seen the blonde hanging all over James, again, wearing the same poison bubblegum voice she wore before, chipped red fingernails tucking a lock of his hair behind his ear.

“Don’t tell me you feel the same way…” she murmured. “James, dear? You’re just *so good* at this… I don’t think this is a chance you should throw away…”

Jessie’s back was turned, still. She felt flames seething up her spine. She couldn’t see them. All she could hear was the lust in Cassidy’s voice that charmed her so long ago. She waited. Waited for James to be the sheepish soul she knew he was, too afraid to be unkind even to the people who deserve it tenfold. She waited for James to awkwardly excuse himself, waited for him to bow respectfully, waited for him to apologize, waited for him to *leave her all alone forever, shitshitshit not that one, don’t think about*—

“I’d advise against offering opinions that nobody asked for, Cassidy,” James said, voice strangely composed. “It might spare you the embarrassing discovery of how little people care about your thoughts.”

Jessie’s eyes went wide, and she heard Meowth let out the first bit of an excitedly astonished cackle before he threw a paw over his mouth to stop it.

James began to walk, then, and Meowth and Wobbuffet stared at him, amazed, before they registered that the party was now leaving and began to follow. As he came to Jessie’s side, he offered her an arm, and with eyes shining and heart pounding, she locked his with her own and faced forward.

Before they began to move, James turned back to offer one last sentiment—

“I hope your day is as pleasant as you are!”
Jessie’s soul felt full. She’d always pictured it like an overflowing cup, as if whoever made her had placed a fountain above it and kept the button held down far too long when choosing what emotion she would feel in each moment. This time it was gratitude, and it bubbled up inside her, threatening to make her collapse into enchanted laughter.

*He stood up for me...* was all her thoughts could say.

“You’re passing up a serious opportunity, here!” Butch shouted as they walked.

Meowth turned over his shoulder, waving him off with a fanged smile.

“Ah, save yer breath, Bazinga!”

The sound of the duo losing it as the former Rockets walked off was beautiful, satisfying, melodious music to their ears.

Meowth was sitting on the balcony of one of Castelia’s hotels with his back paws dangling off the edge. After the stress of the previous day, they’d all agreed to book a room and just vegetate for a while. The near relapse into villainy had shaken up their world more than slightly, and the plan right now was to recuperate to better ease their minds. Once that was done, they’d be able to assess the situation and figure out how to stop it from ever happening again.

Jessie, James, and Wobbuffet were knocked right out in their beds. Meowth was almost certain that he’d never seen the humans sleep so soundly, which was strange given everything that had happened. There was hardly room to complain, though—the moon was full and the city was dazzling and even though he couldn’t see the stars too well, he considered it one of the more beautiful nights he’d seen lately.

The sound of the sliding glass door opening behind him jolted him out of his musings, and he breathed a sigh of relief when he realized it was just Greninja, out of its ball. A bit embarrassed at his lack of composure, Meowth grabbed his fluffed-up tail and wrung it in his hands to smooth the fur back out.

“Jeez, buddy, don’t scare me like that!” He pleaded, earnestly. “Ya move like... uh—like a ninja, I guess.”

Greninja said nothing, regarding him. It simply stalked over beside him and sat, cross-legged.

The night was still, and nothing was spoken between them, for a few moments. Below them, even the city was quiet, caught in the dead hours between sleeping and waking, where hardly a soul walked the streets.

When Greninja finally spoke, its voice was low, and warning, and the sudden intensity of it put Meowth right back on high alert.

*Keep yourself steady, scratch-cat,* it said to him.

There was a seriousness to it that sent a chill down Meowth’s spine, and he slowly turned to face the pokémon, expression uncertain.

“Hey, uh...” the cat stammered. “Whaddya mean?”

Greninja’s eyes bore into him.
I have ears and eyes even when you cannot see them, it said. And the path you nearly wandered down is not the one my master set you upon.

Meowth scratched the back of his head. “Yeah, I know, but… trust me, it’s not somet’in we’re gonna be dabblin’ in again.”

Correct. It is not. Greninja told him, and stood back up to leave. Because had you followed it to its end...

As it began to open the door back up, it turned around to Meowth again, the glare it shot the cat firm and confident and piercing.

...I would have obliterated you without a second thought.

Meowth swallowed, and Greninja looked away, uttering one last warning before returning back inside.

It would do you well to remember that.

The door shut behind him, and he saw the scarlet flash of Greninja returning to its pokéball softly cast alight the ground beneath. Meowth focused his eyes on the moon hanging above.

It wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but he couldn’t help but be struck with the thought that despite this, it was something so much better. Something necessary.

It was the truth.

Chapter End Notes

...sorry that the Butch and Cassidy chapter ended up being the "Jessie's a Sad Bi Trainwreck with a Personality Disorder" chapter? I'm actually not sorry, that's exactly what I wanted. Whoops.

I hope this one's okay. I've definitely been surprised before.

Thanks for the support and reviews, guys!! I can't believe I'm already mostly done with the region I was dreading most. The next chapter is going to be about one of my favourite characters, too, so!!! I can't wait to start on it.

As always, I'll continue to do my best!
Best Dressed, Best Wishes!

Chapter Notes

Sorry this one took so long and that it's so short and mellow in comparison... I wanted them to Rest.

August is ALWAYS a hectic month for me, and I had some commissions I'd been putting off that I needed to finish up! Hopefully you guys didn't mind waiting, I promise I definitely didn't enjoy making you wait.

This chapter is about one of my favourite pokegirls, tied only with Bonnie :’3 I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed channeling her spirit.

If you're an archive reader you can ignore this bit--but last chapter, I was asked to start noting what episodes are referenced in chapters so that people can watch them in preparation, if they want! I've gone back to the previous chapters and added those in my opening notes.

That being said, not many episodes are heavily referenced in this chapter! There's a pretty specific reference to DP146/Dressed for Jess Success, and to a stretch of the Meloetta Arc (BW085--BW093), but beyond that, not much!

Enjoy~!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even early in the day, when the sun had barely made its way across the sky, Nimbasa was a whirling city of lively and energetic faces. Where Castelia’s inhabitants shone with drive, and determination, and a steely grind that brought the promise of business and productivity, Nimbasa’s were a leisurely sister with her head in the clouds and her hair pressed gently against the grass.

The former Rockets had woken earlier than most of them would have liked, with the intention to see the sights and potentially beat the lines at the amusement park. Jessie was a terrifyingly exuberant morning person, much to the chagrin of the boys, who were not to be spoken to before at least two cups of coffee.

This didn’t exactly put a damper on their day, but they did have to rethink their strategy. The trio lagging behind Jessie and yawning were far more inclined to spend the day in a quiet little cafe enjoying the calm oasis of peace, and she was inclined to agree to spare herself their whining. If it didn’t matter, it was better to hit the rides on a day when they actually had the energy to spare.

As they made their way across the city, hopeful to find a place to eat and wind down, a shimmering object caught in Jessie’s peripheral, and she stopped and swiftly turned her head to glance at it. Still caught in a haze of early-morning brain fog, the boys were rammed directly into her one by one,
unprepared for the sudden halt in movement.

“Watch it!” Jessie chided.

“Ya can wake us up at five in da morning, or ya can expect us t’ leave da hotel wit’ our brains
switched on,” Meowth shot right back. “Pick one!”

She absorbed about half of his sass, caught up in the flyer as it hung there on the bricks. The paper it
was printed on was… excessive, to say the least. A glossy finish with holographic starbursts
dispersed throughout—something she could really only liken to one of James’ rare trading cards. She
wondered who on earth had the money to print something like this, likely multiple times, when a
normal black and white flyer would have easily sufficed. Jessie took all of this in long before she
actually read what the paper was advertising.

It was so, so extra. She absolutely loved it. It called to her.

“Elesa?” James was suddenly peering over her shoulder, reading the text adorning it. “She’s the gym
leader around these parts, right?”

Jessie shook off her spellbound trance, squinting as she scanned the object, finally taking in the
information herself. When she finished, the delight in her voice was obvious, tone shot up into the
excited octave range her friends were so tuned in to.

“It’s a fashion show!” She squealed. “Glitter! Glamour! Models! All kinds of new looks from
independent designers!”

Her tone immediately became serious, and what she said next was more of an order than a
suggestion.

“We have to go. Right now.”

“Not to shoot down your dreams,” James began. “But we’ll be waiting a while.”

He pointed to the date as it rested there, firmly declaring that the show wasn’t for another day.

“Where have you been?” Jessie said. “This is the perfect time to offer our services! We’re amazing
at fashion!”

“Dis looks like a big deal, Jess,” Meowth told her. “Ya really t’ink we’re gonna be able to just waltz
in there and make ourselves a part of it?”

“I don’t care if we’re running a concession stand!” She beamed. “I just want to experience it up
close!”

James and Meowth both looked to Wobbuffet, who was standing between them with no opinions of
value to offer, and was just happy to be thought of. They were all still way too tired to exist.

Jessie was already rushing off towards the gym, however—completely apathetic to any protests they
might have offered. She was so caught up in excitedly power-walking away that she didn’t even
notice the girl turning the corner, tugging at her deep blue hair with matching eyes nervously
downcast. Each held aloft in their own disconnected fantasies, the pair messily collided with each
other, and the two of them were slammed backwards onto the sidewalk.

Both of them yelped in surprised, and Jessie’s teammates all grinded to a halt, nearly tripping over
themselves and turning the accident into a full-on dogpile. Jessie cringed sharply at the impact, and
when she was finally able to force her eyes open, she came face to face with an apologetic—and familiar—twerpette.

“I’m so sorry!” Dawn was already knocked square on her butt, so she figured she might as well get on her hands and knees and start begging for forgiveness. “I should’ve been looking where I was going! I’m really sorry for the trouble!”

Jessie’s kneejerk anger instinct flickered out at the girl’s words. It was amazing, really—how easily it was immediately taken over by a much stronger urge, a feeling that had been buried down so deep she’d nearly forgotten it. Without thinking, she practically leapt to her feet and held out a hand, strangely kind.

“Let’s call it even, I was prepared for trouble.”

“If we’re exchanging apologies, make that double!”

“Remind me again,” Meowth rolled his eyes, stepping forward. “Was we in a hurry?”

“Wobbuffet!”

“T’anks, but I don’t t’ink you’ve ever hurried for anyt’in’ in yer life.”

Dawn immediately brought her gaze up to see the duo with their arms outstretched, uncharacteristically welcoming smiles adorning them. Slowly, she grabbed their hands and managed to bring herself back to her feet.

“Team Rocket?” She pondered aloud.

“Oh, right!” She piped back up, practically pulling her hair out, now. “I don’t have time to deal with you guys, I have a fashion show to work on!”

“Exactly that one!” Dawn panicked. “I’m supposed to be working on a dress right now and I haven’t even started and the show is tomorrow—”

Jessie turned back to her teammates with a wickedly proud grin on her face, muttering romantically under her breath. “Oh, kismet… I’ll never stop adoring how picturesque you can be when you favour me.”

She turned back to Dawn, words leveled. “Twerpette. Let us help.”
“Are you actually pulling my leg right now?!” was the response Dawn gave, and not much else.

“Sounds to me like you’ve got several people’s work to do in not a lot of time,” James offered.

“Why not quadruple it?”

“I dunno if I’m that desperate, yet,” she put her hands on her hips. “Even if I did let you, what could you do?!”

“Do ya know who yer talkin’ to?” Meowth said.

“How many times have our on-the-fly disguises fooled you in our heyday?” James added.

Dawn crossed her arms, then, seemingly lost in thought. They were definitely the Team Rocket she’d known, but even then, the troublemakers she’d known were… just that. Not very intimidating. Just people on the wrong side of history. She’d gotten along with them on some rare occasions when they’d had to band together to face a greater enemy, and believing that they had the capacity for kindness… wasn’t too out of the ordinary.

*I mean, if they’re plotting something, it’s not like they’re much of a threat…* she pondered.

“Okay, tell you what,” she finally said, unable to detect an ulterior motive. “We’re gonna walk to the fabric store, and we’re gonna shop, and it’s going to be super boring for you guys, and the entire time we’re there you’re also gonna be selling me on why I should listen to you, and if you can handle it, we’re gonna walk back to the gym, because my life is already so weird that this might as well happen.”

“A test of endurance!” Jessie grinned. “You’ve piqued my interest.”

“And tell me how on earth you got here while we’re walking,” Dawn said then, motioning for them to follow her. “I have so many questions.”

“No promises that it’ll answer any,” James said, following her. “All things considered, we’ve had just as many.”

Just like that, they were off on their next adventure. It felt uncanny, as of late—no legendary dragon-serpent threatening to vaporize them, no angry psychic type attempting to drown them, no old rivals with wicked grins offering a poison that smelled and looked so, so enticing. They hoped this meant another lucky break, for a while. None of them had really felt like they’d been able to breathe since they stepped foot in Unova.

Jessie was practically prancing as they followed behind her, still full of way too much energy for them to keep up with. Between her passionate excitement and Dawn’s nervous fidgeting, the rest of the team knew they were certainly in for a day.

Somehow, the passage of time had eluded all of them, and they were now nestled on the floor of a massive room deep inside the Nimbasa gym. It was thankfully one of the only rooms without a rollercoaster, which Jessie was very thankful for. She’d spent the whole ride down there absolutely screaming her head off in horror, and the subsequent twenty minutes trying to distract from an undignified phobia with complaints of how impractical of a mechanic it was.

Dawn took little convincing to believe that the former Rockets had gotten their act together. This was both completely surprising and entirely predictable to them as a group—they were on the fence about karma, but after standing on the cliff edge and staring into the abyss of temptation back in Castelia, they were *certain* they were going to get theirs soon. On the flipside, this twerpette in particular was
always… a lot like the Original Twerp. The more time they spent in her company, the more convinced they were that somehow, the two were separated at birth. They’d given her the rundown, surprised that they weren’t tired of telling the story yet. Dawn just smiled through it all with arms full of fabric.

Despite being brimming with questions, she barely questioned if they were for real or not, and it gave the quartet a strange sense of pride. Here they were, feeling lower than they had in awhile, more like villains than they had in months—but she seemed to trust them completely. It was refreshing, to say the least.

Presently, the majority of everyone’s pokémon were a room over, relaxing in a daycare-like enclosure full of toys and food. Elesa’s gym was more like a tiny mall than anything, and she’d left a good portion of her team back at the gym to mingle with Dawn’s own. The pokémon’s friendly chattering just barely made it through the walls, providing a playful soundtrack to their work.

Greninja, however, was a lone exception. The pokémon was understandably uneasy about letting the former Rockets out of its sights, a complete opposite to Dawn’s positive and confident outlook on them. It sat meditating in a corner, adjacent to the chaos of fabric and scissors and needles and thread, eyes closed and senses undoubtedly fine-tuned to everything around it.

James and Dawn sat leaned over the pattern that the latter had drawn up, carefully instructing measurements to Meowth as he cut fabric with sharpened claws. The design looked pretty air-tight, all things considered—it was a long, flowing, navy blue garment with a belt wrapped loosely around the waist. Halfway up the skirt, an ebony silhouette of Nimbasa’s skyline stood proudly. James could make out the landmarks, the gym, the ferris wheel… all of it came together to make for a lovely design.

“I just… can’t help but feel frustrated with it.” Dawn admitted, as James was regarding it.

“What’s da big deal?” Meowth asked, paws deep in work. “Looks great ta me.”

“Yeah, it’s not awful…” she said. “…but it’s missing something, and not knowing what that something is has been driving me up a wall.”

“Is that why you’ve got so much on your plate right now?” James inquired.

“Ugh, yes!” She ran a hand through her hair. “I can’t believe I’ve sunk so low. But every time I look at what I have so far I just… hate it.”

James tilted his head, trying to see what she saw. He considered himself an artist in the loosest, most vague terms—it was something he dabbled in but ultimately something that his childhood had more or less beat out of him early. He realized then that he’d never really gotten into the self-loathing stage of it—he’d always been a wide-eyed child with boundless confidence in his work.

Dawn must have needed some positive assurance, right? To be reminded that her design only looked bad to her because she spent all day toiling over it? He opened his mouth to let her know—

“It is absolutely lacking,” Jessie cut him off, and he almost shouted her name at the audacity before she continued. “But feeling bad over it isn’t going to help. What you need is a second opinion.”

To James (and Meowth’s) surprise, Dawn was almost immediately receptive. In Jessie’s harsh words, they watched her anxiety dissolve, some.

“That’s…” she said. “You’re—you’re the only person who’s actually been honest with me!”
Jessie raised an eyebrow. “Oh, god. No wonder you’re such a trainwreck over this. Are you surrounded by people who just praise you day and night? Are you starved for critique?”

“Yes!” Dawn practically shouted. “Like, everyone always told me this business was unforgiving. But I think they were thinking of something else, because even I’m tired of being told there’s no need to worry.”

“Well,” Jessie said, peering deeper into the design. “If you’re asking me, you shouldn’t be shooting for elegance.”

“Wait, really?”

Jessie nodded. “We need glamour where we’re going.”

“Yeah?” Dawn said, resting her face in her hand. “How do you think?”

“Twerpette, have you seen these flyers? They’re printed on glitter paper,” she explained. “I mean, do you really think people here are expecting the hautest of haute couture?”

“Okay, fair point!” Dawn admitted. “As much as I love the feedback, though, I do have some concerns about where it’s coming from.”

“Oh, dere it is.” Meowth commented from behind them, not taking his eyes off his work.

“I assure you, kid, I’m not on a path of sabotage,” Jessie said. “Much as I wish I did, I don’t actually have a ponyta in this race.”

“No, that’s not it at all!” She put her hands up, gesturing transparency. “I mean, this isn’t just about looks. It’s about performance, too. I was a pretty solid Coordinator before fashion, so I think I might have the upper-hand in knowing what to do in those regards!”

Jessie’s eyebrow twitched, and an almost unhinged grin crept onto her face, and James and Meowth stopped what they were doing for the sole purpose of sharing The Look that they gave each other when they knew wholeheartedly that their teammate was about to unleash something.

With flawless precision, she pulled two perfectly round frames out of her pocket and put them on, their gold finish shimmering in the lights of the workroom.

“You and your pokémon aren’t the only ones who’ve seen the spotlight, of course!”

Dawn was almost awestruck, but more than that it looked like she was connecting points in her head that suddenly made way too much sense.

“Y… you were Jessilina?”

“Her spirit still breathes within me!” Jessie declared. “Those were such glamourous days for my life as a Coordinator… I miss them dearly.”

“Yeah, hey, not t’ distract from this beautiful revelation, but,” Meowth began. “Didya just keep those glasses on ya all these years?!?”

“You know I’m a hoarder of sentimentality, Meowth.”

“Oh trust me, I know! Between you ‘n’ Jimmy over dere we might as well start weighing da balloon down wit’ yer junk!”
She shoved him out of her breathing room and went back to addressing Dawn.

“With our superb Coordinator talent combined, we’ve absolutely got this in the bag!” She beamed.

“You know… you’re right!” Dawn said, mirroring her enthusiasm after a moment’s hesitation. Then, a wicked grin found its way to her. “Just don’t change your style four times over the course of this design process, Ms. Jessilina!”

“The nerve!”

As the hours passed, Jessie and James both were finding themselves unable to visualize what exactly it was that the dress was missing. They’d pushed Dawn to let them all make what was more or less a 3D rough draft, and perhaps in a fit of desperation, she was willing to comply. Thankfully enough, it took no time at all with their combined hands and claws.

They were circling around it like two hungry mandibuzz, now, and Dawn was back in a corner sewing some of the more solid parts of the dress that she knew were unlikely to be drafted out. Greninja had fallen asleep, somehow. Wobbuffet had come in from the playroom to offer emotional support. The only sound that could be heard in the quiet concentration was the hum of the sewing machine and the droned-out, slow patter of feet on linoleum.

Dawn creaked her chair across the floor, stretching as she stood up. A quiet alarm had started to sound from her pokétch, and the other occupants of the room hadn’t even registered it until the machine was flipped off. They turned to her, and she gave them a quick wave.

“Oh, no need to worry!” She told their curious looks. “That’s just my reminder to eat. I have a habit of getting kinda sucked into work. Bring you something back from the kitchen?”

Dawn had opened the door to the hall now, and the team were about to open their mouths and offer an enthusiastic yes. Before a word could pass anyone’s lips, however, a sharp clanging noise from the other room rang through the building, and the sound of tiny footsteps that followed it grew ominously louder and louder. Dawn was looking around wildly in slight panic, unsure of what to expect, and she hardly even noticed her piplup shoot through her legs and tear after Elesa’s emolga.

No one really had time to take in or process the scene as it unfolded. Emolga looked annoyed at best, but Piplup was about as fired up as a water pokémon could be. Whatever their squabble had been, it had left Piplup infuriated enough to chase the other pokémon clean into another room with little disregard to any important business that was happening within said room.

Dawn was sputtering at her pokémon, trying to get him to calm down, but he wasn’t hearing any of it—Piplup jumped a few feet, reeled back, and fired off a Bubblebeam in Emolga’s direction, knocking the rodent back into the wall.

Piplup’s impassioned shout as he did this followed by the sound of a pokémon being flung against a wall jolted Greninja awake, and its reflexes completely took over. From behind the work area, it materialized a Cut attack, and sliced the off a chunk of the dress’s lower half.

Jessie and James didn’t have much time to scream in agony about the dress being partially destroyed, because currently they were screaming at the other side of the chaos, where Emolga was beginning to glow a brilliant yellow and fire up a Spark. Piplup immediately snapped out of his rage and
retreated behind his trainer’s leg, and Dawn gave him the most incredulous, exasperated look that anyone in the room had ever seen. She didn’t stand a chance to begin with—the brunt of the weak electric attack hit her and Piplup, throwing them backwards into an exhausted, staticy pile.

The former Rockets hadn’t noticed until just this moment, but somewhere along the way, they had shut their eyes tight in fear. Realizing they’d have to open them to survey the damage eventually, they slowly did so, taking in the view of what they expected to be their best chance at a rough draft—now tattered in ribbons from Greninja’s attack.

Greninja was on its knees beside the dress, bowing its head respectfully in sincere apology, completely embarrassed that it had let its guard down like that. As their eyes followed the natural path from the pokémon to the dress in question, their hearts absolutely sank in relief.

The cut was clean. Not a single frayed scrap or string. It was at an angle, sure, but all at once they realized…it looked better. The long and flowing look wasn’t at all suited to the theme. None of them had even considered just lobbing a good chunk of it off for a much more energized look.

“Greninja, get up!” James beamed. “This is almost perfect, you have nothing to apologize for!”

The pokémon froze, peering up at them. “Gre…?”

“Almost perfect,” Jessie repeated, then raised her voice an octave, so charmed by the happy accident that she completely forgot the chaos that birthed it. “Twerpette, can you come look at this?”

Dawn didn’t say a word of response. She was dazed on the ground, eyes swimming with stars, unable to battle.

“Twerpette?”

The group turned to face her and saw her there, hysterical smile painted on her face, hair positively shimmering with thousands upon thousands of sparkling static stars.

She could offer no sentiments to them, she simply choked out a few choice words that sounded more like an embarrassing nickname than a coherent sentence, and remained momentarily immobilized by the attack. Piplup regained his mind before her, shaking her awake, guilty tears in his eyes. He hardly even noticed Emolga slipping out the door.

Wobbuffet and Meowth were similarly at Dawn’s side, trying to make sure she was still bound to this world. James stayed transfixed on the sparkles festooning her hair like a shining crown.

“Oh, muse,” he said, softly, to no one in particular. “How curious a creature you are.”

Dawn was suddenly regretting jumping at the opportunity to take such a high balcony seat in the auditorium. It was definitely all inside of her head, but knowing that didn’t make the feeling go away—the lack of air up here was strangling her. The nervousness she was so unaccustomed to had cranked itself up to eleven and she couldn’t help but retrace all of the events that had lead up to this moment.

When did she start feeling like this? In the beginning, things were so easy. She could crank out a design and be happy with it, tweaking it along the way. She’d made close to ten now in the time she’d been here, and she knew she was good at it by the cheers the crowd gave whenever they would see her work. So why?

Bass boomed around her as she wrung the back of her neck with a free hand. Jessie had hit the nail
on the head before, she concluded. Dawn liked to think of herself as a person with some common
sense—and as such, she knew nobody was perfect. There’s no reason she would be the exception.
So when people had nothing but praise to offer for her designs, her head filled in for them—
peppering her with unconstructive nitpicks, telling her she needed to change things but refusing to
specify what.

It was maddening. The feeling had only grown with every new design over the past few months, and
she agonized. She knew she could overcome any hurdle that the world threw at her, but her least
favourite part of that was figuring out where to even start.

Piplup was finely tuned into his trainer’s feelings, and even if he wasn’t, he could tell by the look on
her face just how sick she felt watching designs go down the aisle. A physical presence wasn’t
exactly his strong suit, he’d try and pat a friend on the back only for his flippers to move
mechanically and awkwardly and not at all convey the tenderness he’d hoped. The best he could do
for Dawn was chatter excitedly in her direction. Small talk might not have been exactly what she
needed, especially with a bit of a language barrier between them, but it was a distraction, and it was
definitely welcome.

“There are so many good designs here!” Dawn said over the music, her tone a mixture of anxiety
and admiration, and from beside her, Jessie piped in.

“Really? This entire time I was sitting here kind of unimpressed.”

“You can’t mean that…” she responded incredulously, and then turned when Piplup alerted her to
look at the newest look out on the runway. “Oh my Arceus, look at the trim on that one!”

“Sorry,” Jessie interrupted her. “Is that a thing that people in Sinnoh actually say?”

“I do not have time for culture shock right now!” Dawn immediately answered, practically hanging
over the railing as she peered at the designs below. “Look at the talent here! We don’t stand a
chance!”

“Relax, twoipette,” Meowth offered. “Ya said dat da last dress in da show is da one Elesa picked as
her favourite, right? Sure is funny how we haven’t seen yours yet.”

“Yeah, or she just straight-up threw it out!”

“Please,” James said. “If she let that gaudy red-and-pink frou-frou nightmare fly, I’m positive we’re
fine.”

Dawn actually laughed at this, completely caught off-guard, and Piplup couldn’t help but brighten
up. It was the first time he’d seen her optimistic self back all week.

As the minutes left in the show became less and less, Dawn found it curious how her companions
got more excited and she only felt more and more unnerved. She tried to breathe, tried to take her
own advice, but deep down she knew that she wouldn’t be okay until the second she saw her dress
on the runway. The girl knew that comparing her designs to every other one she saw was art poison,
but it was all she could do to aid her racing mind—furiously taking down mental notes of precisely
what every single one of them did right.

After what felt like forever, there was a change in the tempo of the music, and the crowd’s applause
began to swell alongside the swimming lights of the stage. Dawn clasped her hands together in a
begging reverence, unsure of what she was praying for, unsure of what she was feeling other than
‘bursting.’
The crowd positively erupted into cheers. It was almost deafening. Dawn could feel their shouts pricking bumps onto her skin, as if a thousand mothim were fluttering inside her heart, bumping at the walls of it, threatening to break forth. Piplup had to peck furiously at her arm for her to even dream of opening her eyes, shouting his name over the resounding cries of the auditorium.

Dawn forced herself to drift back to the waking world, and swallowing hard, she looked down at Elesa.

The woman was absolutely tearing a fierce trot down the runway, smile on her face bright as ever, blowing kisses and waving to her audience, her mere presence a walking performance. Dawn felt the same pang of inspiration she always felt when she saw Elesa in her element—a hope that she, too, could someday invoke those kinds of feelings just by smiling near people. Her long black hair framed her face better than ever, angling her features but somehow not taking away from the softness she seemed to emit. It was amazing how she practically danced down the stage in heels, never once stumbling, her whole vibe in sync with the music.

That’s when Dawn registered the whole picture, finally—it was her dress. The completed product. What both her and her former enemies had banded together in a single night to breathe life into. Elesa was working it, and adoring it, and the crowds were cheering not only for the gym leader, but for Dawn herself.

Across Nimbasa’s skyline, emblazoned on the dress, hundreds of meticulously sewn sequins brandished themselves. Dawn had stayed up early into the hours of the morning making sure not a single one was out of place. She didn’t realize until she saw the whole outfit in action just how incredible it really looked—as the lights of the stage hit them, they shone with every colour of the rainbow, casting the image of the city iridescently aglow. One by one, in the dark night sky of the dress, Nimbasa’s lively alternative to stars flickered on—a splash of colour in a region that boasted black and white.

The contrast against the darkness of the skyline looked breathtaking, and Dawn felt her eyes begin to well up with tears. She wished, more than anything, that she could’ve taken credit for the idea. More than she was disheartened, though, she was carried aloft by the indescribable feeling that somehow, everything was going to be alright.

The former Rockets had since grabbed her into a massive, crushing, group hug, several of them crying unabashedly. Piplup was crying, too, clinging onto her for dear life. Her head was the only part of her body she could move in the wake of it, and saying nothing, she took in the expression on every single face in the building.

Elesa’s was the last she stopped on, smiling up at the girl before grabbing her mic and thanking everyone for showing up.

When the show was finally over, Dawn and the former Rockets were splayed out on the floor of the workroom, their hair a collective mess as it ran together like mixed paint. Breathing a synced sigh of relief, they mindlessly discovered shapes in the popcorn ceiling above.

The door being thrown open pulled them out of their reverie, and Elesa nothing short of pulled Dawn to her feet. In reality, she was patient with the girl’s obvious exhaustion, but Dawn could tell that she had a lot to say with regards to that night.
Dawn!” Elesa was glowing. “That was some of your best work yet, I can’t believe it!”

Elesa’s words and her electrifying presence had certainly shot some life into Dawn. As much as she wanted to ride that high, to live on that feeling, she never was too good at not wearing her feelings on her sleeve.

“Thank you so much Elesa, but…” she turned to half-face the trio, who were now sitting up and watching carefully. “...I can’t take full credit. If I’m being honest, I had a lot of help from my… um…”

The woman peered into her, waiting for her to finish.

“...from my friends.”

The former Rockets were surprised at how their collective heart swelled at the words. How many times had such sentiments been directed at them sincerely?

“I really only set the stage for this design,” Dawn admitted. “It was these three who really brought the charm up.”

“Well, well!” Elesa said, but her smile was understanding despite the admonishment in her tone. “Not like you to solicit help at all, Ms. Independant! What happened?”

“I, I just—” Dawn stammered. “I couldn’t settle on a design I was happy with, and no one was giving me good feedback, and I’d taken on so many previous projects, it got down to the point where I had so much to do in so little time, and I got overwhelmed and happened to run into some old friends—”

“Dawn,” Elesa stopped her, dragging out her name a second time, hands affectionately on her shoulders. “Daaaawn.”

Dawn quieted herself, and breathed, and looked up at her.

“You’ve got a lot of spunk!” Elesa said. “A lot of optimism, too. It’s not the end of the world when those things run dry, though!”

“I know, I know…” the girl responded. “But I don’t want to be encouraged all the time. I don’t want generalized positivity thrown my way, Elesa—it just messes with my brain.”

“How do you mean?”

“I need to be told what I can do better, too,” Dawn told her. “No matter how much faith you have in me, I need you to be a little hard on me too. Because if you’re not, I’m just going to be hard on myself, and honestly? That just isn’t me.”

Elesa removed her hands from the girl’s shoulders, expression even softer now, and threw her head back into a charmed laugh.

“Only you, Dawn!” She grinned, and put a hand on her hip. “I can do that for you. But only on one condition.”

Dawn tilted her head. “What’s that?”

Elesa produced from the pocket of her jacket a thick envelope, handing it to the girl.

“Your commission,” she told her. “Take this and for heaven’s sake, love, you and your friends
spend a share of it at the amusement park. You need a vacation right now.”

“Can’t I just vacation by laying on the floor until I melt into a ditto?”

“Consider it your punishment!” Elesa said, still grinning. “Your friends were kind enough to help you out. It’s only natural to share the spoils with them!”

Dawn looked down, a little embarrassed.

“Sorry about all this, Elesa,” she suddenly said. “I just want to get better as soon as I can, and… I kinda just… go into warp drive sometimes.”

“Dawn, dear,” Elesa said. “You’re young and beautiful and have all the time in the world. It’s very important to work hard, but do you know what’s even more sacred?”

“What?”

“Having fun.”

Elesa pushed the cash into her hands again, placing her own hand atop Dawn’s affectionately.

“Now go,” she said. “For designing a wonderful dress. Take it and have the time of your life with these people who obviously care about you a lot!”

“Are you sure that’s it?”

“Knowing how much of a workaholic you are, I think it’s more than fair,” Elesa winked.

The sunset brought with it a pleasant chill, and the group found their collective solace in the white noise of theme park as it swam around them. Lights slowly began to blink on. For every star cast far away from the glowing city, an artificial one took its place. They shone brilliantly, unafraid that they were any less, confident that they made this niche of the world exactly what it was.

Former Rockets at any manner of theme park were a forced to be reckoned with. Jessie had a habit of falling in love with every single oversized plush prize she saw, and James had a habit of being criminally good at every single carnival game ever. Naturally, one would think this was ideal—but in lieu of any home base they had being out of the picture, they no longer had the room to hoard unnecessary items of leisure. Jessie was having some trouble adjusting to this fact.

“I want that giant wobbuffet,” she’d said.

“You have an actual, real-life wobbuffet,” James kept walking. “He is standing next to you.”

“Precisely,” Jessie had told him. “I’d much prefer one that keeps quiet.”

“Wob~ ba!” Her pokémon retorted, and Meowth had to keep himself from laughing at how nonchalantly Wobbuffet had called her coldblooded.

The night was cool and calm and precisely what Dawn had needed after such a long grind. She was so unused to stress, so unused to her optimism wavering. There were a few unkind hours, before everything was said and done, where she was wholly convinced that she had lost her stride. That her
days of artistry were behind her.

There, with old enemies made friends, smiling in the shimmer of the theme park, she wondered when that doubt had managed to creep inside her. Right now, Dawn felt nothing but hopeful for the future of all of them.

Jessie was timid in the face of most fast-paced rides, biting anyone’s head off when they inquired if her usual unwavering demeanour had cracks in it. She’d file her nails and re-tie her hair and put her eyes anywhere that weren’t on the interrogators, because she wasn’t scared, she just didn’t see the point in screaming for a measly three minutes as a leisurely activity, honestly.

Jessie wouldn’t have stopped any of the others from enjoying those rides without her, but communication definitely wasn’t her strong suit. As it was, all of them compromised and ended up on the Rendez-View ferris wheel as it quietly drifted through the night, carrying them upwards towards the stars.

“My, my,” Jessie said, staring out at the expanse as it lay like a painting beyond the gondola’s windows. “It certainly has been a while.”

“It has, hasn’t it?” James added. “The last time we rode this ferris wheel, we were plotting some pretty nasty deeds.”

“Time flies…” Meowth concluded. “What about you, twoipette? T’ings have been so hectic, we barely even got t’ talk.”

“Oh! Well, um…” Dawn began. “I suppose I did sit there and listen to your wild stories without really giving any of my own…”

“It was a fair trade, for what it was,” James told her. “For all you knew, we were still just as dastardly as ever.”

“I suppose that’s true enough!” Dawn responded. “Although… if we’re being honest, I pretty much believed you from the get-go.”

“That trusting heart is gonna get you taken advantage of one day, you know!” Jessie said.

“Is that not normal?” The girl inquired. “You guys aren’t that scary.”

“So we’re learning,” Jessie said, and there was a certain solemn in her voice as she gazed out the window.

There was a short silence, not uncomfortable, but still leaving something to be desired, and Dawn was the one to break it.

“I was out here a while back, too,” she said. “I came to visit Ash! And see the sights, I suppose.”

“Oh, right!” James said. “Back in the Meloetta days…”

“I’d radder we don’t dwell on dose,” Meowth butted in. “We’ve had enough reflectin’ on da darker days for one story-arc, yeah? Finish ya story, kid.”

“Ha, well…” she continued. “At the time, fashion was just kind of a side interest of mine, y’know? Nothing I really planned on pursuing… but I saw one of Elesa’s shows and it just… planted some kinda seed in me. Something… different than what contests made me feel, I guess.”
“How do you think?” Jessie asked her.

“It’s like… a contest performance is cool, right? But think about it…” she paused to think. “All those people show up to cheer for you. And what they get is an amazing performance, but even then, that’s just… a memory.

“Any good Coordinator will tell you that without an audience, we’re nothing. Even if every judge says yes to our routine, they’re only in that building to judge us because people want to see us perform.

“In the end, despite being the total foundation of contests, I just… don’t feel like we give enough back to the people who got us there,” she raised her voice an octave, suddenly a tad defensive. “That isn’t to say that I’m disenchanted with the contest scene at all! It’s still something I love with all my heart. But…

“Fashion is more tangible art, you know?” Dawn looked at her feet, smile radiating a humility far beyond her years. “You can put a design out there, and in return for their support, the people who love your work can keep it with them forever. I just… think that’s kind of beautiful, you know?”

Predictably, James was on the verge of tears at Dawn’s words, and Jessie couldn’t help but feel something resonating inside of her, too. Like most things that elicited an emotional response in her, her brain decided to be irritated at this.

“Honestly, can’t believe…” she grumbled.

“No. You’re ridiculously wise, and I’m disgustingly jealous,” Jessie said with an annoyed sense of self-awareness. “I wish I had figured out all that before my time in the contest spotlight ended. The stuff about us owing it to our audiences, I mean. I worry that I never truly did hit my prime…”

“Hey, no need to worry!” The girl beamed at her. “Just because you’re on this whole new adventure now doesn’t mean your time in the spotlight is up! Consider it a really long rest day. Heck, this conversation might as well be homework, yeah?”

“I think you’ll find that the term ‘rest-day’ is fairly alien to Jessie.” James smirked.

“Excuse you, Mr. Slacker!” Jessie huffed in response. “Not my fault I value action.”


“Oh my god, that was one time,” Jessie shot back. “I wanted to be there myself!”

“And point,” James concluded.

Dawn was looking understandably perplexed, and noticing this, James turned away from his teammate and back to her to clarify—

“That’s probably a story for later,” he said. “In retrospect, it is one of our better ones.”

“I probably can’t judge much!” Dawn told him, and then turned to face Jessie herself. “I mean, the whole reason we’re even here together right now is because I don’t know how to slow down. Starly of a feather, huh?”
Jessie smiled genuinely at this, unused to people connecting with her in a way that didn’t make her feel vulnerable and open and bleeding.

“I suppose so.”

Another silence. This time, more comfortable. The wheel came to a stop, and they waved to the controller to let him know they were good for another trip. In the late night atmosphere where only a handful breathed, they ascended freely once more.

“I really love it here,” Dawn said, suddenly. “I can’t help but feel it was the region itself that called to me most.”

“You know,” James said, eyes fixed on the smattering of lights and people below. “Unova’s really done a number on us. Maybe it… maybe there’s something about these lands that invokes a deep sense of reflection in people.”

“I can understand how that feels,” the girl affirmed. “I mean, I really like what I do here! Honing my skills as a design intern, and all. The whole time before this, though, I felt so torn. Between my original goal and what I ended up falling in love with and being pretty good at.”

“Ah, man,” Meowth said. “If dat doesn’t resonate.”

“That’s the other thing about being in Unova, too…” Dawn’s tone was oddly philosophical, as if she was repeating something she’d heard in a tall tale long ago. “You’ll hear lots about ‘truth and ideals'. My ideal would have been to just go on writing fashion articles before going back to being a Coordinator like my mom... but my truth ended up being that I fell in love with designing and didn’t want to leave it any time soon.”

The quiet that ended up falling over the group made her a little nervous, and she quickly backpedaled, realizing how serious she had inadvertently made things sound. Her voice got lighter, more playful.

“It’s just funny, is all!” She said. “The idea that a change of atmosphere can change you entirely. It seems silly right up until it happens!”

“Nah, yer definitely ont’ somet’in,” Meowth told her, crossing his arms. “Dat divide is real, y’know? I guess our ideal was that we wanted t’ go on a painless journey where we didn’t ever have ta face da people dat we was before.”

“Granted,” James interjected. “We knew we’d have apologies to give. We knew we’d probably take a few beatings in atonement. But I think there might have been a certain… detachment from who we were then and who we are now. As if we have their memories, but not their hearts.”

“I think that’s normal, though,” Dawn said. “When you change with the years, it’s way easier to think of your past self as… your past self, not... just you.”

“Unova did something terrifying, though,” James continued. “It put those past selves—I mean, it put us—up against the one group of people who we were never prepared to beg for the forgiveness of.”

The girl peered into him as he shared a look with his teammates. “Who’s that?”

“Us.”

In the silence of the still air, James let the words sink in. His teammates remained quiet, unable to say it better themselves. He was right, of course—as soon as the reality of their redemption quest had
sunk in, the entire group were making lists in their head. Of the people they’d hurt, of the people they needed to seek closure with, of the people they would gladly take a blast-off from if it meant a clear conscience. The list was overwhelming, and decades long, and every name tattooed itself maddeningly onto their skin. The list went on and on and on into forever before they ever once noticed their own names square in the center of it.

Dawn sat there across from them, the lights of the theme park illuminating her through the window as if she were atop a throne of kings. When she spoke, the empathy in her voice was something they were certain could transcend language itself.

“So you’ve found your truth,” she told them, strangely quiet despite her signature optimism. “But that doesn’t mean it’s something you have to process right away.”

Jessie peeked out of her steel fortress, looking down at Dawn from its barbed-wire fence. “...you think?”

“You’ve all got plenty of time. Life is only short in the grand scheme of things, right?” She smiled. “For the people living it, it’s the longest thing there is!”

In response to this, the redhead cracked a sly smile. “Sure your truth is designing clothes and not motivational wall-hangings, No-Worries-Twerpette?”

“Oh, make no mistake, by the time I’ve made it big in this scene, I’m definitely going to find a way to combine the two,” she snarked right back. “It just seems natural.”

The group nodded in mock-seriousness, proud of the bit they’d cultivated, and Dawn couldn’t help but break character and let out a charmed laugh.

“You gotta look for the convenient things when tackling the hard ones,” she said, then. “That divide between truth and ideals, black and white, whatever you wanna call it... it was heavy, but it also kinda reminded me of home, how Sinnoh’s divided by Mt. Coronet. It might sound like a stretch, but when I was able to make things familiar, I honestly just felt like I was setting off from Twinleaf again.”

“Ah, Sinnoh,” Meowth said, almost romantically. “Bout time we made our way dere, huh?”

“You could probably learn some stuff there, too,” Dawn told him. “I miiiight be biased, but it is a lot comfier of a region.”

“I do seem to recall enjoying our time there a lot,” Jessie added. “But then again, I was constantly on stage and being cheered for.”

“There’s a lot to do there!” Dawn said. “And a lot to learn. I think it’ll be a bit more forgiving to you, though.”

“Guess we both needed to hear what Elesa had to say, eh?” James asked her, gaze fixated outside. “It’s important to bleed, and important to heal.”

Dawn grinned again, taking in the night air, the view. She was acutely aware, just then, that somewhere in the day, her body had finally relaxed. The soreness of all her muscles no longer being clenched tight crept into her, but she couldn’t help but be annoyed with it. It was a beautiful, middle-of-the-road feeling, like twilight in her nerves—she’d worked hard, and now she could rest.

Dawn gave good advice, and seldom followed it herself. This time, though, she was confident that she’d be taking her own words to heart.
Hanging there in the black air, they felt weightless.

It was late in the day when the former Rockets finally decided to set off, and they couldn’t help but feel a pang of sadness as Dawn walked them to the edge of the city. After all Unova had put them through, after the challenges and confrontations and ugly reflections of who they’d been, Dawn’s presence was an incredible comfort. Just when they felt as if they weren’t deserving of a break, she was there to remind them that hardship does not mean the end of good times.

*Of course it would be her,* James found himself thinking as he pondered the whole scenario. *She always did retain a certain sunny outlook.*

Dawn sat beside them, smile bright as ever, feeling as if nothing short of a miracle had brought her old enemies into her hands. Yes, the win was not entirely her own—but if not for it, if not for them, if not for their confidence in place of her own, how long would it have taken her to make the breakthrough that she did? To tell her mentor her problems without fear of letting her down?

*Of course it would be them,* Dawn realized. *They never did give up, even when things went downright catastrophic for them.*

“Dis is where we take off!” Meowth declared. “Partin’ is such sweet sorrow.”

“He’s right, you know,” James agreed. “Somehow, I find saying goodbye to you harder than anyone so far, twerpette.”

“Geez, I dunno what to say,” she offered. “All I did was be an anxious wreck around you guys for a few days!”

“Still, I think you’re exactly the kind of person we needed to run into,” Jessie said. “I know you’re not responsible for the beauty of fate, but there’s still something to be said for that.”

“Well, I guess all I can say is thanks!” Dawn beamed. “For everything, really. Who knows where I’d be right now if you hadn’t shown up.”

“We should be off to Sinnoh soon enough,” James told her. “Anyone there you’d like us to pass a message to?”

“No one I don’t already talk to regularly, I don’t think!” She told them, then paused. “Although…you did say that was Ash’s greninja, yeah? So I take it you’ll be running to his parts eventually?”

“You bet!” Meowth affirmed. “Pallet’s da last stop we’re hittin’ up, but we definitely intend to make it there.”

“Hands up,” she said bluntly, and the lot of them were a bit caught off guard by how instant the demand was.

“We’re ex-cons, twerpette, that’s not exactly a statement we’re elated to hear—”

“Just work with me here, alright?”

Hesitantly, James raised his arms, and with the biggest, brightest smile, the girl high fived him with all she had.

“That’s from me,” she said. “To Ash. He’ll know what it means, okay?”
James stiffened a bit, unsure of if he was going to be able to deliver with as much energy as she had, but determined to at the very least try.

“I’ll make sure it gets to him,” he said.

Dawn’s eyes shone like the surface of the ocean when the dipping sun hit them, and as they were about to part ways, she told them something they didn’t know the needed to hear.

“Best wishes,” she said, and her voice sunk to the pit of their hearts like drizzled honey, warm and sweet and inviting and safe.

Jessie couldn’t help but inquire. “What’s that?”

“Unova is rough and unforgiving, and you do hear a lot about truth and ideals, you do end up doing a lot of hard reflecting,” Dawn told them. “But you’ll also hear an awful lot of people wishing you nothing but the best when you set off to confront those truths and ideals. That’s what makes the region worth it.”

She gave her words a moment to register, then spoke again. “That’s how you part ways in Unova. With an affirmation that no matter what happens, you hope that people end up happy. It’s something I learned here and probably something I’ll always keep with me.”

“Suppose we had to earn it, huh?” Jessie said, then closed her eyes, exhaling with a smile. “Best wishes, twerpette.”

“Best wishes, Team Rocket.”

As their footsteps echoed down the dirt road, towards their balloon, Jessie couldn’t help but inquire —

“Lesson or no lesson,” she said. “I still wish the karmic retribution of the universe would’ve given us a little warning that it was going to strike hard the second we landed here.”

“Eh, y’know what dey say, Jess…”

“Hm?”

“It’s always darkest before da dawn.”

Pidove fluttered out of the trees beside them at the sound of her heel shoving him straight into a bush.

Chapter End Notes

I've felt kinda garbage about these last few chapters, and it definitely peaked with this one, ehe. I was agonizing over it the entire time I was writing it, worrying that not enough happened, and that Dawn kinda took the focus when previously it had always been about the TRio.

That being said, pretty much every good and coherent part of this chapter was Ven, so if
you liked something, chances are he literally ghostwrote it xD

Unova has been just as tough for me as it has been for the Rockets, tbh. It's a region I don't find myself very well acquainted with, so I really hope that I did it justice. I know things got really heavy here, and for some that was awesome, but I plan on keeping this a pretty balanced story overall. Meowth's awful dad joke was entirely on point.

Honestly thanks so much for all the support, you guys. I felt really meh about the last two chapters, only for the reviews to tell me that they were some of the best yet. Now they're some of my favourite things I've ever written. I seriously mean this--I could not survive this landscape without y'all. A multichapter is a scary undertaking I've never succeeded at before, but because of the comments you guys leave, I'm more confident about seeing DTE to its end than ever.

Ven and I love writing this story and we love that you love it, too. Thank you so much. I cannot wait for Sinnoh.

As always, I will do my best!
Thanks for your patience! By request, the episode referenced in this chapter is:

-DP117/"Noodles, Roamin’ Off!"

There's a lot of direct referencing that one, so maybe watch it for a refresher! If you've seen it before, you're probably solid.

Thanks to /r/ramen who this chapter would probably not be good without.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Entering Sinnoh from the North was, admittedly, not one of their brightest ideas.

It seemed innocent enough. Drifting along, seeing the sights, maybe picking up some work in a town or two? Stopping to camp in a nice forest along the road? It wasn’t until the frigid winds started blowing in and the former Rockets saw the telltale landmarks of Snowpoint City that they realized oh. We might not be as well equipped to handle this as we would like.

Being adaptable to tricky situations was something that the quartet boasted and took great pride in. While their enemies were trailing through the rain unprepared, they were quietly unfolding their umbrellas, always prepared for the worst. Of course they had coats. Heavy, warm, inviting ones, even. The fashion of these garments, however, was outdated—lacking in style—and both Jessie and James were more than a little pathetic, huddled in the corner of the balloon, hoping no one would notice them dressed in last year’s looks.

“Humans, honestly,” Meowth shook his head, standing atop Wobbuffet to properly man the fire.

“Wob~ba.”

“Allow me my vanity,” Jessie wailed, slumped down and eyes unfocused. “The trials of this journey have taken enough of my bite already.”

“Wish dat was true for my own sake,” the cat responded, peering over the edge of the basket at the sparkling white scenery underfoot, and maybe it was, because she didn’t have it in her to pull him into a headlock at that moment.

Jessie more or less threw off her jacket the second the air began to warm up. The team rolled their eyes, but they were used to it, by now—she embraced cold weather like a lifelong friend. Soon enough, the others followed suit, and the sun began to warm them ever so slightly.

James was standing, now, head propped up in his palms as he watched the trees quietly exist below. A small town along the route began to take shape in the blurry horizon, and he hardly had time to process the idea before he was saying it out loud.

“Say,” he began. “If we’re south of Snowpoint… doesn’t that mean we’re close to Christopher’s dive?”
Meowth’s fur stood slightly, unprepared for the memory to resurface so suddenly, unused to the sensation of guilt despite everything that had gone on since. He swallowed.

“Right about,” he said, a little darkly. “Whaddya say? Wanna drop in? Or is it too soon after da last time I left yous for dead?”

It wasn’t supposed to sound so unkind. Not to anyone beyond Meowth himself, at least. Jokes were the only way he really knew how to deal with his own demons, and it wasn’t something that always hit with the people around him.

“I can handle it,” Jessie rolled her eyes. “So long as you don’t let the sweet, starchy goodness get to that fuzzy little head of yours. James?”

Despite the painful reflection, he found it hard to refuse the idea. “Our adventures as of late have been a little too serendipitous a little too often. The idea of actually planning something is a change I’ll welcome!”

“Ugh, why didn’t I realize that until you said it? Did the Twerp rub off on us? Don’t answer that.” Jessie said. “In any case, there’s no better cure for a boring routine than a face-full of noodles!”

“Ain’t dat da truth!”

“Wobbuffet!”

Still early in the day, the small, roadside town didn’t have much going on yet. Despite the silence of the space, there was a definite, welcoming presence emanating from inside Christopher’s shop, and the former Rockets could smell the unmistakable scent of freshly-set broth wafting through the air.

They let themselves take it in, this time, as they approached. The humble little shop—the start of so many more—and at the very front of it, adorning the sign… their names. Jessie and James’ Ramen.

If you really think about it, James reflected. This was our first slice of karma.

A whole chain of successful restaurants named after them. And all it cost them was a hot meal for a friend in need, and some words of assurance that there is more to life than villainy.

The group let out a collective breath—more of excited anxiety than fearful—and pushed their way through the door.

“Knock knock!” Jessie chimed to the empty room.

Christopher was surprisingly front and center, kneading some dough up at the front of the counter, and he practically lit up like a carnival display when he saw them. It had been years, after all. He motioned for one of his chefs to take over, excitedly running over to his friends, mouth running a mile a minute.

“Jessie! James!” He shuffled a bit, leaning over to enthusiastically greet Meowth as well. “Meowth, too! It’s been so long!”

"We were in your parts,” James smiled, a hand on his hip. “Figured we might as well drop in and greet an old comrade!”

“Tell me about it!” His tone softened. “I was so worried about you guys. After I heard about what
happened to Team Rocket, I… well, I’m just glad you weren’t at HQ when everything went down. It’s so relieving to see your faces again.”

“Honestly, Chris, after what we’ve been through since Team Rocket fell?” Jessie told him. “I’d be a dirty liar if I said I didn’t share that sentiment. The stories we could tell you…”

Christopher looked back to his kitchen over his shoulder, and then back to the quartet. His expression was conflicted as they’d ever seen it.

“I want to catch up more than anything, but…”

“But?”

“You guys picked one heck of a day to drop by,” Christopher said. “There’s some kind of food critic hitting up all the hot spots in Sinnoh, and some insiders have told us that he’s supposed to be here today. All things considered, I need all the focus I can get right now.”

“Pff, is dat all?” Meowth brushed him off. “Let us help ya out, Chrissy-buddy. We know our way around a kitchen.”

Christopher’s eyes were full of stars, and from the looks of things, were seconds away from being equally full of tears. “What? For real? But I’m already so indebted to you!”

“Debts among friends! Please,” James grinned. “Allow us. Perhaps we can teach each other?”

The brunette wasn’t holding back now, his bare arm raised to his eyes as he cried boundless tears of joy. “You guys are still so cool! I’m so honoured to have mentors like you!”

“Well, I mean…” Jessie began. “If helping an enemy out is good karma, then helping a friend out must be doubly desirable!”

Sinnoh was already treating them much differently than they’d grown accustomed to. A planned pitstop, a smooth start to the day, and a reunion with someone who had always shared a side with them. The instinct was to be fearful—but each of them tried their best to swallow it. Things going well didn’t always have to mean that something cruel was further down the road.

Christopher hardly had to give Meowth the rundown. The way the cat kneaded the dough was unconscious, muscle memory. Not because of the short time he’d spent calling these walls a home—no, it was like this before, too. There was always something therapeutic about pressing his paw-pads against it, the feelings of serenity that came with it. A culinary artist wasn’t exactly one of the things Meowth considered himself, but when he was making ramen, he felt as though he was a part of something bigger.

He stayed surprisingly quiet as he shaved the noodles off the lump with his claws, and despite his earlier reassurance, the lack of sound between them set James’ emotions on high alert. He felt his head grow the same fogginess it tended to before he found himself stepping out of his skin, and pressed his eyes closed in an attempt to shake it. Forcing himself to take the reigns, James conversed.

“So,” he said to Christopher. “Any other intel on the profile of this critic?”

Christopher shook his head, not taking his eyes off the garlic he was grating. “Not much. He’s not Sinnoh native, and a lot of people have just mentioned that ‘you’ll know him when you see him,’ which really doesn’t help much.”

From outside the kitchen, Jessie was waiting tables, all dressed up for the occasion and practically
dancing through the isles. The place wasn’t very busy, but she was more than delighted to be the only one in the establishment not embellished in a dull white, an easy center of attention for what little attention there was to give.

“Any idea when he usually drops in?”

“Right before the dinner rush, usually,” Christopher answered. “All things considered, I’m tempted to redo this batch of broth, but we’d probably be cutting it close…”

“It smells divine, for what it’s worth,” James told him. “And, if you’re willing to allow it... I do have some ideas of my own?”

“James, I respect you as a mentor, but…” his face burned, unplanned to turn down kindness. “We have a very strict tradition of how we make ramen in Northern Sinnoh, and I’m worried about risking it and compromising the brand.”

“A valid concern!” He responded, and Christopher’s disposition seemed to lighten. “It’s nothing we’ll serve without your consent. But we are ahead of schedule as is... would you be willing to let me try my hand?”

“I suppose as long as we’re ahead of the game,” Christopher allowed. “What do you have in mind?”

“Alright,” he said. “Blitz the corn, we’re about to get experimental!”

The brunette looked over to the unopened sweetcorn next to him, and then incredulously back to James. Meowth, who had been practically meditating in his dough corner, chose this moment to break his silence.

“Trust Jimmy on dis one, kid,” he told Christopher. “He might not look like much, but he knows the ins ‘n’ outs of all kinds of high-class culinary masterpieces.”

“Alright. Yeah, alright!” He responded after a quiet pause. “What else?”

“That tare?” James told him. “Less on the sesame, heavy on the butter...”

It was slightly earlier than Christopher had expected when he saw the person in question come in. In that moment, he was inclined to understand what his sources had meant when they said he would instantly know.

His attire was a strange blend of formal and casual, and he wore it with a confidence that was both intimidating and inviting. A person of status, and still someone who would easily befriend any stranger. His face was young, far younger than Christopher ever would have expected—yet his eyes held many, many years of wisdom. And his hair—a colour that was uncommon, unexpected. Muted, yet vibrant. Subtle, yet unique. The boy was a walking contradiction, a transitory frame that still managed to carry weight with his presence, and Christopher felt every single ounce of that presence the second he walked in the door.

I’ve got this, he told himself, and told his friends and co-workers to hang back for now. The lunch rush was over, the place was quiet, and he was going to serve this person himself, smile on his face, nervous heart buried somewhere deep down and locked up tight.

After a beat, where the former Rockets could hear nothing but muted voices distantly chattering, Christopher was back in the kitchen in an instant, his voice shaking in fear of the unknown, his hands clamped onto James’ shoulders, his eyes locked on his friend’s.
“Make it again,” he said. “We’ve got one shot.”

“You certain?”

Christopher nodded, intently, with all the feeling he could possibly put into the single gesture.

“Alright, team!” James echoed to Meowth and Jessie, the latter of which was back in the corner looking bored. “Quick, but with as much heart as we can muster! Speedy success and good vibes!”

“Sounds easy enough,” Jessie grinned, kicking herself out of the folding chair she was perched atop.

The four of them tirelessly moved their hands in sync as they pureed corn, grated garlic, peeled ginger, sliced noodles. They were halfway into it, and when Jessie looked to the clock, she was surprised to see that no time had passed at all. Yet the tare tasted incredible, the work was definitely there, in front of her. Christopher seemed equally mesmerized at how well the trio worked in tandem, handing each other utensils and working a routine that he figured they… must have done before? Nothing else could explain the chemistry between them without much words, the lightness of their expressions as they created, unlike anything he’d ever seen from them before.

“You all are…” he tried to pick his words in a manner that read flattering, not weirded out. “…really good at this?”

“Food service is something we’ve done many a time,” James proclaimed.

“We do have quite a few years of group work dynamic under our belt!”

“Yeah, but…” Christopher was still staring at them, enthralled. “Ramen takes an incredible amount of discipline. I’m just… amazed that I’m still learning from you guys all these years later.”

“Put dat learnin’ ta use!” Meowth cheered, impatiently tapping a paw on the table. “We gotta get dis food out dere and make ya even more of a noodle notable!”

“Hear hear!” James agreed, and they went back to their craft all at once, their friend stealing one last amazed glance as he watched them snap back to it like they’d never been shaken to begin with.

One by one, a feeling swept over the former Rockets. Hard to put words to, unlike anything they’d felt in a long time. Optimism? Drive? There was a hurricane that had been raging above their heads for years, and they’d made their way to the eye of the storm. A feeling that told them that if they stayed put, they’d know shelter from the storm.

Meowth’s movements petered out, and then James’, and then Jessie’s, and Christopher was oddly present enough in his own work that he actually didn’t notice it happen, the brief moment that it lasted. The three of them shared a look. Knowing, but also lost.

Like identifying silhouettes on a screen. Like hearing a beat, and the lyrics hitting you after a long stutter.

**Belonging.**

This was just another town to pass through. Nothing more than another stop on a long, long list of connections. And all at once, the trio were hit with an idea—what if we stayed here forever, happy and together and doing something we do well?

Then the look. Meowth to James. Jessie to James. James moving his head to make eye contact with both of them. Meowth and Jessie, across the table. *Did you feel it, too?* Their eyes said, wordlessly.
That flutter in your heart? That sense that things could maybe be okay?

Then the visions of the future—of the ramen shop named after them, a subtle prophecy all along. 
There in plain sight, always overshadowed by a wicked crimson letter, blinding them.

The advice they’d given to Christopher, that night, so many years ago— “You know, there’s more to life than Team Rocket.”

They hardly noticed that they’d finished the bowl, drifting off into their shared thoughts, someplace far more beautiful. Christopher gave them a look as he trayed it, years of trust and solidarity and kindness burning in his eyes. There was a confidence underneath it all that they so badly hoped was not misplaced.

They couldn’t look as he brought it out to the boy. Actually, they hadn’t even set their eyes on the sitting area of the restaurant since Christopher had announced the critic had showed up. There was an inherent worry that they would jinx their luck trying to play to sensibilities they gleaned only from appearance.

Time passed agonizingly slowly. Far too much for a single order, surely? Were they making smalltalk? Was Christopher hovering out amongst the tables and chairs, watching for validation like some kind of creep?

The anxiety was eating the former Rockets alive, their emotions still ridiculously in sync due to the shackles of work mode. They shared another look, collectively swallowed, and peeked over the window to see the scene unfolding.

...no way.

“Positively divine! I can’t believe this taste!”

Absolutely NO way.

“Do you always make it like this in Sinnoh? The sweetness of the corn paired alongside the musky taste of the broth… the way the butter melts alongside it! It’s unlike any ramen I’ve ever tasted!”

You have GOT to be kidding.

“You flatter me, sir! This is honestly just how we make it up North,” Christopher was casual, but his legs were shaking. “The corn is a staple, I wish I could say I was the one who came up with it.”

“There’s still something to be said for the respects you’ve paid to these staples, here! I can tell the ramen masters long before would consider your take a worthy chiffonade atop the meal of tradition!”

“Well, thank you!” Christopher bowed. “It’s not often we get such an enthusiastic presence in here, especially during the slower hours!”

“That’s such a bitter flavour!” The patron responded. “If this is the quality you’re putting out, everyone should be as enthusiastic as myself! Tell me, what is your name?”

“Oh, excuse me! How did I forget?” His face went pink. “My name’s Christopher. I’m actually the founder!”

“Charmed, Christopher!” He held out his hand. “I’m a Connoisseur of many passions, and food was my first love! My name is Cilan.”
The combined joy of the two of them out there was positively radiant, and the Rockets watched in collective shock as one of their longest friends made small talk with an individual from a heavy, critical region they had hoped they’d finally escaped. A sense of unease settled in the pit of their stomachs, and it was almost as if the universe caught onto this and turned the conversation outside in an unfortunate direction.

“Do you do all the cooking here, Christopher?”

“Not usually!” He said. “But some dear old friends of mine are in town today, and they’re quite talented at the craft, so we decided to all work together.”

A pause, and then he scratched the back of his neck with a hand, sheepishly. “Actually, if I’m being honest, they’re the reason I was able to make such a wonderful dish for you. They suggested some tweaks to the recipe here I never would’ve imagined.”

The passion in Cilan’s eyes peaked to a raging fire, and he directed the intensity directly at Christopher.

“This is not a scenario where I can just send my regards to the chefs,” he said. “Are they still here? I’d love to know their secrets!”

From in the back, Jessie had cranked down the vents, eavesdropping alongside her teammates, their ears all pressed against the wall, out of sight.

“This could be bad,” she warned.

The three of them practically fell backwards when Wobbuffet decided, amongst the creeping stillness and silence, that this was a great time to agree with his trainer.

Christopher threw the curtain open, excitedly beckoning them outward, chattering about how the meal was so good that the critic wanted to talk to them personally, how unorthodox he thought it was but how lucky he was to have such good mentors—he barely heard their stuttering protests. James was dragged around the corner, Jessie dove after him protectively, and Meowth and Wobbuffet knew the logical end to that, at this point.

Panic was an understatement.

“Here they are, Mr. Cilan!” Christopher was beaming, ignorant to the fear his friends were writhing in. “I actually named this shop after Jessie and James here, and Meowth worked for me for a while way back when!”

They stood there, frozen, deerling in the headlights. Cursing themselves for being right—things do not just fall into place like that, not when you’ve got things to atone for, obviously! A day with a planned stop and a reunion with an old friend could not be just that. Absolutely not. The laws of the world were going to throw a twerp in the mix, because a narrative without grit certainly isn’t one worth cheering for.

Alright, Sinnoh, Meowth thought to himself. Let’s see what you’ve got for us.

Cilan’s joy dissolved almost instantly upon seeing them, and the change in his expression chilled them in that it was unreadable beyond not good. James found himself unable to pick up on any vibes he could parse, his talents in the field of instant empathy failing him—if it wasn’t something that he was able to pick up on, none of his teammates would be, either.

They sat there, timid, and it was Jessie who tried her charisma.
“Long time no see,” she said to Cilan, in a small voice and with a weak wave. To this, Christopher turned curiously, eyes on her.

Cilan didn’t respond to her, his expression firm, rigid. He sat unyielding, slowly dragging his gaze from the former Rockets to Christopher, and back.

“Christopher,” he said, voice edged. “Do you know who these people are?”

The brunet was connecting points in his head, attempting to gain words, fearful of the situation he’d gotten himself into. He never could’ve guessed… not that they were acquainted, not that this could potentially compromise publicity he was looking forward to, feedback he desperately needed. Not that he would have to choose between his business’s reputation and his dear friends. He pressed on.

“In what ways, sir?”

“These people you’ve invited into your establishment. Named it after, even,” Cilan offered. “You can’t have known, I imagine… that they’re members of a global organization that wrought chaos and destruction across the world?”

Christopher dropped his gaze from Cilan to his shoes. Behind him, the Rockets stood meek, unsure, and terrified. Things were nice while they lasted, all things considered. If getting kicked out of the ramen shop meant their friend—who served them hot food free of charge and basically worshipped the ground they walked on—would gain even more prosperity and happiness in his own life… then, well, what would be better karmic retribution than humbling themselves to let him have that?

In front of them, Christopher clenched his fists, arms pressed hard against his side, and they braced for impact, ready for their undoing. He raised his head back up, looked directly at Cilan, and opened his mouth to speak.

The words were soft. There was no bite. His fingers released, his shoulders sunk.

“Oh, Team Rocket?” He smiled, as if it were nothing at all. “Yeah, I know tons about that!”

The quartet behind him nearly did a doubletake. This wasn’t the plan, either! He was supposed to forsake them for his own benefit, right?

That’s… what you do in these scenarios, right?!

Even Cilan seemed surprised at the lightheartedness with which he said the sentence, eyes widening, wordless. Christopher saw the confusion in him, and continued to speak.

“In all honesty, sir, I know Team Rocket more well than I’d ever like to admit,” he said, the tiniest bit of shame shaking in his voice. “But I hope you might be able to suspend your disbelief, if only for a moment?”

Cilan pressed a finger to his cheek, considering the thought.

“Well, suspending disbelief isn’t exactly my strong suit…” he told Christopher. “But you don’t seem the wicked type, and I suppose you deserve to be heard.”

Christopher smiled, and carried on. “You see, Jessie and James and I were all in Team Rocket together, a long time ago. I… wasn’t very good at the job, all things considered. And they were the only people that really noticed my struggles, and reassured me that I was good at something, even if it wasn’t that life.

“This place, and every other location it’s spawned, is named after them for a reason. It wouldn’t exist without them. The meal in front of you wouldn’t exist, in more ways than one,” he paused, trying to
focus on his words, trying to sway the boy opposite of him. “And… I don’t know if you’ve seen the news, but Team Rocket is gone now. There aren’t wrongdoings to be done anymore.”

Cilan leaned back in his seat, arms crossed, closing his eyes as he let the sentences and arguments ruminant to a conclusion in his head. A silence followed, slow and unsettling and reflective, before he spoke again, looking to the former Rockets.

“Well,” he told them. “Anything to add to your case?”

“We, ah—well, we’ve been—”

“We saw Iris,” Meowth interrupted James’ stuttering attempt to explain months of travel in a few minutes. Bluntly, and without much weight.

Cilan peered into him.

“She looked good. Saved us from a pissed off fairy. Her axew evolved,” he added. “Wanna see pics?”

James sighed, but admired his approach.

“We’ve been working harder than we ever would’ve liked,” Jessie followed. “To undo some mistakes. I don’t know if it shows, if it’s something that can show.”

“But Chris doesn’t deserve discredit to his business just because of our rotten past,” James said. “He’s just a friend trying to offer a nice, karmic meal to some people who are starving to right their wrongs.”

Cilan went back to his thoughtful position, poised with his gaze up at the tiled ceiling and arms still tangled in critical ponderance. Long silences after conversations like this were starting to run James ragged—they sent his heart racing in all the worst ways, itched like cold burning beneath his skin.

The young gym leader couldn’t help but smile a touch, finally bringing his eyes back down to meet them.

“I do have to say…” he offered. “I definitely didn’t detect the bitter taste of evil in that dish.”

The entire group let out a relieved sigh, happy to have some semblance of Cilan’s trust. The reality of what had happened set in slowly, for the quartet—someone they had done good unto had chosen to defend their honour. And they, in turn, were inclined to defend his. It was something they weren’t used to, despite the camaraderie between the four of them—another thing, they realized, that kept people kind through life’s tests.

Christopher was right back to his smiling self, fists balled near his face, ecstatic for no reason other than that the day was going good.

“Thank you for giving us all a chance, Mr. Cilan!” He beamed. “I hope the hard conversation didn’t tarnish the taste of the noodles.”

“It would have to be quite the downer for that to be accomplished, honest!” Cilan contested.

There was honesty in his voice. That feeling of belonging bubbled back up, engulfing the former Rockets whole.

Cilan had humbly requested if he could stay into the evening, and Christopher didn’t have it in him
to protest much, simply honored to have the pleasure. All of them combined their efforts to power through the final rush, and Christopher even offered Cilan the opportunity to shadow him as he worked his magic. When the sun had long set, and the day was winding down, there was a kindness to the frigid air that seemed relieving in a way that was hard to put words to, assuaging the burns that festooned their psyche.

The shop had long closed, by now, and the former Rockets plus Christopher and Cilan were situated at a table, extra chairs pulled haphazardly up against the sides of it, moonlight shining in through the windows. The day was exhausting, even for how much collective energy the lot of them had, but there were stories to be told and catching up to do and camaraderie to be made. Over steaming hot coffee, they learned each other.

“I wanted to challenge myself, you know,” Cilan was in the middle of saying. “Always pursuing passions that came naturally to me… I figured it was time to take on an interest that every part of me rejected.”

“Yes, but mythology?” James inquired. “How on earth can you be friends with the Twerp and not experience that firsthand?”

“I will admit, I’m a rigid skeptic,” he responded. “Most times, even when I can see something ethereal with my eyes, I’ll try and find a more logical conclusion justify it. It gets to the point where I jump through so many hoops that my logical conclusions are objectively a million times more nonsensical than just admitting to myself there are forces we as humans can’t always understand.”

“Suckers,” Meowth said, and Jessie shoved him, almost playfully.

“It’s that frustration with myself that brought me to Sinnoh,” Cilan said. “Widely considered one of the most spiritual, mythology-rich regions out there.”

“Huh… I never really thought about it, growing up here…” Christopher pondered. “But you’re right! We really do have a lot of dedicated scriptures.”

Cilan nodded, smiling earnestly. “It’s humbled me more than I ever would have imagined. I like to hope that one day I can proudly call myself a Mythology Connoisseur, too.”

“Wait, wait,” Jessie said. “How did you get the reputation as a food critic along the way? Are you balancing a spiritual journey with a foodie blog?”

The boy chuckled a little, running a hand through his hair. “Well, it certainly wasn’t intentional, but I figured that it would be a crime to wander a new region without sampling its many tastes. I suppose word got around…”

“To the defense of the gossipmongers,” James began. “You do have quite a presence.”

Cilan straightened his bowtie, almost proudly, and grinned.

“I will say, though, this is hands down the best food I’ve tasted.”

“Come on!” Christopher looked nearly on the verge of tears. “You’re just saying that, right?!”

“It would go against my morals to give a dishonest evaluation!” Cilan shot back, jovially. “You… all of you. You really make some spectacular art here.”

To the former Rockets’ surprise, Christopher spent little time reveling in the praise, instead turning to face them, his smile bright as ever.
“He’s right, you know,” the man said to them, glowing. “Even all these years later, you’re still managing to teach me new things.”

Flowers of pride bloomed in their hearts. They were struck, gradually, with the realization that this was one of the only friendships they’d managed to create and maintain outside of each other. It was easy to wonder what it felt like to have that tenfold.

“Hey, uh…” Christopher continued, suddenly very sheepish. “You guys… are out of jobs, yeah?”

“In the technical sense, yes,” James told him. “We make enough to survive. Our job right now is to travel and do good. After that, who knows what will become of us?”

“We’re hoping that the forces of karma will magically present us with some beautiful answer and push us in the direction of a dream,” Jessie added.

Their friend looked to his hands, resting on his lap. “And you… haven’t experienced that feeling yet, huh?”

There was something in his voice that weighed his words. Upon hearing it, the memory resurfaced—no, we have. Hours ago, in these walls. A feeling that soothed them to their very center and let them know that home existed, in little places all across the world, and in the hearts of people who would sacrifice what they hold dear for your smile.

“It’s probably not fair to say we haven’t,” James said. “To be honest, I’ve enjoyed my time here more than anything I’ve seen thus far.”

“He does have a point,” Jessie agreed. “I imagine my home luxurious, far less humble… but I can’t help but admit that there’s something curiously cozy here.”

“Fah pete’s sake!” Meowth shouted, much less serenely than his teammates, accusatory. “I been sittin’ here wallowin’ in my own guilt for leavin’ yous twos ta woik here all dose years ago, an’ now ya t’ink it’s a good idea t’ tell me we all just coulda been slinging dough and makin’ dough togetha?!”

“You know well as I we were different people back then,” James offered. “The idea of quitting Team Rocket was absurd to us even a few years ago!”

“Peh, still,” the cat said.

“Aww, how darling,” Jessie cooed. “Meowth loves us!”

“Keep pushin’ it an’ you’ll turn dat sentence into past-tense.”

Cilan, surprisingly, was not looking clueless—he seemed to be lost in his coffee, smiling as he sipped it, memories of quarrels with old friends keeping him warm and happy.

“Well, ah…” Christopher interrupted. “You know… I think it would be really amazing if we all worked together… but that’s probably a bit of a pipe dream, huh?”

A thoughtful hush permeated them, and they desperately wanted it to seem kind. Not as though they were all telepathically trying to formulate the best way to shoot him down. Moreso like they were attempting to navigate their lives for the next who knows how long, with a clear ending in mind, laying down the narrative before they lived it.

In their heads, they couldn’t help but visualize the future within this tiny roadside world—and how
every single one of them was wearing a smile that looked as if it had known pain, and still kept the belief that there was joy in living onward.

Wish fulfillment or not, it resonated. It resonated, and the feeling of serenity, of belonging, returned.

“You’re… unsure, yeah?” Christopher finally asked.

“I think the problem is we’re too sure,” Jessie said. “Without turning this into a pity party, we’re unused to good things just hitting us dead on.”

“And very used to bad things hitting us dead on,” James added.

“If I may?” Cilan offered, and they turned to him to listen. “I think the world would be a much better place if all of you were here making food of this caliber together. However… I also believe that a connoisseur should seek to invigorate their palate before they can truly understand what flavour suits them best.”

The group seemed to respond to this, and Christopher took a breath, letting himself internalize the advice, as well.

“I’m speaking from a place of experience, of course,” he smiled. “Keep your minds open, right? Give yourselves time to think.”

“You’re right,” Christopher said, and then turned to the former Rockets. “I don’t want you to feel like this is your only option! There’s so much in the world. Just know you have a home here, alright? There’ll always be free ramen and honest work here for you.”

His selflessness, from morning to night, had been something taken notice of, sure. It wasn’t until he said these words, however, that the quartet felt their hearts shaken with gratitude. The beginnings of tears rose up from their chests and into their throats, tight and sudden and unmistakable. What he said next was almost enough to unearth them.

“I don’t ever want you guys to have to do something like Team Rocket again.”

James was gone, briefly. He wasn’t in the ramen shop, at the tables with his friends—he was alone with nothing and no one. Meowth and Wobbuffet where nowhere to be seen. Jessie was a character in his story, but what were they, beyond strangers with memories? She lingered under his skin, one more woman whose face he could not scrub from beneath his fingernails, one more unkind failure of his in a long list stretching back as far as he could remember. At least this time, it was her who ran.

Streetlights flickered around him in the alleyway he’d suddenly been transported to, blacking out the stars he wasn’t sure he was even privy to view, anymore—wicked as he was. His stomach ached, begging him for food, the silver spoon still clanking around inside of it, refusing to accept that its presence had long since grown null. Legs too tired to run from a meal unpaid, arms too tired to sift through the trash for scraps, mind too tired to justify why someone like him even deserved to eat, to breathe, to live.

This is what you chose, his thoughts said to him, rudely. This is the slower of deaths. At the very least, it is on your own terms.

His head was right, at the very least. Softer to die by your own hand than to sit idly by as someone else cuts you down. He tried to veer his thoughts away from the details—he refused to let Her be in his final thoughts. James closed his eyes. Instead, he thought about Growlie, and the look it gave him
when he ran again. Not guilting, not hurt—understanding, urging, proud. The knowledge that he was letting down the only person who’d ever believed in him was too much to bear.

He’d wanted to cry, for months, now. The tears caught in his throat and refused to materialize. It was another release he would be robbed of, another kind of tranquility he wondered if he’d even know again.

Someone wandered into the alleyway, then, their boots heavy and foreboding, their presence to match. On a better day, James would have done what he does best—bolt. Today, he was tired. The man crouched down in front of him, examining him with sharpened eyes, a bloody red symbol etched across his chest.

“Hungry?”

James didn’t respond to him. What did it matter? How much longer would he be here, anyways? The figure took his silence and reached around to pull something out of his satchel—a single rice ball, bright white against the black of his odd uniform.

Despite James’ dilapidated mindset, his body wanted to survive, and it was the stronger of the two, conditioned from years and years of doing just that. Without processing the action, he dove forward, hands grabbing at the morsel, devouring it with every ounce of energy he had left, relishing in the kindness of feeling full.

“Street rattata, huh?”

He still didn’t have it in him to speak. Periods of silence weren’t particularly strange, for James—they were his default in situations of extreme stress. Another thing his family offered him by, alongside the way he moved his hands and the bottlecaps that jingled in his pockets when he ran and the way he couldn’t keep his eyes on anyone. His normal, their nightmare.

“Don’t talk much? That’s fine,” he said. “You know, it doesn’t matter who you are where I’m from. No one goes to bed hungry.”

James sat up a little straighter, timidly stealing glances at him, feeling his body settle.

“There’s a better life for you than this, I just want you to know. I can help you get there.”

Words bubbled up inside him, confused and almost terrified at the kindness of this stranger. The emotions didn’t take. His sentences slugged, defeated.

“Do with me what you want. I’m tired.”

The man saw his resignation, and he smiled.

He reached his hand out to James, trailing his index and middle finger across his chest, tracing a silent silhouette of the letter ‘R.’ The feeling of another’s hands on James turned his blood to ice, made him want to puke back up the food he’d only just received. He swallowed hard.

“All we require of you,” the figure said. “Is your loyalty.”

James said nothing, simply stood up and hobbled alongside his dark angel, out of the alley, into the burning streetlights, back toward the ramen shop, back toward the present.
Team Rocket was a safe haven. That was a truth, right? Pulling three strangers out of poverty, off the streets, into a stable life where at least they had something to do, somewhere to be. There was the counterpoint to all of it, however… had any of them ever known a safe haven, before?

Can you find a safe haven in a roof over your head and boundless riches, or does the inclusion of three people having complete control over everything you are, their hands hard against your cheek when you defy them, nullify that?

Can you find a safe haven in the arms of a loving mother who speaks to you like you hung the stars in her sky, or does the stinging, all-encompassing pangs of an empty stomach nullify that?

Can you find a safe haven in a city you dreamed up the lights of, or does the knowledge that you don’t have a single friend walking its streets nullify that?

They thought they’d known, all this time. What it meant to feel security. What it meant to have something to truly, genuinely fall back on. The reality really didn’t hit them, until Christopher had said it so plainly, that a prison is still a prison, regardless of how safe you’re kept behind steel bars.

They swallowed tears, all of them in sync as ever and refusing to become blubbering messes in the midst of yet another twerp.

“Thank you,” James choked out, and despite his best efforts, it was obvious how moved the simple statement had made him. Christopher smiled, and Cilan smiled, and god, is this what home felt like?

“It’s getting late…” Christopher noted. “What are your plans for tomorrow, Mr. Cilan?”

“I’ll be off again, sad to say,” he informed. “I was on my way to Lake Acuity. What about you four?”

“Hadn’t really planned much,” Meowth responded. “We kinda go where da wind takes us.”

“You could always tag along, if you’re looking for a quiet place to reflect,” Cilan offered. “Perhaps it’s a stretch, but maybe the both of us could learn a thing or two there?”

Jessie looked up from her nails, only to see her teammates staring at her for an affirmation. She rolled her eyes.

“Haven’t you lot ever heard of ‘yes, and’? Of course we’re going.”

Things were going to change. Things were going to look up. The sun was going to come out. Even if it took painful revelations, even if it took memories they’d rather not exhume, even if it meant jumping at every opportunity that presented itself. Quiet wasn’t Team Rocket, and neither was reflection.

Over and over, they reminded themselves that they were not those people anymore.

Snowpoint and Acuity weren’t terribly hard of a destination to reach by balloon, but there was still an eeriness in going back the way they came. Symbolically, it felt contradictory, and the former Rockets really had to drill it in their head that their lives were not a cliched narrative, that they weren’t just arcs to live through, but people. Not everything had to foreshadow another—not everything had to present as foreboding.

Things were going to be better. So long as they as individuals got better, first.
This time, they were able to purchase in-fashion garments for the chill around Acuity. It was a necessary precaution, lest they spend all their time hiding in the bushes, unseen and fearful. Again—they were trying to move away from those vibes.

Slowly but surely they made their way up the route, thankful that despite Cilan’s initial distrust of them, he was a charismatic, pleasant conversationalist. He had a tendency to lead the conversation, which the former Rockets welcomed—a little out of practice with monologues and dialogues which didn’t involve them loudly professing how evil they were.

“I really admire what you four are doing, you know?”

“Not like we had much of a choice,” Jessie mentioned, and Cilan was ready to fire back almost immediately.

“You did, though,” he said, as if he knew them better. “I’m sure everything you are told you to keep taking shortcuts and being unkind. And yet, you chose the higher road, even though it’s much more treacherous.”

“Well, in our defense, it didn’t look quite so horrid at the time…” James said.

Cilan shook his head. “You don’t give yourselves enough credit. I’m speaking from a place of experience, of course. I’m way out of my comfort zone too… I know firsthand the kind of courage it takes to admit that maybe you were wrong about something you’ve based your whole life around.”

“S’pose dat’s fair,” Meowth told him. “But at da very least, ya don’t have a billion enemies jus’ waitin’ for ya around every corner.”

“Very true,” he admitted. “My frustrations have mostly come from a lack of quick answers, if I’m really thinking about it.”

“Ugh, now you’re speaking my language,” Jessie said. “I’m too impatient for self-reflection and slow developments. I’d like my instant gratification, thank you very much!”

“Self-awareness is a big part of self-reflection! You’re well on your way,” Cilan reassured. “I’m frustrated, too. I can visit as many lakes and temples as I please, I can immerse myself wholly… but it doesn’t mean I’ll always get a concrete answer on if these myths are real or not.”

“Eh, I t’ink yer both t’inkin too much in black ‘n’ white,” Meowth said. “And dat’s so last season. If dere’s one t’ing we loihned, it’s dat… sometimes lookin’ for answers is just dat. Lookin’ for em.”

“I suppose that’s true,” the boy responded. “Sometimes the fun is in cooking the dish, rather than tasting it.”

The conversation trailed off along the freezing winds, and the five of them enjoyed silence for a while. When the lake came into view, it was breathtaking—the pearly snow around it half-melted, and the sunlight hitting it, setting it sparkling aglow, iridescent like a thousand diamonds. The second thing they noticed after the scenery was the stillness of it all—not a single creature seemed to stir, the air was paused and silent. In a less spiritual setting, it might have been unsettling. Here, it was peaceful.

After they’d landed, Cilan was instant in his setup—he waltzed over to the lake’s edge, staring out across the glittering waters, as if he was waiting for something spectacular to hit him. Some kind of revelation about the world.

As he stood there in the hush of it all, the former Rockets came to his side one by one, hanging back
just a little. Jessie dropped to an immediate sit, uncaring that the frigid tundra would soon thereafter creep through her clothes, and James shuddered as he watched her and empathy’s phantom passed into him. After a long silence, Cilan began to speak again.

“Three pokémon there were, into the lakes they dove,” he said, almost wistfully. “Deep, deep, drawing no breath, into suffocating depths they dove.”

The quartet turned to peer closer into him. Jessie pulled her knees to her chest, listening intently.

“Deeper, then deepest they alight, from the lake floor they rise,” he continued. “Bearing with them the power to make vast lands, they rise again.”

“What’s that?” James inquired, finally biting the bullet and deciding to just sit with his teammate.

“Sinnoh’s Myth,” Cilan answered. “One of many myths of Sinnoh, but that’s the actual title. I’ve been visiting various lakes across the region to see what I can glean from it, what I can learn about those pokémon it speaks of.”

“And?” Jessie asked. “Anything?”

The boy smiled, and shook his head once more. “Absolutely nothing. I suppose if it was that easy, it wouldn’t be a myth though, right?”

“Suppose so,” James said. “I mean, what would you even find, ideally? What would it take to make one believe something they couldn’t even fathom, before?”

“For me, it was seeing Reshiram in the flesh,” Cilan said. “I think that’s when I began to understand that there was more to this world than what I could see.”

“You saw legendaries before dat, dough, right?” Meowth asked. “Coulda sworn you was dere when everything went messy wit’ Meloetta.”

“I was,” he said. “But even still, the reality of something like that really hadn’t sunk in. I may not look it, but I’m stubborn to a fault…”

“You’d have to witness something again, then?” Jessie inquired, and in response, he pressed a thumb to his chin in thought.

“Who can say?” He offered. “I don’t think it’s something I’ll know until I experience it.”

“Well, that’s anticlimactic,” she said, and rather than take offense, Cilan brightened the smile he’d been wearing all day.

There was another gentle silence, no sound beyond the ripples of the lake crashing into each other quietly as the wind pulled them every which way. The cold painted all of them pink, but the air was crisp, fresh, kind to their lungs despite its sting. It was curious how there was an apparent lack of boredom present, despite doing nothing beyond staring out across the waters.

“I may not know what I’m looking for,” Cilan broke the silence. “But at the very least, I know I’ve met some wonderful people in Sinnoh. I think there’s something to be said for that much.”

It resonated. The same could definitely be said for them—that despite their lack of an end after Pallet, they knew they were living something worthwhile just because of how many enemies they’d turned to allies.
The first week I was here, Pansage and I were more or less lost in the forest, just kind of dawdling and cooking some food before we set out and tried to make sense of our map again,” he continued. “And seemingly out of the trees came this tornado of a girl... more energetic than anyone I’d ever met, even Ash.”

A wave of nostalgia began to lap at their feet. James balled his fists involuntarily. The edges of the world began to haze over.

“She was so enthralled to see a pansage in Sinnoh! And despite never seeing one before, the first thing she did was ask it for a leaf off his head, she already knew all about the physiology of the species,” he chuckled. “Looking at her, she definitely didn’t need the excess stamina it provided. I learned quickly from talking to her that it was just something she wanted to experience, and there was something about that, that made it really stick with me.”

The fog was growing heavier. Cilan persisted, unshaken by it.

“I never expected her to be a sort of kin to me,” he said. “Two grass type gym leaders... I normally don’t partake in flavours too similar to my own, but I think she made me realize that a little spice can change the meal entirely.”

James was chilled with an unkind feeling, suddenly, that he was being watched. How it gelled with the piercing sentiment that he was more alone than ever in that moment was anyone’s guess, and he wondered why no one else felt the cold and saw the fog and—

“Yes, of all the appetizers to this beautiful region, I never could have anticipated Gardenia,” he said. “Evaluating her was a highlight of my Pokémon Connoisseur career thus far. I find it hard to put words to the way she and her cacturne complement each other.”

James felt something inside of him break. Cilan may or may not have been the only person talking—the fog seemed to curl around him, muting everyone else. The sound of water moving in the lake grew louder. Not deafening—quieter, more like an itch, a repeated noise you want to ignore but find yourself unable to. Cilan turned from the lake to James, where he expected to see the rest of the team. He didn’t.

His eyes widened, and his sentence trailed off and sunk into the depths. James looked equally as lost, but beyond that? Frightened and alone, his expression desperately searching Cilan for validation. That he wasn’t losing himself, that he wasn’t overreacting to something that should have just been a kind anecdote.

From outside of their bubble, Jessie, Meowth, and Wobbuffet called desperately to the haze in an attempt to find them. Their shouts petered out, and nothing was heard. The lake was gone, the trees were gone, the sky was gone—nothing but the milky void in its place.

Cilan and James stayed there, eyes on each other, each hoping that the other had answers. The silent backdrop with nothing but ripples in the water as contrast had grown eerie, now. The quiet quieter, the noise nosier. James caught a flash of red illuminating the left of Cilan’s face, and slowly, agonizingly, he stuttered his neck around to look towards the lake it was seemingly originating from.

There was some trouble comprehending what he saw, and in the wake of James’ gaping expression, Cilan, too turned his head.

Cutting through the fog was a shining crimson light, and looking at it, the two of them didn’t know if they were supposed to feel serene or terrified. It was slowly getting bigger, advancing toward them, and every ounce of James told him that he needed to run. He was frozen.
The fog surrounding the glow cleared all at once, but the hazy, dreamlike state of the rest of the world around them remained. Sharply, the creature that was left cast off the weather obscuring it, a testament to the power it held, the things it was capable of. Where it lacked eyes opened, the blaring red jewel in the center of its forehead seemed to peer into the pair, and Cilan took a cautious step forward, his fingers almost pawing at the heavy air.

James peered back into the jewel, his anxieties high and his muscles tense, his mind racing. Looking at this… pokémon? It was there in plain sight, but simultaneously incorporeal, incomprehensible to his eyes. As if he were looking at a puzzle with missing chunks and pieces, as if the pokémon itself couldn’t commit to this reality. Instead, he focused on the jewel, the one thing he could concentrate on, could perceive as concrete and real.

The pokémon raised its arms, then, its tail swishing in the wind, and the jewel gleamed one final time, blinding the both of them. James closed his eyes and heard an unsettling sound he had trouble putting words to. It was… void? The low, ominous murmur of something powerful and unprecedented suddenly being gone. It was so specific, there was nothing in this world he could think to compare it to.

Through shut lids, he could feel the heat of the light on his face. Then, just like that, the chill in the air returned, and the fear that paralyzed him before was gone. The tranquility that replaced it was almost too benevolent to bear, it’s grace a relief that brought tears to his throat and a tremor to his breath.

James opened his eyes when the sound of his confused team droned back in. Jessie’s hands were on his shoulders, shaking him with a ferocity that he knew was based in fear rather than anger, despite the sting in her voice. He looked past her, to Cilan, who Meowth was awkwardly trying to bring back to reality as well.

“What was that?! ” Jessie was in the middle of ranting. “James, I can respect if you need time to yourself, but at the very least I’d prefer a little warning before you decide to vanish off this plane of existence!”

She was seriously fired up, and he felt bad for being unable to explain to even himself what had happened. Quietly, he placed a hand on her own, and looked deep into the blazing blue of her eyes. He said nothing, but Jessie seemed to ease slightly at the feeling of his mittened hand on hers.

Cilan was more lucid, across the divide, his words practically falling out of his mouth.

“Did… did you see that?”

“See what?!” Meowth asked. “All we saw was yous two disappear inta da void for what felt like an eternity! Our eyes might as well o’ been closed!”

“Are you telling us you had some sort of cosmic experience in there?! Without us?! ”

“Wob~ba?!”

“I… can’t believe it,” Cilan marveled, ignoring their protests. “James, what about you?”

James, like so many times before, could not find words. They stopped in his throat, threatening to come out only as syllables, incomplete and inaudible. Instead, he nodded, hoping Cilan would understand.

In response to this, the boy moved back into his typical thinking position, thoughts racing.
“I… didn’t expect to just see something like that upfront so soon…” Cilan said. “That… had to have been the Lake Guardian Uxie.”

He paused, looking back out across the lake, the sparkles on its surface rivaled by the ones that danced in his eyes.

“I can’t explain it, but suddenly, I feel like there’s nothing in this world I can’t take on.”

Finally, after a considerable amount of lag, James more or less regained his faculties. His voice returned to him, his eyes saw clearly again, he broke to a jog to catch up with everyone around him, metaphorically speaking. His words were brief, fragmented—but there was a heaviness to them that sunk into the hearts of his friends, their importance upfront.

“I have somewhere to be;” he said, and the rest of the group peered into him curiously. “I… I want to lead us to our next destination.”

It was almost questioning, and Jessie felt inclined to give him permission simply because of the way he said it. The thought was absurd—he could do whatever he wanted, of course.

“James,” she started. “What is going on?”

He smiled a bit, eyes soft. “I’ll tell you when I figure out myself?”

She knew when he was playing her for a fool, and there wasn’t a trace of dishonesty in his words. The need for answers burned her, made her want to run a mile and scream—but that was nothing new. Jessie swallowed it, and it went down rough as always, but down nonetheless.

“Where do you have in mind?”

“Eterna City,” he said, in a voice like a prayer. “There’s someone who I’m long overdue to see.”

“James,” Meowth said, stepping over to his side, his tone concerned. “Are ya sure?”

Neither Jessie nor Meowth wanted to say it, but the connotation to that question was can you handle it?

He nodded, as if it wasn’t even something he had to think about. There was something about the fog he’d just spent that quiet time in that made him certain he had the courage within him for a reunion he never prepared for.

It was difficult to go back when you ran. This was a truth James had always known. It was so much easier to keep running forward, until your legs stopped moving, until you collapsed somewhere safe. He looked to Cilan, grounded and logical and calculating, and the boy had an ethereal glow to him that screamed I am ready for whatever mysteries the world throws my way, I am ready to accept there are things I will never understand.

James, disgraced son of a billionaire, cowardly agent of Team Rocket, ran.

Team Rocket was gone now.

He wanted nothing more than to be so, so much more.

Christopher stood smiling, the light of the sunset hitting the sign above him. The words that adorned it reminded the trio that home had many definitions and did not always have to be one static place. It seemed so simple, thinking about it now—they wondered why it had taken them all so long to
understand.

“That was quite the excellent taste of one of Sinnoh’s myths…” Cilan had said as he looked onwards. “But maybe if I keep searching, I can find another?”

There were two goodbyes to be said here, which was more than they were used to as of late. As if to continue the theme of events falling out of routine, Christopher stepped forward towards his friends and pulled two of them into a hug.

The lot of them were pretty cuddly people, all things considered—but not much outside of each other. There was a nervousness to it, quietly stirring inside them, but also the feeling that they’d been starved for that kind of warmness for far, far too long.

Christopher pulled away from them, his normally overjoyed smile this time protective, inviting, earnest. He sat there with one hand on Jessie’s shoulder, one on James’, and when he spoke to them, his voice was full of the same promise and safety and love that was there before.

“I meant what I said, okay?” He told them. “You will always have a home here in Sinnoh.”

“Chris,” James suddenly said. “Why jump through so many hoops for us? Are we really deserving of… this?”

He shook his head, grinning. “I was no one to you guys. You didn’t need me, you didn’t gain anything from helping me come to terms with things.”

“Of course, but… it was one kindness poised against a long list of misdeeds,” Jessie admitted.

“People aren’t just bad or good, you know?” He said. “There’s more to us than that. And in those moments, you let me know that there was something greater out there for me. Now it’s my turn to let you know that there’s something here for you.”

From adjacent to him, Cilan was equally tranquil, observing the tender scene with joy enveloping his heart. To see the growth of others in such a drastic way… it was hard not to be reassured in the idea of his own prosperity some day.

“Keep in touch, okay?”

To this, they all nodded in sync, and not even Jessie could keep herself from crying, the whole of them completely moved by the kindness and unable to comprehend the idea that their few kind deeds landed them with such a dedicated friend.

Were there more to come? Was this what the power of unconditional love could do? How many more doors were there out there that could open?

It was hard for them to leave. It was hard for them to move forward, even with a clear destination in mind. Hard for them to let go of Christopher’s hands, hard for them to bow to Cilan and thank him, hard for them to walk away. The ramen shop had made itself a home in such a short time—it was a warm, engulfing bed after the strain of keeping their eyes open for far, far too long.

But they did. Wiping tears away, they did. Different tears from the ones that’d been lingering in their hearts as of late. Not the pain of a broken life—the moved disposition of the onlookers as one by one, people formed a crowd and began to glue that life back together.
Home. *Home.*

They tried not to wear out the word as it sat on their tongues like the warmest, kindest meal.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when I said Unova was too mean and I'd be nicer to them?? I'm sorry. That unfortunate flashback wrote itself.

The next few chapters are... Bittersweet, like this one, but not unkind. I hope it comes through! They will definitely be emotional, but I hope in a more beautiful, coming to terms with things way.

As always, I'll do my best!!
Chapter Notes

Before I get to this one, I have a couple things I think are better suited to opening notes rather than closing.

One, this chapter isn't exactly unkind in spirits, but there is a homophobic slur smack dab in the middle of it, so that's something that's deserving of a trigger warning, make sure you're in a good place if that kind of thing is something that'll get at you.

Two, there's a scene in this chapter that has been done before (and if you ask me, done better) by my friend and fellow fic-writer Kelcifer on FFnet. I struggled with this, because it's always been my headcanon for a point in Jessie & James' history, something I planned to write, but I didn't want it to seem like I was stealing her ideas and prose. It's been a LONG time since I read that bit so hopefully I didn't lift anything without thinking (I didn't want to re-read it because I was even more scared I'd lift something) I decided the best thing to do was acknowledge it in my notes and recommend that you go read her fic and her take on it, Undisclosed Desires. It is by far my favourite Rocketshipping multichapter out there and it's not even complete yet! If you're a fan of the backstory stuff that I tend to divulge into from time to time, you will be in love with it.

Three, sorry this took so long ^^; My birthday was this week. I was constantly partying or out and about and barely got any time to write. It's a miracle I finished this before my job interview and concert later this week.

As per request, the episode referenced in this chapter is:

-DP054 (Once There Were Greenfields)

So give it a watch if you need a refresher!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jessie found herself in a situation she’d rarely encountered before as she power walked through Eterna City—she was having to up her game to keep up with James.

Normally, she lead the pack. She was at its front, fired up and forward-facing and laughing boisterously as her friends trailed behind, panting, begging her to slow down. Karma was a friend she’d been quite acquainted with, as of late, but she certainly didn’t expect it to have such a list of ways to greet her. She already didn’t want to be here—and the soreness of her muscles wasn’t helping with her sour mood.

James was unaware, completely, of the state of his current physical presence. His legs looked uncomfortably straight, his shoulders were practically at his ears, he had no idea how badly his teeth were pressed together. He refused to let his confidence peter out, refused to let his courage fade. He had to make it, he had to, before it disappeared and left him who he was at the beginning, before—

He stopped dead in his tracks, and the rest of the team nearly collided with him, an action that
Meowth was considering getting trademarked at this point. James swallowed. Just like that, his fire flared out.

The former Rockets were standing in front of Eterna Gym. Their settings registered, one by one—green as far as the eye could see, in every shade imaginable. Chartreuse and apple and olive and emerald delicately embracing as they snaked up the sides and top of the dome-shaped building, enveloping it warmly. James tried to focus on the beauty of the lush greenery, something he normally found such comfort in—but it did nothing to steady his trembling hands, his fearful heart.

The man stood there, glued to the ground. He swallowed again. He couldn’t swallow enough. He was being choked, there wasn’t enough air around despite the living, breathing plant life surrounding him in all sides. He tried to repeat a mantra he’d grown so accustomed to, that it was all in his head. It had never done much good for him, but as time slowly passed he grew more and more desperate.

Frustrated with the silence, but ultimately trying to be soft, Jessie spoke up.

“We don’t have to do this if it’s too much for you,” she said, and James felt something inside him awaken at her words.

He was tired of disappointing her. He was tired of being cowardly.

He threw the doors of the gym open and lumbered inside.

As if they needed time to buffer, his team stuttered a moment before practically chasing him in, terrified at his uncharacteristic audacity, terrified at the unknown of the situation, wondering if they were even a fraction as terrified as him.

Gardenia was under a tree with her back turned to the group, and they could see the fire of her unmistakable red hair like a splash of colour against nothing but green. She heard them come in, an excitable grin creeping across her face, and spoke with utmost confidence before they even had time to think.

“Welcome!” She announced to the empty air. “If you’re here for a badge, I hope you’re prepared—”

Mid-sentence, she began to turn to face them all, and when she caught James’ eyes, something unidentifiable flashed in her own, so brief that James couldn’t help but wonder if he imagined it. As soon as it disappeared, it was overtaken by the gym leader’s signature manic smile, and she nearly screamed out across the divide.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” Gardenia shouted. “It’s been so long! This is incredible! Oh my gosh!”

James felt a layer of something over his anxiety, not dispersing the butterfree in his stomach but giving him another feeling to focus on trying to identify. Gardenia didn’t give him time to explain himself, his emotions, his presence in her home. Instead, she flawlessly dug a ball out of her pocket, throwing it up in the air as she cackled in excitable delight. Vibrant blue light flashed in front of James, and the word no bubbled up in his throat, as in— no, I’m not ready, why did I come here, why did I say I was, why did I convince myself—

The glittering blue turned to a sturdy green, and a dark figure towered next to Gardenia, roaring out a battle cry, raring to go. It loosened its stance to face its opponent, ready to give it an incredible fight, gaze burning into the enemy pokémon from across the grassy divide. Instead of a challenger there, it saw James.

Cacturne felt a lot of things, then. The softness of a human’s skin poised on its spikes. The sweetness of sugar cookies on its tongue. The warmness of being wrapped in a blanket in the dead of night,
held tightly as its sharpened skin could allow, against a steady and beating heart. Back in the present, tears in its eyes.

Its former partner stood there in the lush clearing. There was a stillness as they locked gazes, quivering green on glowing yellow. James was so small, standing there, with so much he wanted to say. Even if the words had come to him, the tremors in his jaw would not have allowed them to pass. Synchronized still after years without each other, him and Cacturne broke into a ran at the exact same second, their feet tearing a path through the battlefield.

The fear, the worry, the pain—it was gone. Gone when James saw the look on his old friend’s face, gone when he realized how eager Gardenia was to reunite them, gone when he let himself be carried back to that final moment where his cacnea, small and unsure and determined, nodded to him with the confidence of someone who wanted to be trusted. James ran forward, metaphorically speaking. This time, he ran backward.

Cacturne and James collided in the dead center of the divide, falling to their knees as they embraced. Its spines pierced through his clothes and deep into his skin and the pain meant nothing, felt like nothing. It was a feeling so specific and one he never in a million years dreamed he would miss, and much later, never one he ever thought he’d feel again. It wasn’t the same as Carnivine’s bearhugs or Victreebel’s bites or Mareanie’s stinger, not even comparable. It was distinctly Cacturne, his cacturne, once upon a time. There was no time to feel pain on top of the overwhelming relief and gratitude that wracked him with the heaviest sobs he’d experienced in years.

The pokémon held him close, its voice equally wet with tears, its broad arms clinging to him as if he would disappear again if it let go. There was something so unreal about seeing him again, how much he seemed to have changed, how little he seemed to have changed. How many times the forest in James’ eyes had been burned to the ground and regrown again.

Meowth had an arm pressed against his face, fighting off genuine tears as he watched the pair entwine. Wobbuffet was far less modest, crying unapologetically beside him. Jessie tried to find her smile—she was happy for him, undeniably so. Looking at James as he sat there bawling, she realized she hadn’t seen him that happy in ages.

Gardenia strolled over to them, smile bright as ever, words blunt as ever.

“What took you so long?!” She inquired, and James and Cacturne broke their reverie to meet her gaze.

As the sound of Gardenia’s voice, Jessie gritted her teeth. James wiped away his face and answered the gym leader in earnest.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and then turned to face Cacturne again. “I’m so sorry. So much has happened! I don’t know where to begin!”

Jessie was unnerved—angry, even, at the fact that he was apologizing. James was going to be James, of course he was, but it didn’t annoy her any less.

Gardenia raised a hand up in a stop motion, as if it was something she’d practically rehearsed. As if this was a moment she’d been anticipating forever.

“I love a good story!” She told him. “Your friends can tell me, right?”

“Well, I suppose, but…”

Meowth picked up the vibe she was putting out, and responded to it.

“Great!” Gardenia affirmed. “So I’ll learn all about that while you and Cacturne go and have the best day ever, okay?”

“I… you…” James almost couldn’t believe the certainty with which she said it—yeah, here, Mr. Ex-Team Rocket Grunt, take my pokémon and go have a field day. “This wasn’t how I envisioned this meeting going.”

“What about you, Cacturne?” She said, turning to her partner. “Does that sound like a good idea? You and James?”

The pokémon cheered its name, pulling him into a hug that was acupuncture on his heavy, hurting soul.

James felt tears again. Not because of the embrace, but because despite everything, he could still understand what Cacturne was saying.

“Well?” Gardenia asked, reading his mind. “Did you get that?”

He blinked the joy away, swallowing more sobs, smiling harder than he knew he could, hanging onto his friend. “Yes.”

“Then I don’t think you have a choice!”

James couldn’t stop himself from incredulously dragging his gaze from her to Cacturne, almost rhythmically so. She had to have prepared for this, right? The way she said everything with such confidence, the way there wasn’t a single seed of doubt growing in her heart despite the fact that he wasn’t exactly a friend to her… how much thinking had she done? And why did she have more faith in his return than he ever would have?

Guilt stained his heart, guiltier than he felt had for anything. Guiltier than he had for stealing and lying and hurting. How many others were there out in the world, waiting for him to come back? Was he wrong in assuming that more than anything, they were happy to be rid of him?

Cacturne stood, slowly and meticulously pulling its arms from him, making sure not to jerk away and rip the fabric of his shirt in the process. James kneeled there in the aftershock of emotional overload, breath unsteady and heart full, as the pokémon outstretched an arm and beckoned him upward.

The man wiped what was left of his tears and grabbed it, wincing at the thorns but unperturbed in spirit. Despite all the nervousness, the fluttering, the feeling of uneasiness, there was a serenity there, with his hand on Cacturne’s. As if there was inherent beauty to be had in the idea that their hearts could connect once more at all. He rose.

“There’s quite a lot to unpack here,” James finally broached the topic. “Gardenia… our time together was short and debatable in its lightheartedness. We might as well be strangers, right?”

“I guess if you wanna be pessimistic about it!” She shot back, cheery tone betraying any sting her words might have had. “But you’re not a stranger to Cacturne. You gotta stop thinking about my place in this equation so much!”

James softened, some, feeling his world a little shaken, feeling confused. He peered further into her, trying to read her.

“Come on, you think I don’t listen to my pokémon?” She told him. “I might not know you
personally, but I know what this guy has told me, and I know there was a smile there every single
time.”

“You…” he began, looking back to Cacturne, who averted its gaze, almost bashfully. “Really?”

“Give yourself more credit!” Gardenia said. “Cacturne missed you a lot. And it looks like you missed
it, too! You think I’m gonna sit here and deny my friend something it’s wanted for so long?”

“But,” James protested. “How can you trust me?”

“Cacturne trusts you!” She beamed. “So I trust you no problem.”

He felt tears threaten him again and he swallowed them, still marveled and terrified at Sinnoh’s
kindness. Where was the caveat? Where was the pain? There was a part of him that preferred the
certainty of hardship, and he begged his heart to quiet it.

“What do you say, Cacturne?” James offered, gathering his courage. “Care to play catch-up?”

It beamed a lively ‘cac!’, and James’ heart shuddered at the smile in its voice. There wasn’t a trace of
resentment. It was as if his friend didn’t even care that he’d abandoned it so long ago.

Feeling a wave of something unpleasant coming from somewhere in the general direction of his
friends, he turned back to them, eyes sheepish.

“Is… is that alright by you?” James inquired, voice nearly a mumble. “You’re welcome to come
along, if you want.”

“Dis is yer day, Jimmy,” Meowth told him, confident. “I’m sure you’d do da same fer us, right Jess?”

She seemed to be lost somewhere, and jolted back to reality at the sound of her name. There was
sincerity in her tone despite the stiffness in her movements, and her eyes were kind when they rested
on James.

“Right,” she affirmed. “James, if anyone deserves this it’s you. We’ll set up camp on the hill across
the lake. Roger?”

“Y… yes!” He practically wept. “Thank you all!”

“It might be a quieter corner of Sinnoh, but Eterna’s still got some spots worth checking out,”
Gardenia told him. “I don’t have any battles today! So I’ll hang back at camp with everyone.”

“I certainly don’t remember inviting you,” Jessie said, just barely audibly, and Meowth elbowed her
leg.

“Sounds top notch!” Meowth contrasted. “I’ll letcha know all about what we been up to and see if
we can rustle up some grub. You got spices in dat herb garden out front?”

“Tons!” She boasted. “Come take your pick, I actually ran into a guy recently who gave me some
pro tips—”

“Yeah, it’s a heck of a story, about dat…”

Meowth and Gardenia wandered forward, and Wobbuffet prodded at his trainer’s side softly. Jessie
turned to him, muttering something in affirmation, then back to James. She flashed him a weak smile
and a wave before following behind the pair, leaving James and Cacturne side by side in the gym’s
center.
There was something to be said for the healing powers of life’s little pleasures. Getting into bed after an exhausting day, the first bite of hot food on an aching stomach, walking into an air-conditioned supermarket during a blistering summer’s heat. Today, it was the pristine perfection of finding an unoccupied seat at an outdoor cafe with just enough sunlight hitting it. Not too hot, not too shady, a group of sunbeams just substantial enough to grow and bloom flowers in James and Cacturne’s collective heart.

Cacturne was fidgeting with its hot cocoa, presently, trying to get a hold of the cup without fingers or lips. With outstanding tenderness, James unwrapped the straw he’d grabbed and slid it into the pokémon’s drink, and it crooned in gratitude, smile in its eyes as it sipped.

There hadn’t been many words between them. On the walk there, as they ordered, even now. There was a part of James that didn’t know where to start with all he wanted to say, didn’t know what was right, a divide between the words he had in his heart and the ones he knew would make for the best day possible. He steeled his patience, visualizing a plant in his mind’s eye, and how easily it would drown and die were he to pour water on it all at once.

He could tell Cacturne felt it too, that uneasiness—what is okay? How do two people with so much between them make small talk as if they were strangers? What’s the point of a facade like that? It was strange, and a little bit awkward, and a little bit unfair. Nevertheless, they pressed onward, knowing that anything was better than letting the day pass with nothing said.

“So,” James offered, setting his cocoa down. “You’ve gotten quite the makeover.”

Cacturne actually laughed, unprepared for him to comment on that of all things. It supposed that he would take notice of it—it was one of the more drastic evolutions out there.

“Turne…” it murmured, as if to say I guess so…! The pokémon dropped its glowing gaze to its hands, the passage of time suddenly taking hold of it. There was a time when they were stubbier, the spines on them not-so evenly dispersed, clumsy and awkward and far less precise.

“It must be nice, though!” its former trainer said. “You don’t have to balance on taller folk for vantage anymore, I bet! Less waddling around, too. I always felt a little bad that it was always forests with us. You must have missed the ease of the desert.”

The pokémon shrugged. “Cac,” it affirmed, non-committally.

“So modest,” James grinned, stirring the gratuitous amount of whipped cream in his drink. “You used to be such a small thing. How ever did you put up with the life I was making you live?”

“Cac!” It suddenly shot at him, soundly very briefly offended. Then a much softer “Cac~turne.”

Come on! James heard loud and clear, and had to fight the impulse to become choked up again when he heard what followed— You know I was with you by choice.

“I’m sorry, Cacturne,” he admitted. “I’m afraid that even though the old team and I are trying to be better people, it’s hard for me to shake the idea that no one would want to live those hardships alongside me.”

A silence passed between them, more on the side of comfortable but not quite fully there yet.

“This quiet talk isn’t suited to me,” he told the pokémon. “What about you? What have you been doing? Have you made friends around these parts?”
“Cacturne!” It boasted, raising its arms triumphantly, then motioning one to abashedly rub at the back of its head. “Turne…”

“I see,” James chuckled. “So the others were a little intimidated by how quickly you became her star?”

It nodded, chattering something more.

“Well, not your fault you were born with such dazzling charisma,” he told it, and Cacturne would’ve blushed if only it could.

Hoping to hide its unbridled joy at the flattery, the pokémon downed the last of its cocoa, exhaling in satisfaction as it dropped the empty cup back down to the foggy glass of the table. Another quiet silence passed, and the two of them watched the wind shake the branches of the tree adjacent to them, its movement a quiet song. James opened his mouth to speak, trying not to let his words carry how much weight was lingering in his soul.

“You’ve really become happy here, haven’t you?”

Cacturne softened a bit, and James couldn’t help but take note of how easy it was to see the eyes of the cacnea he remembered. The thought upfront was strange—they were the same person, after all—but Cacturne was large and towering and probably a touch scary to anyone who didn’t know its playful heart. Behind eyes like the moon’s rays and a smile that could easily read as wicked, James saw that tiny, affectionate, excitable person he knew, and it warmed him immeasurably.

“Cac…” it affirmed, and then, “Cacturne.”

Yes… James let the word rest in his head, and melted into the ending of the pokémon’s sentence like it was the sweetest dream. And I was happy with you, too.

Years had passed. More than James had cared to keep track of—at first the days trudged by like agony, and long into them, he’d stopped counting how long it had been since he’d last seen his partner. A pokémon with a strong bond to its trainer will almost always know what that trainer is feeling. Jessie always had a learning curve with hers, but James never was able to grasp the logic of her complaints. His pokémon always warmed up to him instantly, and he wondered why it took so long for a living sun like her and no time at all for a wretch like himself.

Despite the courage that dragged him to Eterna, into the gym, into the arms of a person he’d long since left, that self-doubt still lingered. Cacturne could feel it—enveloping, overwhelming, painful. More than anything, it wanted to quell it, assuage it, let James know that he was not just a stepping stone on the pokémon’s journey—he was a ferry, kind and stocked with love, and one Cacturne would’ve taken great joy in spending days aloft, time and time again.

James stood up, grabbing his own empty cup, turning to his friend to signal that there was still much more day to be had. In his eyes there was a nettled mess of emotion, running the gamut from hopeful to gloomy with every bittersweet shade of greenery in between.

“Show me the town?” James asked with the beginnings of a soft smile. “I’m sure you know it far better than I do.”

There was a chance there. A chance for Cacturne to cheer on its friend, a chance for it to make up for the lost time and let him know—really let him know—that the closing of a chapter between two people doesn’t mean that there has to be blame on either side.

“Cac~turne!” The pokémon chirped, giving the brightest grin it could muster, and it hoped with
everything it had that it could be the oasis James needed in the arid desert of his heavy heart.

“That’s wild, though! So Cilan pointed you in this direction?”

“Eh, kinda. T’be honest, I t’ink we woulda ended up here anyways.”

Jessie was near a picnic table, away from their chatter, trying desperately to drown it out, to focus on what she was cooking. They’d been at it for hours now, and James certainly wasn’t going to come back anytime soon. She simultaneously craved the isolation and loathed it—normally Wobbuffet would have been perfect company, but he was picking up on her surly mood and nervously wobbling words at her more often than usual. It was eating up her energy to reassure him that she was fine every five minutes.

“Darling,” she told her pokémon, forcing the petname out through gritted teeth, hand resting on his head. “It’s not you. But I would prefer not to chat right now, capiche?”

Wobbuffet looked a tad dejected at being unable to pierce her demeanour, but it wasn’t anything the pokémon wasn’t used to. If she wasn’t going to tell him, then she wasn’t going to tell anyone, and that was just how things were.

Gardenia and Meowth droned out into the background song, enveloped by the lake’s gentle waters rippling and the whistling of wind through the trees and the crackling of the fire as Jessie boiled stew over it. She welcomed its metamorphosis into white noise like a dear friend, drifting off to somewhere with kinder thoughts.

“I always kinda had a feelin’ in my gut dat Jimmy would suck it up and visit his pal again,” Meowth was in the middle of saying. “But I didn’t expect it so soon, y’know?”

“Really? Surprised me how long it took!” Gardenia countered. “If I had such a cute grass type waiting for me to come home, I don’t think I’d be able to keep myself away!”

“Jimmy’s a complicated poihson,” Meowth explained. “He’s got some baggage. We all do, some of us are jus’ a little more willin’ to admit it dan ot’ers.”

She sighed a bit frivolously. “Baggage that protects him from the allure of grass types?”

“...yeah, actually,” Meowth said, a little taken aback at how smooth of a transition it was. “I mean, he ain’t exactly wearin’ hard times on his sleeve, but somet’ in happened to James that made him terrified of grass types an’ only grass types for years.”

“What kind of awful thing could ruin something so wonderful?” Gardenia could not have fit more despair into her voice.

“Dunno,” Meowth offered. “Like I said, he never goes too far into da details wit’out spacin’ out a little. Usually, dat’s a cue to back off an’ stop askin’ questions.”

“But, wait,” Gardenia interjected. “If he was scared of them, how were him and Cacturne so close?”

Meowth shook his head, trying to make sense of vague points as he connected them in his head. “Dat’s just it. It was da strangest thing, he jus’ came home wit’ a weepinbell one day. Went out and caught it himself, wit’ his own ball an’ everything.”

The gym leader rested her face in her hands, listening intently. “Just… out of nowhere? After all that fear?”
“Yeah,” Meowth added. “Dat’s also strange for Jimmy. He doesn’t usually operate dat way. He’s much more inclined to feed a pokémon ‘n’ ask it to tag along dan ta battle it all proper-like. An’ den after dat... he did a complete one-eighty.”

“In what way?”

“Suddenly it was not’in’ but grass types,” the cat told her. “I mean, some exceptions, but after dat he got Carnivine and Cacturne practically one after da ot’er, and the way he took care of ‘em was... well, he was great at it, better dan he was at anyt’in’ else. He’d be up at sunrise every mornin’ ta water ‘em. Always bought ‘em da most nutrient-rich food he could afford. I mean jus’ spoiled ‘em silly.”

“No way…” something dismal seemed to flare up in her expression, just barely surfacing before dissolving quick as it came. “That’s no beginner knowledge. That’s something only type specialists and Breeders do...”

“Exactly,” Meowth said. “All my years walkin’ dis woild, I ain’t never seen anyone do dat but Jimmy. An’ since den, he’s talked time and time again about how he loves grass types more dan any ot’er kinda pokémon, never once explainin’ how he got ta dat point after years of freezin’ up at da sight of ‘em.”

“That’s so mysterious, isn’t it?” Gardenia pondered. “I wonder what changed.”

“My t’eory is he somehow fought against everyt’in’ he was t’ get over dat fear,” he responded. “An’ if it’s true, den I t’ink he deserves a lot more credit dan we’s always givin’ ‘im. Whatever happened to ‘im ta cause dat fear... maybe dat’s also what makes him so quick ta run an’ never look back.”

“And maybe that bravery in overcoming his fear of grass types is also the same bravery that brought him back here?” She offered.

“Exactly,” Meowth affirmed. “Like I said, James is a guy wit’ a lot goin’ on, and I’d be lyin’ if I said I knew anyt’in’ about most of it. But dere’s somet’in’ buried deep in dose woods, and I t’ink lately he’s really spendin’ more time musterin’ up his courage to uneart’ it.”

“Sounds like it...”

Gardenia’s sentence trailed off, and she brought her knees to her chest, oddly introspective as she let their words quietly halt and the sounds of the breathing universe take their place.

For the first time in a long while, she said nothing.

Mid-way into the day, as James and Cacturne were wandering the city, the man’s eyes stopped on a fateful sign and his legs soon followed. Cacturne was still in sync enough to stop alongside him, inquiring softly at what had piqued his interest.

There was a colourful banner hanging across the entrance of Eterna’s Historical Museum, announcing with exuberance that Canalave Library’s collection was on tour. There was a part of James that was pulled almost agonizingly toward it, and he had to momentarily stop himself from being sucked inward with little thought. He shook himself from the reverie, turning to Cacturne.

“Would you take issue with a slight detour?”

“Cac?”
“It’s just…” he tried to put words to his thoughts. “Well, I recently ran into someone who sang heavy praises of the same literature we’re staring down…”

“Cacturne!”

“You think?” James told it. “I promise I won’t be long.”

Cacturne offered him another affirmation, and he understood its sentiment clear as day—*I don’t mind what we do as long as we’re together.*

He brought his voice to a hush as they wandered inside and paid the fare, still not entirely sure what the social niceties for a museum were. He’d only ever been in them in the dead of night and for the purpose of thievery—mere years ago he was walking these very halls with the intent of ruining the hard work and dedication of the people who had worked to build it. He swore he had been to some in his youth, but there were dark patches in his memories and they turned to static when he tried to parse their contents. He was thankful, at the very least, that there was no pokéball policy here.

*If I was here as a boy,* he pondered. *I was probably told to keep my hands at my sides and my mouth sewed shut, anyways.*

Cacturne sensed something dark in his silence, and prodded at him a little in an attempt to wake him up. James realized his body was tensed all at once, unclenching his jaw and exhaling deeply.

“Sorry,” he told it. “Just letting my mind wander. Shall we?”

The pokémon peered into him, concerned, but elected not to press it, nodding instead. It followed him through the quiet halls, their feet echoing across the tile. In a moment of silent admiration, Cacturne reached its hand out and softly grabbed James’ own.

There was a steadiness to it, and James couldn’t help but note how much of a change that was in itself. His cacnea did not think about its volatile skin in relation to others—it was a loud, tiny thing too full of love to control itself in any manner. He never resented the pokémon for it—even when it seemed like a trait assigned simply to test James’ courage and willpower. Gardenia didn’t strike him as the type of person who would mind, either, and chances were she probably adored it even more than him. All of this made Cacturne’s decision to be gentle that much more heart-wrenching. Years later, the pokémon could still see right through him, sensitive enough to his anxious heart to try and lessen his pain in whatever ways possible.

Almost childishly, James pulled his jacket sleeve down his arm, covering his open palm for the express purpose of holding Cacturne’s hand tighter and with more feeling. In this simple gesture, he felt a wave of joy come off the pokémon, who was happy as ever that its comforting attempt had been received and welcomed. The doubt started to wash away from both of them. The stage began to pack up, the costume started to come off. James stopped feeling like an actor in a play following cues and conversational topics, drifted back to a time when him and Cacturne had hundreds of words between them and a world beneath their feet to conquer.

Past the model of Space-Time Tower, James’ eyes rested on the plaque hanging proudly above Canalone’s display, and as he held onto his old friend’s hand and stared up at it, he couldn’t help but feel it’s significance deep in his unsure heart—

*Eterna City: History Living,* the museum boasted. And then, below it—*The Town That Ties the Past to Now.*

It sunk in gradually, then all at once. His hand on fabric on Cacturne’s. The person he was whe...
he came here. The Adamant Orb, curiously returned back to where it belonged after all he had seen it been through. First as his target, now as his solace. Untouched. Safe.

Inside the museum, not much could be heard besides the sound of their footsteps as they quietly resonated. Like most of the town, it was peacefully serene—its only patrons the occasional tourist, or old soul who’d come to reminisce. Front and center there was a dusty tome, laying open on a random page, and James quietly let himself be taken by the fading, spotty words etched onto it.

*Betray not your anger, lest — will come.*

*Weep not with sorrow, or — will draw near.*

*When joy and enjoyment come natural as the very air, that is happiness.*

*Let such be blessed by the hand of Master —.*

*Those words were spoken often, as customary.*

There was a part of him that wanted to find meaning in it—to understand it—but everything Cilan had told him urged him to fight that natural instinct to pry apart its words and instead suspend his disbelief. Even if he could understand with clarity, there was no way he alone would be able to fill in blanks that even historians could not glean meaning from. Still, he couldn’t help but feel as if this message, no matter how wise its meaning, was not for his eyes.

Cacturne raised its free hand to jostle his shoulder as he was caught in the trance, flipping through pages and myths. It seemed to be interested in something towards the back of the exhibit, motioning towards it in curiosity. James looked to it, then let his friend lead him, closing the tome in courtesy.

The pokémon had walked him over to a glossy, framed photo—blown up several sizes for the purpose of better display. Despite this, it seemed a touch too well hidden amongst all the other books and photos, on the very back wall with almost no lighting to illuminate it. James squinted as he leaned into it, attempting to register what he was looking it. It looked like… a stone wall? With some sort of script carved into it. Cacturne gestured toward it again, this time looking to James, inquisitively uttering its name as if to ask “What does this say?”

James squinted again, humming a noise in concentration. The script wasn’t plain language—but some part of him recognized it. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, arms folded intently, trying to dig up books he’d read as a child by flashlight when he was supposed to be fast asleep. Tapping into his sensory memory, the thing that worked most effectively—eighteen-hundred thread-count sheets, the quiet purr of a dehumidifier, the leather of an expensive history book, the messily singed tufts of white around a growlithe puppy’s mane. When he opened his eyes, the letters still swam dizzyingly in his head, but with time, he was able to make sense of them.

As James read them aloud, his voice the only sound either of them could hear in the tranquil emptiness of the museum, he held Cacturne’s hand as if letting go would be his end.

James and Cacturne turned back up at camp a little before sunset, a bittersweet gentleness radiating off the both of them as they greeted their friends and left almost as soon as they had come. They were within the rest of the team’s sights, at the very least—farther down the lakeside with their knees lazily bunched up against their chests, waiting for the sun to start sinking in the horizon so that they could experience it together.

Meowth had taken a break from chatting with Gardenia to help Jessie cook, and their combined effort was making for quite the meal. Greninja was reclining against a tree, quiet as the still waters in
front of it. Wobbuffet refused to leave Jessie’s side, something that was starting to get on her nerves, but she couldn’t bring herself to focus her anger on him. There were targets more deserving who she’d feel far less guilt over.

Gardenia was still in her position on the grass, taking in the dipping sun herself. Meowth came to sit beside her once again with his bowl of stew and an armful of buttered rolls, practically inhaling both of them.

“That smells amazing,” Gardenia noted, then waved enthusiastically to Jessie. “Hey waitress! Care to get me in on this action?”

More deserving. Less guilt.

She roared over to happy circle of camaraderie, and Meowth could feel the impending storm in the weight of her footsteps and the way Wobbuffet threw his arms up and quietly choked out a ‘Wait—!’ Leaving a trail of fire blazing behind her, Jessie tore across the divide and nearly threw her ladle on the grass next to Gardenia, her eyes practically screaming get it yourself.

“Here’s your check,” she quipped through gritted teeth, and stomped back off in the other direction, the silhouette of her back razor sharp against the setting sun.

Gardenia was quiet for a moment, attempting to process the event, before she spoke to Meowth.

“...is she always like this?”

The cat swallowed the last of his food and let out a tiny sigh. “Not especially. I mean, she’s always got a temper, but it’s been’... accentuated, at dis moment.”

Gardenia turned her head upward, momentarily lost in thought. “Is she upset that her boyfriend isn’t around?”

Meowth practically choked. “Ha! Boyfriend. Haven’t heard dat one in a while.”

“...are they not dating?”

“Wild, right?” He agreed. “Nah, if dey’s in love, den dey got a ways t’ go before dey figure it out.”

“Huh,” Gardenia said. “So what’s her deal?”


“My skin’s thick enough!” The gym leader boasted. “Lemme hear it.”

“Jessie, she... well, she ain’t yer biggest fan,” he explained. “I t’ink it’s easy to see her as not’in’ but rage and dramatics, but dere’s also a big part of her dat’s fiercely protective of da small circle she has.”

Gardenia nodded, following along.

“Ta make a long story short,” Meowth said. “She’s ticked at ya for takin’ James’ friend away from ‘im. I know dat must not seem very fair, but, uh...”

“But, uh?”

“Ta be honest, I kinda get where she’s comin’ from,” he admitted.
“Well,” Gardenia said, oddly content. “Where’s she coming from?”

He blinked a little, surprised at her willingness to hear them out. “Well, uh… she… we t’inks you kinda manipulated him.”

He was expecting her to react defensively any moment now, but she sat there, eyes focused on him, beckoning him silently to keep going. Her quiet was unnerving in that it was kind and understanding, a stark contrast to the blunt and energetic person she so often was. He pressed on.

“I mean… maybe it wasn’t what ya intended, but…” Meowth tried to find his words. “Ya showed up outta da blue beggin’ ol’ Jimmy ta hand over his carnivine and cacnea. And ya didn’t seem t’ wanna take no for an answer. Den all of a sudden, it’s what he has t’ do in order for his pokémon ta be stronger? Sorry, I’m not buyin’ it.

“Ya coulda done somet’in’ better. Ya coulda taught him what techniques you used to teach Cacturne. Coulda helped ‘im out. But ya had no faith in da guy at all, and I t’ink dat’s what Jessie’s angriest about. Jimmy already has such little self-wort’, da second you put yaself on higher ground dan ‘im, he accepted it wit’out even t’inkin’ of standin’ up for himself. An’… ta her, it just looks like ya took advantage of one of her best friends because you was jealous of what he had.”

“I see,” Gardenia said, her gaze now off Meowth and stuck forward. “And you?”

“Me-owth?” He responded, not expecting it. “Middle o’ da road. Like I said, I get where Jess is comin’ from, but it’s easier for me to keep my t’oughts grey. Don’t got da temper she’s got. I dunno if I believe dat yer innocent here, but I dunno if I believe dat yer da connivin’ type, eit’er.”

“Well, that’s not that bad,” Gardenia told him. “To be honest, I’ve thought about it a lot, too.”

Meowth made a sort of ugly noise of curiosity and surprise, not expecting her to take it so well or to add against her case herself.

“I don’t think I have to tell you that I’m the kinda person who acts on impulse a lot,” she offered, staring out across the sparkling waters, mysteriously serene. There was an almost resigned aura to her smile.

“At first, I didn’t think much of the whole thing. I mean, James seemed alright with it, right?” Gardenia said. “And I got an adorable little cacnea! What was there to dwell on? I just wanted to face forward and grow stronger.”

Meowth stayed quiet, mystified at the wisdom to her tone. She laughed a little, then pressed on.

“It only took a couple nights of Cacnea musing quietly by itself for me to realize there was more to it than that,” the gym leader explained. “That first week, it was too heartbroken to do much of anything. It barely ate or slept. I can guess James was probably going through something similar.”

Meowth looked towards his back paws, the memories hitting him in bits and pieces. “Pretty much t’ da letter. We couldn’t get Jimmy ta do much of anyt’in’.”

“That was my problem,” she said. “I didn’t just disregard his skills as a trainer… I disregarded something crucial. I refused to see just how much of a bond they had.”

“Y’know,” Meowth picked his words, unsure what they’d do for the situation. “Jimmy befriended dat cacnea less dan a year before givin’ it to yous.”

Gardenia kept her composure, but there was almost a slight wince in her expression, and she shook
her head. “I never could have guessed. A bond like that, in such a short time... he must have been an amazing trainer.”

“He was,” Meowth said, his own tone almost sad. “He is.”

“Back then...” she told him. “I think deep down, I knew what was there. I feel... guilty, and like I’m lying, when I try to say I was completely unaware. But it was just an idea I shoved down. I didn’t want to acknowledge that there were other options. I just wanted that pokémon, and I think if I hadn’t found the reason I did...”

“...ya woulda found anot’er?”

She nodded, solemnly. “The person I was back then... I think it’s a cop-out to say she’s a different human than me. But when I think back on her actions, I can’t help but feel so disconnected. I don’t think... I hope it’s not something that I would do today.”

“Man, dis is it, huh?” Meowth said, oddly cracked up. “I’m finally at dat part in my redemption quest where I get to give someone else advice.”

“I guess so,” she said, amused despite the mood.

“I dunno ya very well, so who knows what my opinion means,” he told her. “But realizin’ ya screwed up is da first step toward screwin’ up less. So longs as yous patch up those mistakes and try yer damndest not ta make ‘em again, I t’ink yer on da right path.”

“I just hope I’ve been doing the right thing so far,” Gardenia admitted. “I spent so long thinking about what I was gonna say to him if he ever came back here. But when I saw him standing there I just reacted on instinct again.”

“If ya ask me, what ya did dere was best,” Meowth nodded. “Jimmy wasn’t needin’ ta get himself anymore psyched up. He just needed to be shocked back inta reality wit’ one of dose painful hugs he missed so much.”

“That’s good to hear,” she propped her head into her palm, stealing a quiet glance back at Jessie. “Think she’ll forgive me?”


Farther away, just barely out of earshot, Jessie was furiously fidgeting with the contents of her handbag, desperate to do something with her hands stave off the hurricane inside her heart. She heard Meowth or Gardenia or someone get up to get food and she kept her back defensively turned.

Wobbuffet had taken a hint and was no longer coddling her, simply being present near her in the event that she needed anything he could provide.

She knew they were talking about her. How could they not, after she’d made a scene like that? She’d just had to get her hands dirty and involve herself like that, the words tumbling from her lips with nothing to catch them on their way. Her veins itched and burned, raw and radiating from the center of her chest, and it only made her want to scream more.

This was maddening.

Jessie missed when things were easier, back when she was able to just be wicked and feel her feelings without remorse or regret for the situations they bred. Years ago, she would have ripped Gardenia out of the soil like the weed she was, her only qualm being the dirt staining her hands as she walked away. Now she had karma breathing down her neck. Now she had a will to be better,
but god, at what cost?

Good traits, she had plenty of those. She was beautiful, and talented, and lit up every room she walked into. The universe, however, had a few discrepancies between what traits are good and what ones make others want to spend time around you, invest themselves in companionship alongside you. Desirable traits were harder for her to list, her long-term charisma far lower than she ever would have liked to admit. Amongst the sliver where the venn diagram intersected, she knew with certainty that she’d always had one thing going for her, a single consistency that came as naturally to her as the breath in her lungs.

James was pushed up against cold brick, the sun almost fully set and the orange it painted the sky malevolent, unforgiving. There was pain nearly everywhere he could still move and clouds rolling in quickly, and he desperately grappled at the fist on his collar in an attempt to dislodge it.

“What’s the matter, moneybags?” His assailant taunted, breath hot on his tearstained face.
“Couldn’t buy a stronger arm?”

He pulled James closer, words dripping with aggression and malice, brows furrowed and eyes practically slits. When he spoke, his voice was low.

“Spent it all on skirts, huh?”

James closed his eyes once more, words somewhere far away, mind trying to find them in the great, great yonder. He barely even had it in him to cry any longer, and he was angry at himself for not being used to it by now, after everything.

“Fuckin’ fag,” the boy spat, slamming him up against the wall again, the word like knives from his lips. “You think you’re hiding it? Everyone knows it, y’know.”

His attacker grinned, as if he were proud to have figured something so inconsequential out. The gesture was simple, and the weight it carried, the fear it struck in James’ heart was far more substantial. The sense of exposure, the lack of safety—he smiled screamed I see you. It was unkind, intrusive, more than anything it was unfair. Who was this stranger to know James? Who gave him the right?

His anger was swallowed in fear. He took one last look around at the blurry scenery of Pokémon Technical Institute. Tomorrow, he’d be gone with his satchel, off to try something else. There had to be something. There had to be a white tomorrow.

“Put him down.”

The assailant whipped his head around, grip just barely loosening on James’ uniform. Someone else had entered the abandoned lot, and James squinted his eyes in a weak attempt to focus on them. Standing there in the open autumn air was a girl with blazing red hair trailing behind her, her shoulders hunched and her fists balled. Bandages on her scraped up knees and tears sloppily sewn up in her uniform, a massive orange raincoat more-or-less devouring her, thrown over it all. Her face was oddly familiar, but James couldn’t place it as she faded in and out of his focus. The girl stayed with searing blue eyes locked on the nobody clinging to James, teeth bared like an arcanine ready to charge.

“Are you hard of hearing, or just an idiot?!” She practically snarled. “I told you to put him down.”
“And who the hell are you?”

“I’m the person who’s gonna kick your scrawny ass in T minus five seconds if you don’t get your hands off that kid right now!”

“Yeah, right. You?”

She stared him down, unmoving. “Five.”

“Don’t kid yourself, street rattata!”

“Four.”

“Tiny little whelp like you…”

“Three.”

“Can’t even afford the vending machine—”

“Two.” She unhooked her earrings, one by one.

“That why you like moneybags here?”

“One.” Almost carelessly, she dropped them to the ground, eyes shut as she sucked in a breath.

“How much is he payin’ you?”

The second the words left his lips, the girl’s eyes shot back open, and the claps of thunder in the distance echoed over her voice as if she’d summoned them for the express purpose, as if they were her idle playthings.

“Blast off.”

She charged the boy, hair a flaming sunbeam behind her as she dove for his torso, ramming full force into it. She moved faster than he had time to process, and the impact knocked the wind out of him and loosened his grip entirely, sending James tumbling to the cold ground. When James was able to open his eyes again, he saw her with the boy pinned, a measly ekans coiled angrily around a rhyhorn. His face pressed hard against the grimy concrete, her words sharp as they left her.

“Jessica Rosalyn Miyamoto!” She barked out. “You hear me?! You keep that name in your head and you don’t dare forget it! Don’t you dare forget the name of the girl who put you in the dirt where you belong!”

The former attacker was wailing in agony as she twisted his arm back, unrelenting.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!” He shouted. “Let me go!”

“Beg!”

“Please! I’ll never touch him again! I’ll never touch anyone again!”

At his words, she released her hold on him, cautiously standing with her back to James as she got up, still on her guard. Her eyebrows slanted fiercely, her glossy lips pressed into a line, she refused to take her eyes off the slime for a second.

He got up, weakly, staring at her with fear in his eyes. She was almost disappointed at how little of a
fight he put up.

“I know you have others,” she told him, hoping to make him feel even half a shred of the same vulnerability and fear she knew James was feeling. The boy swallowed.

“Tell them what happened here.”

With that, he bolted down the road, and the hanging clouds above rumbled and cracked apart to unleash a downpour. The pair heard his footsteps wet on the sidewalk as he disappeared from their sight. James winced as the rain hit his bare arms, unprepared for the onslaught, and when his vision focused back some, he saw her there. Arm outstretched, drizzle framing her, she looked like a blazing sanctuary against the gloomy skies.

It was then that he realized where he recognized her from—on the first week of school at Pokémon Tech, he passed her in the hallways on his way to class. Taken almost entirely by her long strawberry mane and the way it framed her resting expression, he tripped over his feet and spilled his cocoa all over his uniform and homework.

“You in there, kid?”

James shook himself back to the present, staring up at this angel alight. Why she was talking to him, offering her hand to him, was anyone’s guess—nonetheless, he held tightly on and shakily allowed himself to be pulled to his feet.

“Aren’t you okay?” She asked him, carefully examining his face. “That scumbag really got you good. I’m sure he won’t be hanging around anymore, though.”

“Thank you,” he finally was able to choke out, and he nearly gasped at the sudden feeling of words in his throat, touching a hand to his mouth.

“Always a pleasure to take out the trash,” she turned her nose up, disgusted. “Picking on someone defenseless is one thing, but throwing words like that around is a whole new level of revolting!”

It was healing, how her voice shook with disdain at the thought of it. James suddenly felt safer than he ever had before. The contrast almost jarred him, posed against the exposed feeling he’d been drowning in only moments ago. He began to regain his faculties one by one, and as his saviour was picking her earrings up off the ground and cramming them into her pockets with a charming lack of grace, he felt the rain in full. The chill of it registered, and he shuddered fiercely.

“Jeez, do you not have a coat?” She marveled at him, removing her own with little thought. “You’re gonna catch a cold, stupid.”

She wrapped it around him like a blanket, and James stood fixated on the tenderness of her ministrations, unable to believe her hands were fighting to defend mere moments ago. A fire to burn away evil, a fire to keep people warm. The sensation of someone dressing him in his dazed stupor was nostalgic, almost scarily so—there were memories in his brain trying to resurface at the red of her hair and the feeling of hands on his shoulders. He pushed them down, blinking himself back.

What did humans do, usually? Social cues eluded James more often than not. Introductions? He knew her. Did she know him?

“Jessica,” he said, as if to announce “Okay, that’s your name. Do you know mine?”

“Don’t,” she shot back almost instantly. “Jessie. It was for effect, sounds more powerful, huh?”
He seemed to understand. She kept talking, embarrassed at feeling she had gone from nurturing to harsh too quickly.

“Two people can call me Jessica—my mama and the handsome man I’m gonna marry once I meet him in a few years,” Jessie paused, putting a single finger to her mouth in thought. “Maybe my best, best friend, but only if one or both of us is on our death bed.”

“Jessie,” he repeated, and the name felt like morphine on his aching frame. He pointed to himself, words coming faster, now. “I’m James.”

“I know,” she said, grinning. “You’re the kid with the fancy coated canvas backpack and the soft hair.”

“It’s soft?” He said, running his hands through the few dry bits left on the underside, mystified.

“Wanna come back to my dorm?” She said, and James swore the rain parted around her smile. “I have some boy clothes you can borrow while yours dry!”

She paused again, adding an afterthought—“Or girl clothes if you want!”

James pulled the collar of her raincoat closer to his face, unsure if the warm solace he was enveloped in was coming from the garment or the extent of her unconditional protection. He nodded, trying not to cry.

“Careful with that coat, ok? It’s mama’s.”

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks, Jessie.”

“Yeah!” She affirmed, holding her hand back out. “C’mon, let’s go home.”

“Home,” he echoed, liking the way the foreign word felt as it turned to steam against the freezing air.

He grabbed her hand and walked forward.

If Jessie wasn’t allowed to be warm and watchful, what was she? She could easily forego her more villainous traits. She was coming to terms with losing her viciousness, or at the very least, saving it for when she needed it. If she couldn’t channel it into protection, what was she good for in the wake of her friends’ pain? What could she do? No good with reassurance, sub-par with affection, all she knew was how to weave words and throw punches so that “I’ll tear your enemies limb from limb.” became the kindest song.

Was her anger toward Gardenia even justified? Was her resentment valid? Half of her brain screamed keep the one you love safe. The other half screamed right back, control yourself—you’re trying to be better.

She let out a sharp huff, stepping back towards the cookware to wash some of the dishes that were stacked around the fire. If she was going to quietly simmer in agony, she might as well channel the excess mania into something productive.

Picking up a metal bowl, she allowed her gaze to fall to James and Cacturne, a speck of darkness on
the citrus horizon. He looked so peaceful, sitting there, as if whatever worries he did have could be put to bed for just today.

*Whatever I end up doing or feeling in the end,* Jessie couldn’t help the thought. *I hope it makes you happy, too.*

She dipped her hands into the lake, wishing to the crisp waters to take her someplace else.

With the picturesque apricot sky hanging above, and the cool grass entwined in their hands below, James and Cacturne couldn’t help but fall into comfortable silence. It was the first time all day where the fear that their time together would end with too much unsaid wasn’t gripping their hearts and keeping them from oxygen.

The scene was set like something out of a sepia-toned nostalgic dream. Two friends, side by side, shoulder to shoulder. The sun vanishing slowly into the horizon. Sparkling waters at their feet. A chill in the air that woke them, but didn’t freeze them. The quiet background noise of mutual friends talking in syllables somewhere far off as streetlights blinked on one by one across the lake.

It was so tranquil that James had nearly forgotten his plans, letting out a quiet ‘oh!’ as he reached into his bag and dug around for something. Cacturne moved its head slightly, taking note of his jittery movements, muttering a tiny utterance in curiosity.

“No, it’s fine, I just—” he stopped, being overtaken by a delighted smile, brandishing the prize he was looking for. “Aha! Here we are!”

Cacturne squinted at the bag, unable to parse the text adorning its label. It was going to ask, but as soon as James ripped the thing open, the sweet smell hit it and it cried out in amazed joy.

“You remember, right?” He said, looking smitten at the pokémon’s genuine happiness. “How we met?”

“Cac-turne!” It shouted, as if to proclaim “Um, DUH?” playfully. It made excited grabbing motions at James, who had to put a hand up to stave its eagerness off.

“Hold on, hold on!” He laughed. “Save some for your old pal!”

James pulled a cookie out of the bag, tentatively placing it in Cacturne’s hand. Despite the pokémon’s enthusiastic demeanour, it waited patiently for him to grab one himself before digging in, and James set the bag down between them, taking in the scenery again. The quiet settled for a while before he spoke once more.

“Did I ever tell you that you were somewhat of a salvation to me, that day?”

“Cac?”
“The day we met,” James began. “I had lost a dear friend of mine. One who’d been beside me for years. I had to let them go much for the same reasons I had to let you go. It was just… time, you know? For the chapter to close.”

“Turne…”
“It was hard, yes,” he agreed, voice lulling. “But in the midst of it all, I met you. And I think I would have survived that kind of heartache without our meeting, but I’m grateful that I didn’t have to.”

Cacturne chirped something sentimental at him, carefully leaning its head against his shoulder. His heart swelled at the warmth resonating from the spot, needling love through every ounce of him, sewing together his fragmented state of being.

“Your spines used to hurt like the dickens,” he said, regarding the feeling of their closeness once more. “What an ungrateful thing I was.”

“Cacturne, cac...” it mumbled lazily, and James chuckled—

I have more of them now, silly…

“Time makes fools of us all,” James told it. “We’re old souls now, aren’t we?”

“Turne~cac…” it said. I guess so…

Another gentle silence fell upon them, their bittersweet nostalgia replaced by waves and idle chatter in the distance. James closed his eyes and let himself be taken by it, and Cacturne did the same. Both of them were acutely aware, in the moment, of how Eterna’s boast of uniting the past and present couldn’t have possibly been more significant.

Years ago, they were sitting on these very lands gazing out at the same beautiful sun. Years ago, they watched the lights of the city blink on one by one as they both began to come to the understanding that it would be their last day together.

Things changed. Cacturne was several heads taller, brandishing a formidable strength and drive. Things also remained the same, evidenced enough by the pokémon cuddling up to him like it was all it was put on this earth to do. It had done so much with itself, its life. James wondered if he, too, could become stronger, braver, kinder with time and dedication.

“The small one,” James said, suddenly, not initially realizing he was speaking aloud. “Was me all along, I think.”

Cacturne pulled its head up and turned to him, unsure what it was he meant. He shook the statement, attempting to brush it off, smiling brightly at his friend. James stood, then—chipper mood contagious, qualms unimportant.

“Show me that Drain Punch?”

“Cacturne?” It inquired, confused.

“The last time we were here, you were working yourself silly on the verge of collapse to even attempt it,” James explained. “I want to see the effort of all that work! I want to know firsthand how strong you’ve become.”

“Cac… cac turne ?” It was concerned, but James’ attitude said he wanted it more than the alternative. “Are you sure?” The pokémon had asked.

“Please,” he was beaming. “Hit me with everything you got.”

Cacturne stared at its arm, then at James. He wasn’t the pokémon’s trainer anymore—an order from him wasn’t one Cacturne was obligated to follow by any means. A friend’s humble request, on the other hand, was a matter it had a clear choice in. Somehow, that felt better.

Cacturne balled its fist and nodded intently to James, who stood his ground with his arms open and
ready.

The pokémon lunged forward, its whole arm a magnificent, resplendent viridian. Crying out its name in exuberant rapture against the bright orange backdrop of the quickly fading sun, it twirled its arm against James’ shoulder, sending him reeling back onto the grass.

Almost immediately, Cacturne phased out of battle mode, concerned for the safety of its dear friend, but James burst into laughter and got right back up on his feet.

“That was amazing, Cacturne! You’re stronger than ever!” He cheered. “Once more with feeling!”

There was a part of Cacturne that worried maybe this was his version of hysterics. It was quickly replaced by the part of the pokémon that spent day in and day out with a trainer who so rarely scolded it for nuzzling him with sharpened quills. This was James, who he was at heart, and Cacturne couldn’t find it in itself to take that for granted ever again.

It tore forward again, this time hitting James in the chest. He held himself together better, pushing back with force against the pokémon. With another motion for another attack, they formed a sort of rhythm—Cacturne shouting out its battle cry, James responding to the hit with boisterous, thankful laughter—as if the onslaught was restoring his livelihood rather than taking from it. Cacturne pressed on. James cheered it forward.

He laughed. He laughed. He couldn’t stop. Not even when Greninja darted over, concerned and unable to comprehend the scene. Not even when his friends soon followed, one of them barreling forward looking like she was about ready to murder someone. Not even when they questioned the pair, tried to pry answers from the lips of their reverie. James fell to his knees from exhaustion, and Cacturne mirrored this, and they collapsed on each other in a smiling, giddy pile. Tears streaming down both of their faces, laughter echoing as the sun disappeared out of the sky.

A thin line of light lingered over the horizon of Eterna’s humble skyline, barely illuminating the outline of the two of them. In its pale radiance, they held onto each other like two halves of one single, strengthened whole.

Their friends watched the scene unfold—expressions softened, now—and quietly turned back to camp, allowing them their embrace, allowing them their deserved happy end.

Midday, James was standing with his back turned to the balloon, unsure of how it was he was going to find the courage within himself to say goodbye to his friend once more. It wasn’t until he was hugging Cacturne with everything he was that the idea began to sit with him that now that he’d come back, the fear was quieter than it had ever been. All it took was once. One leap, one decision to try harder, to be better.

“I’ll visit again as soon as I put roots down somewhere,” James told it. “I’ll call you whenever I think of you, alright? I promise this time things will be different.”

“Cac~turne,” it told him, tears staining its amber eyes. I know.

Gardenia had been looking at her hands the entire time, uncharacteristically quiet. In the brief moment where James and Cacturne pulled apart from each other, she found her voice at last, speaking up in a tone James had never heard pass her lips before.

“James,” she said, her eyes darker than normal. “Can I get real with you for a moment?”

The phrasing of the question set his heart in a million different directions, erratic and fearful and back
“I need to apologize,” she said, bowing her head slightly, and James gazed incredulously at the spectacle, unable to register what it was she meant.

“What for?” He asked, his voice grasping for meaning. “You’ve done nothing but treat me far better than I ever could have thought. You gave me the perfect reunion with someone I missed more dearly than anything. Why on earth does that warrant apology?”

She raised her head, then shook it, dismissing his words. “No, that was what you deserved, plain and simple. James… all those years ago. Taking Cacturne in… it might not have ended as poorly as it could, but it was still wrong.”

“What do you mean? You’re not making any sense…”

“I wanted your pokémon,” Gardenia said, voice heavy with remorse. “So I jumped on the quickest reason I could find to make you believe I was entitled to it. I was selfish. I was wrong.”

He protested still, and Jessie found herself watching the scenario with a confusing mess of emotions tearing her insides apart.

“James… Cacturne didn’t need to come with me,” the gym leader explained, a sad smile creeping onto her face. “It could have stayed with you. I could have helped to teach you the regime I would have put it through to learn that Drain Punch. I could’ve done so many things differently, but I didn’t.

“All this time, I’ve been trying to put it together in my head. How I would say sorry to you when you showed up here again. I can see now that you’re a trainer who loves with all his heart. You are today, and you were back then. I’m sorry I doubted you all that time ago. I hope you can forgive me.”

She bowed again, and James tried with everything he was to understand. It was strange—to suddenly be on the other end of an apology, after a lifetime of people taking and taking and taking from him, never offering anything in exchange. He found himself momentarily wishing she was someone so much more wicked—someone who he could hold a grudge against, someone who he could revel in the sorries of. Instead, life threw this at him—a girl he didn’t even know he was supposed to be upset with.

“I’m… not exactly sure how to go about this,” he admitted. “But I don’t think your heart was in an unkind place, was it?”

“Well, no…” she said. “I guess if anything, it was just a lack of thought. But that doesn’t make it any better.”

He shook his head at her, smiling earnestly. “Forgiving you is something I’m… unsure about, because I was never mad at you to begin with. I’m sorry if that’s not the answer you wanted from me.”

“Don’t apologize to me, James!” Gardenia said. “It’s alright. I can live with that. But… I was thinking, you know…”

“What’s that?”

“...maybe you and Cacturne could leave together.”
They all gaped at her at precisely the same moment, the statement lingering on the open air, unreal, unprecedented. James stammered, grappling at whatever sentence structure he could get a hold of.

“You can’t be serious!”

“And why not…?” She grinned. “I mean, if it’s happier with you, who am I to keep it here, y’know? Maybe it’ll enjoy seeing the world again.”

James and Cacturne shared a nervous look, their thoughts quietly mingling. There was merit to the question, yes. She made a very good point, and it was obvious that she’d put her whole heart into the statement—Gardenia rarely ever said things she didn’t mean.

“Cacturne knew me for a short time,” James admitted. “And that short time was beautiful and significant. But… it’s your pokémon, Gardenia. Regardless of the story that brought you two together. You feel the same, don’t you, Cacturne?”

The pokémon looked at its feet, as if it were embarrassed by its own emotions, betrayed. Slowly, it nodded, and James felt a pang in his heart at the idea that it would think to worry he would hold this against it.

“That doesn’t mean this is goodbye again,” James said, his hands cautiously perched on his friend’s shoulders, moving one to touch its face. “I meant what I said! I’ll be here this time. We’ll meet again.”

“Cacturne…” it whined, overwhelmed with adoration, unprepared regardless.

They embraced once more, and Gardenia let out an amused sigh, turning away from them.

“Well, I tried my best,” she quipped, then raised her head back up to meet James’ eyes as he parted from Cacturne once more. “James, you’re something else. Keep that in your heart, alright?”

“I can’t imagine what you’re talking about…” he mumbled. “But thank you.”

“You’re a good person,” she said, and then swiveled very slightly to let her eyes wander to Jessie while she spoke. “…and you have some friends who really, really care about you. Here in Eterna, and right by your side, and who knows where else!”

Jessie turned from her almost immediately, face burning and arms holding her sides together in the wake of emotional vulnerability. She was grateful that Gardenia had owned up to her uncouth behaviour, dissatisfied that it was clear she hadn’t come to that conclusion on her own, squirming at the idea of being involved. Her thoughts oscillated between get bent and thank you, so she settled on the plan of grilling Meowth for spilling her thoughts and feelings much, much later. For now, she exhaled, and it was as though all the unkind demons she had been keeping inside floated away along the gentle breeze.

Before they parted, James hugged Cacturne one last time, his voice low and soft and shaking with wistful emotion.

“I love you,” he choked out, his arms wrapped tightly around his friend.

“Turne~cacturne,” the pokémon mirrored, and he let its sentiments linger like a wax seal on his tender heart.

Walking away the last time, James bolted from the scene in uproarious tears, his team chasing after him desperately, spending the subsequent week trying to pull him out of a deep depression.
Walking away this time, he felt the sun on his face, and their smiles on his back, and though the pain inside still lingered, he knew this time he was capable of thriving despite it. There was someone here for him. He’d gained another home.

Drifting along the wind, James kept his eyes on the horizon, a different kind of solitude and quiet than his teammates had dealt with before. When Eterna was gone from their sights, he let out a breath of air, and as it escaped him he couldn’t help but wonder if it was one he had been holding all his life until now. Voice only barely audible against the wind and clouds around them, he spoke aloud to no one in particular.

“All lives touch other lives to create something anew and alive,” he said.

“You writing poetry now?” Jessie offered, attempting to lighten the mood.

He smiled, and shook his head once more. “A message I saw in the museum here—a photo of those words carved into a ruin wall. Written in Unown, of all things… an ancient language I just happened to take an interest in once upon a time.”

“Spooky!” she said. “Or maybe beautiful? Could be either, at this point.”

“Whaddyu t’ink it means, Jimmy?”

“Who knows?” He said, finally moving his gaze to look upon his friends, and then dragging it back out to the vast blue skies. Staravia tore through the clouds. The sun’s rays beat down on every living thing below.

“Something, I hope.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I had a lot of controversial/unpopular opinions going into this one, so I hope they weren't too awful. Jessie was kinda muted this chapter as well, but I promise that's intentional and part of some plans I have for her and her character arc. It's not gonna be like this forever, but James was honestly long overdue for his own chapter--I'm mad that I had to wait this long for the first one.

Also, this is my first venture away from canon-compliance! Scary. The message James recites at the end is from the Solaceon Ruins, and in the dub its something like "When every life meets another life, something new is born." I think that sounds so clunky and awkward, a direct translation of the Japanese message, so I went ahead and retconned it to be the text you find in those ruins in the DP Pt games. I think it's a lot more beautiful in the gameverse, and I wish that TPCI had translated it proper.

This is the longest chapter yet! 12k! Yay!

Thanks for reading! As always, I will do my best!
Serena stood at the entrance to Twinleaf Town with her arms pressed hard at her sides, eyes taking in the lush green of its vast open fields and humble appearance of its worn dirt roads. All things considered, it was not a particularly breathtaking sight—especially not to someone who grew up with the luster of Kalos’ scenery. Still, she found a tremble accompanying her stance and a nervousness fluttering anxiously against her lungs. It was a rare nostalgia that she wasn’t fond of—she’d seen far too much and overcome even more, she didn’t have time to revert back to the person she was once upon a time.

“Delphox,” Serena told her pokémon. “If I’m not through this gate in ten minutes, I need you to whack me with your stick.”

“Phox?” The pokémon responded to the request, in a tone that said *I mean yeah, but, you sure?*

Serena’s nod was punctuated with something unexpected from behind her, and she failed spectacularly to keep herself from yelping out in surprise when the noise hit the air.

“Oh, hey twerpette.”

James wasn’t able to get through his sentence, the words cut off sharply by said twerpette emitting a startled shriek. Sure, neither of them were expecting to see the other in Sinnoh of all places, but she didn’t have to be *dramatic* about it.

Serena slapped her hands over her mouth, embarrassed at the scene she had made, before turning around to face her former enemies. There was a brief moment where she thought it must have been a trick of the mind—they never made an entrance so nonchalant and casual! Where was the glamour and the fireworks and the strange slam poetry that she was certain she’d memorized, at some point? Why were they *here?*

James was looking a little startled himself at her reaction, and Jessie was far more wrapped up in stylishly looking off into the distance to match. Meowth was lazily slumped over Wobbuffet’s head, paws dangling in the space between the pokémon’s eyes. There in their flawlessly coordinated, light pastel jackets, they didn’t look much like the villains Serena was used to.

“Sorry!” Her and James said in perfect unison, both a little unsure of what they were apologizing for, but unable to resist the impulse reflexively.

“I swear…” Jessie let out as she regarded the debacle, but there were traces of an amused smile.
somewhere in her words.

“Whatcha doin’ out on da countryside, twoihpete?” Meowth finally broached.

“I could ask you all the same…” Serena practically marveled, her already dazed-mood now intensified.

“It’s our last stop on the Sinnoh tour, of course,” James said. “Then we’re off to Hoenn, if everything works out alright.”

“That’s…” his exposition didn’t help any of her questions. “What are you plotting that far in advance?”

“Dat ol’ song ‘n’ dance got pretty old pretty fast,” Meowth offered. “An’ ta be honest, so is da narrative of repeatin’ why we quit it wit’out a gentle fade into da next scene.”

Serena dragged a hand over her face, only slightly overwhelmed, honestly.

“Alright! I’m standing at the entrance to the hometown of one of my idols, losing my mind and suddenly ten years old again, and now Team Rocket is here!”

“We have names,” Jessie quipped. “And for your information, we haven’t worn those out-of-style uniforms in ages.”

“Perhaps… I can speed this process up?”

Soon as the sentence had left him, James dug in his bag for Greninja’s pokéball. He threw it into the air far too nonchalantly, and Jessie couldn’t help but smile knowingly at his quick thinking.

When Greninja materialized, its normally hard stance softened almost instantly at the sight of Serena. Its pupils shifted from thick lines straight into sparkling circles, and the croak it let out almost involuntarily was sung far higher than its normal cadence.

“Greninja!” Serena knew the pokémon as soon as she saw it, barely needing time to register its features. “I feel like it’s been forever! How did you… where’s Ash?”

It rubbed a webbed hand across the back of its head, unsure of how to explain itself. The language barrier eluded it with one lone exception, and the quartet behind the pokémon certainly sensed this.

“It’s as I said, we’ve been out and about,” James told Serena. “The younger twerpette, the lemondrop? She had Greninja with her.”

“She practically begged us ta take it back ta Pallet with us!” Meowth added. “So we’s buddies for now. Right, Greninja?”

Greninja crossed its arms and shot him a glare, letting out a ‘nin-ja’ that Meowth heard crystal clear.

*I take issue with being used for these purposes, scratch cat.*

It moved its eyes back to Serena, nodding affirmatively regardless. Despite the circumstances, it warmed its heart to see her face again. It hadn’t realized how much it had missed her until that very moment.

“So, then,” Jessie began. “Are you going to tell us why you’re hanging out in the middle of nowhere, or will we have to pull out even more lofty tales about our countless travels?”
“I mean, it’s…” Serena told her. “A little hard to explain.”

“Oh, wait!” Jessie suddenly said, her expression morphing into something ravenously excitable. “Twerpette, you perform, don’t you? Are you here to challenge the Sinnoh circuit?”

“Um, yes, but…” the world was moving too quickly for Serena for the first time in a while. “How did… you know that I perform?”

“Goodness, this bit is becoming exhausting…” Jessie muttered under her breath, then raised her voice. “Let me pose to you an inquiry! Do you remember a performer named Jessilee who once dazzled the many stages scattered across the Kalos region?”

“Of course!” Serena beamed. “She was really good at what she did.”

Jessie smiled, proudly, before continuing. “Did you ever find it curious how she had a gourgeist, and a wobbuffet, and a meowth…”

Serena’s face went blank as she quietly connected points in her head, and she gasped as she placed a hand over her mouth, the other pointed square at Jessie.

“No way! You?!”

“I’m a woman of many talents!”

“I feel so stupid!” Serena said, eyes fixated on her hands. “I knew she seemed familiar, but there’s no way I ever would’ve… oh my gosh, we were in the master class together?!”

“Those were the days, weren’t they?” Jessie said, eyes full of promise. “But you didn’t answer me, missy! Contests or no?”

Serena nodded, her world shaken just a tad. “I already made my way through Hoenn and Kanto… it just seemed like the next step.”

“Sinnoh’s locations are a personal favourite of mine…” Jessie admitted, almost wistfully. “Though, there wasn’t a contest hall in a hick town like this, last I was here. Have times changed?”

“Oh! No, actually, I’m…” Serena began. “I’m actually here to meet with a former top Coordinator. Johanna… do you know her?”

“Know her?” Jessie said. “Her twerpy little daughter used to hang around Twerp Classic.”

“Around Ash?” Serena asked, her eyes growing wide. “You… I—I’m that few circles away from Johanna?!”

“It would appear so,” James observed from behind them. “He does seem to have a knack for picking up little performer friends, come to think of it…”

Serena’s knees were wobbling, and she looked about ready to pass out at this point. Barely ten minutes had passed, and in that minuscule amount of time, she had learned more new info than she had all month. From people who tried to rob her at least more than once. The situation was too strange to be real, but she was staring it down regardless.

She sighed. “Delphox, I might need that whack sooner than later…”

The pokémon looked at her, concerned, genuinely unable to tell if she was joking or not.
“Why so nervous?” Jessie offered. “Last I checked, you were somehow lucky enough to beat me in the finals!”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Serena said, slightly downtrodden. “I thought I was past all this. I’ve been all across the world performing and I almost never have to deal with this kind of anxiety anymore…”

“I gots’n idea,” Meowth suddenly piped up. “Hows about ya run yer current routine by us? Even if it’s poinfect and we can’t give ya any pointers, maybe it’ll help ta have someone reaffoihm it for ya.”

“It’s not a bad idea…” the girl responded. “I mean, if you’re offering, is that alright?”

“What’s a little help from one performer to another?” Jessie smiled. “You better impress, twerpette.”

“That I can promise,” Serena cheered up. “Thanks… that’s so weird to say to you guys, but I guess I mean it.”

“There’s a clearing a short walk east of here,” James said, recalling passing it on their way. “We’ll take you there. Just try not to light anything wildly aflame.”

“For once? Shouldn’t be a problem,” Serena stuck her tongue out.

Trees blurred together lazily on either side of the group as they neared the open space, their quiet smalltalk and catch-up complemented by the sound of starly and kricketot quietly chirping around the route. Jessie and Serena chatted excitedly at the head of the pack, the boys hanging back a bit as they dominated the conversation. The three of them were unable to hide their smiles, stealing looks at each other, happy to see Jessie so happy for the first time in such a long while.

“I haven’t technically done anything in Sinnoh yet,” Serena was in the middle of saying. “But I’ve watched so many videos of past Coordinators, I feel like my head is spinning. There was Johanna, and Dawn is really amazing too! Wallace and Fantina, Nando and Zoey and Jessilina…”

“Oh,” Jessie said, nonchalantly. “That’s me.”

“I’m not that gullible! Once, sure, but twice?” Serena shot her down almost instantly.

Jessie raised a single pointed finger near her chin, and started casually counting on the others as she listed names.

“Dustox, Wobbuffet, Meowth, Yanmega, Seviper…”

“No way,” Serena stopped dead in her tracks. “No way!”

Jessie let out a hearty laugh, and Serena was instantly right back to interrogating her.

“Why were you so many people?!”

“Performing is my passion, but crime was my job,” she told the girl. “Sadly, the two are incompatible as partners, unable to dance upon the same stage. Much as I would love everyone to know my name, I can’t compromise what kept food on the metaphorical table.”

“Before you totally uproot my worldview any more tonight, were you any other notable performers I should know about?!” Serena said.

“Tons,” Jessie grinned. “In Hoenn alone I played enough different roles to fill a Pokémon Base
“Nevermind, I don’t want to know how many times I was actually watching you in contests,” she waved off. “That being said…I really did draw a ridiculous amount of inspiration from you.”

Jessie grinned more fiercely, chest broad, brimming with joy. “Really, now?”

“Yeah! Although if I’m being honest, it was hard to pick just one style…” Serena said, sounding a little embarrassed. “You have a really varied pool to choose from.”

The comment was unexpected, and made Jessie blush something fierce. She was used to that being cited as a fault of hers. To hear it painted in such a flattering light was…new. She admired the twerptette’s optimism.

“Well,” she said, in her best attempt to shake it off. “Who says you have to pick just one?”

The words sat with Serena, an idea she had never considered. “I guess that’s true…what’s a brand, after all?”

“For me, it was refusing to have one,” Jessie smirked.

They’d reached the clearing in what felt like no time, and with her eyes on Serena, then on the open field, Jessie dropped to a sit against the soft grass. The rest of the team, including Greninja and Delphox, soon followed.

“Well,” the redhead started. “Show me what you’ve got.”

“Alright!” Serena smiled brightly, and tossed her ball into the sky.

Delphox seemed content to be sitting this one out, her ebony claws poised delicately against the earth below. Sylveon shimmered to life, and Serena quietly explained the situation to her. The pokémon nodded, side-eyeing the curious audience a bit nervously, but her faith strong in Serena regardless.

The pair nodded at each other, putting on their best and most enthusiastic expressions. Then, almost perfectly in sync, they dashed to opposite ends of the clearing in starting positions. Serena didn’t even have to call out to ask Sylveon if she was ready—they were clearly one as the imaginary stage lights fell upon them.

As quickly as they had run away from each other, they began the quick rush back together once more. Serena got in a couple skips along the way, angling her body best she could to give off both an elegant and playful air. It was effective, to say the least, a move that Jessie had pulled out in her Kalos showcases more than once—it had taken her years to properly execute, to see Serena accomplish it so easily hung her heart with an odd combination of envy and pride.

“Fairy Wind!” Serena called out, and Sylveon cheered exuberantly as she complied with the command. Her trainer leapt forward, directly into the shimmering pink gust, not a trace of fear or hesitation on her face. Her performer’s smile didn’t falter for a moment, the coordination of the actions off without a single hitch. Fluidly, Serena was lifted into the air, her arms outstretched playfully as she stayed held aloft on the lustrous breeze.

Jessie peered onward with a quiet mesh of concentration and peace—the routine had only started, but she found herself oddly transfixed on the technique. Every fine detail shone like a small sun, warming her—the way Sylveon joyfully dashed around Serena as it kept her floating there, the way Serena splayed herself out to keep her balance proper, the way there was a good long while of nothing beyond their harmonious laughter. Jessie couldn’t tear her eyes away even if she wanted to,
her heart pounding, taken by a subtle—but nagging—sense of nostalgia.

“Alright Sylveon!” Serena lingered there in the air for just a second too long, but didn’t at all seem ashamed of it. “Light Screen!”

*That’s an odd choice,* James noted almost instantly. A simple, defensive move used mainly for strategy... performing was far more suited to flashy offensive moves. Jessie only had to lose so many contests with Wobbuffet as her star performer for that to be apparent.

Then again, he’d seen her *win* a few, too.

Without stopping her waltz around Serena, Sylveon responded. Within seconds, the empty air in front of the small audience had transformed into several suspended pillars of light, crystallizing to a brilliant rose-tinted wall of hexagons. It hovered there in the air, Serena’s smoky silhouette barely visible from within it, the burnished chrysalis an oasis within the still settling tornado of glitter.

It stayed there only for a moment, allowed itself to be taken in, before the wind keeping the girl’s foggy contour aloft could no longer reach her inside of the box. Her form was barely visible, but they could see clearly enough the sudden movement of her impact against the bottom of the flashy prison. Cracks crept across it, ominously multiplying before the entire thing shattered all at once.

The glass splintered off into hundreds of shining, resplendent slivers of light. As the sun hit them one by one and painted them iridescently, Serena seemed to almost hover there, for a moment, her form moving in slow-motion, near-phantasmal against the opalescent daytime galaxies as they blinked quietly out of existence.

Sylveon lunged forward, angling one of her ribbons in front of Serena—who then balanced her weight on one foot, springing off the appendage and jumping forward with the momentum it allowed her. The combined strength it must have taken both of them to pull off the move was equally as admirable as everything else they had brought to the table, so far.

With the extra momentum, Serena was able to adjust her stance and stick her landing as she finally felt her feet on the ground once again. Sylveon landed perfectly centered in front of her, her dainty ribbons outstretched still, framing both her and Serena in an adorable heart shape. With the performance complete, the girl stretched her arms out once more and let out an all-too-familiar ‘ta-daa!’, and Sylveon mirrored the tune with her own proud vocalization.

There was a moment of silence while Serena’s chest rapidly rose and fell, her lungs desperately trying to catch up with the moment. The quiet was always simultaneously her favourite and least favourite part of the show—more often than not, people were only stunned into silence when they liked what they saw. Even in the wake of a terrible routine, people are going to clap out of pity.

It didn’t last long, however, as James began furiously clapping his hands like an excited child almost as soon as her performance had ended. Jessie was still lost in her reverie, and had to shake herself out of it to join him. Almost instantly, the whole clearing was taken with scattered applause. Serena smiled gratefully, happy to have pulled off the unorthodox routine, before kneeling to gather her pokémon’s bearings as well.

“Solid routine, twerpette,” Jessie said, walking closer to Serena, a hand on her hip.

“You think?” Serena asked her, smile unflattering.

She nodded. “To be honest... I don’t know if I would change anything. Your tastes really have aged like a fine wine.”
“I don’t know why I’m surprised to hear you say that…” Serena admitted, a little sheepishly. “As long as we’re doing honesty hour, I might have drawn a little inspiration from your Solaceon win way back when.”

“Solaceon?” Jessie said, willing her head to remember one success on a long list of accomplishments. “Solaceon…”

“Yeah!” Serena said, not offering much in the way of memory-jogging. “You and Dustox were incredible, the way you dragged your ascent in the air out just long enough to keep people in suspense and make the ending super satisfying? It’s no wonder you won. You really blew away the competition!”

“That’s right!” Jessie said, remembering the finer details all at once, her eyes staring off at something in the distance behind the girl.

That’s right… her heart echoed. Solaceon…

Jessie’s memories were, more often than not, incomparable to a gentle trickle of water into a sink, or sands falling one by one through an hourglass. Her recall didn’t work in grey—it was far more suited to the black and white that she usually found herself thinking in. Either agonizingly vivid, or nothing at all. A better metaphor for how things came back to her would be turning the sink on expecting a quiet drip and instead being met with a firehose.

Serena’s simple words grabbed that faucet and pulled it so hard it dislodged itself from the stained, fading metal. The water couldn’t stop even if one were to beg it from running.

Months throughout Hoenn, Jessie didn’t see a single win. The world wouldn’t allow her that, seemed to go out of its way to deny her it. Even when she’d make it to the second round, a faulty attack or a technicality would keep her from victory, stepping on her fingers when the trophy was in sight, within reach.

Jessie was, at her core, a loser. But damn it, she was a professional loser.

The morning after every lost contest would see her up against the sunrise. Wobuffet on one side of her, Dustox on the other, Seviper coiled around them with its full length. They would watch its slow ascent into the sky, feel the chill of the air and the dew on the grass beneath them, listen to the taillow and swablu quietly begin to awaken. Closing their eyes, they would focus on the feeling of the air slowly but surely growing warmer—proving to the frigid stillness that it was not infallible, no matter how long the night it held domain over seemed.

Dustox was there when she won her first ribbon. No, it was just as much Dustox’s ribbon as it was anyone’s.

The day it happened, Meowth and James were so moved to tears in their joy for the pair that they took them out on the town—it was an awful idea, they were already low on money, but they couldn’t resist celebrating. There were shops upon shops displaying clothes and accessories for pokémon who performed, especially in a city with a contest hall. They tended to revolve around a more mammalian template, however, and Jessie found that dressing a large poisonous insect was something easier said than done. She elected long before to fashion her own ribbons for Dustox and for herself, an adorable coordination that— honestly —looked better than anything anyone else had brought to the table that day.
Ducked away in the corner of a spooky little shop, boasting knickknacks far more suited to a Hex Maniac than a beauty queen, Jessie found a box full of loose rhinestones. Dead in the center of the pile’s top was one with a dappled background that made its round shimmer look nothing short of moonlight. She tore into the container, desperately searching for three more of them, thanking the universe for finally giving her break after break when she pulled the last one out.

Cautiously, she angled her head around to take in her surroundings. No people, no cameras, clear exit. She dropped the tiny miracles into her handbag and turned the corner, intent on finding her team and getting out of there as soon as she was able.

That night, Dustox sat with her as she pinned the small embellishments onto both of their ribbons, a smile stuck on her that was uncharacteristic in its serenity. Jessie held them up against the moon before placing them gently onto the pokémon’s antennae, and in her excitable chanting and fluttering wings, the newly-reborn Coordinator found another reason to keep getting back on stage.

In a few weeks, Dustox was gone.

Jessie blinked back her focus, a bit surprised at how suddenly the fine details had rammed into her. A pang of panic hit her chest—how long had she been silent? Had this since grown awkward?

“Goodness, that was such a long time ago…” Jessie admitted, shaking off the heaviness her heart suddenly held. “I’m amazed and flattered that this adorable face is still circulating amongst the common folk!”

She laughed, and Serena laughed with her, not taking note in the slightest of the sentimental, bittersweet dip in the woman’s voice as she spoke. Jessie breathed an internal sigh of relief at this, eager to put that one back in the vault and not ever have to think about it again.

James looked to Meowth, then to Wobbuffet, and was unsurprised to see his own concerned expression easily mirrored in theirs.

As things turned out, the extra push was exactly what Serena needed in order to march to Johanna’s place and ask upfront for the former Coordinator’s guidance.

What she had hyped up in her head as a big, terrifying moment, was far quieter in reality. An invitation inside for tea, a thrilling contest battle out in the back behind the humble home, a quiet game of storytelling as the sun quietly made its way across the sky. Right now, Johanna was midway through offering Serena feedback on the routine she’d previously shown the former Rockets—who’d been invited to tag along and complied as per usual.

Pictures upon pictures hung on the walls, framed alongside newspaper clippings and polished ribbons. Dawn and Johanna’s achievements seemed to blend into one another as they decorated the home, and Jessie found herself squinting in an attempt to tell them apart more than once. They made such a perfect team, mother and daughter, burning brightly with their goals so in sync… she emitted a quiet sigh and hoped the crackling of the fire did enough to cover it up.

“You have a very tactful routine,” Johanna was in the middle of saying. “But I think there’s a habit there of falling into Kalosian techniques… when you do the Light Screen, it would do you better to leave the front of it open so that the judges—and a good chunk of the audience—can see you the entire time.”

“How come, though?” Serena inquired. “Isn’t the emphasis on the pokémon, rather than the trainer, in Sinnoh contests?”
“That’s exactly it, actually!” The woman responded. “When the screen shatters, it’s surprising, so all eyes immediately go to you and off of Sylveon. If you leave the front open, then it won’t come across as an instinctual perspective shift! You’ll be much more nicely in sync.”

“You’re right!” Serena responded, sounding a little awestruck. “Geez, I was so focused on the little things, I didn’t even think about the bigger picture… what a rookie mistake.”

“Old habits die hard, dear,” Johanna smiled. “The important thing is that eagerness to overcome. And you seem to have that in spades.”

“Thanks for saying so!”

A momentary silence fell while the two of them sipped at their tea, its warmth fading in the wake of their long, excitable conversation. Jessie sat with her eyes fixated firmly on the carpet, her team sat with their eyes stealing nervous glances at her.

Johanna let out a smooth exhale, content to have visitors for the first time in quite a while, and broached the topic—

“So, Jessie,” she said. “Serena here mentioned you were a Coordinator, too?”

“Oh!” Jessie was eager to have something to distract her from her thoughts. “Yes, in fact, I actually competed alongside your daughter.”


“Indeed!” She boasted. “Her and I have crossed paths more than once. I saw her in Unova just recently!”

“Strange…” Johanna said, voice soft. “She never mentioned you…”

“I think calling us acquaintances would be painting things a touch too nicely,” Jessie offered. “But back when we competed, my stage name was Jessilina.”

“Oh, that makes sense! I knew your face seemed familiar!” Johanna went right back into her warm disposition. “You were excellent in Solaceon.”

The name of the town felt like needles in her heart all over again, but she powered on through it. “Yes, so I’ve heard…”

Jessie grabbed her cup and took a quiet, almost sheepish sip—hoping desperately that the warmth of the drink would travel down into her frame and heal her bruised and bleeding soul. Her eyes traveled back off her conversation partner, somewhere out of focus, and Johanna seemed intent on pressing her.

“Was there a reason you stopped?”

The redhead tensed a little at the question, then set her tea down and quietly laughed it off.

“Oh, do we ever truly stop loving our passions?” She said in a smitten voice, although one that sounded like she was reading off a script. “The spirit of a Coordinator will always exist within me. But for now, it’s taking a backseat so I can figure some more grown-up things out. It’s a drag, I know.”

This seemed to resonate with Johanna, and she shut her eyes with a knowing grin. “Hear, hear.”
“Miss Johanna,” Serena followed. “Why did you stop?”

The woman leaned back in her chair, her voice permeated with a kind nostalgia as she spoke.

“Well… when I was preparing for what would eventually be my last real contest, I wondered a lot about where I’d go afterwards. I’d dedicated my life to contests, made so many amazing friends there…” she said. “In the end, fate just seemed to pave the way for me. I fell in love shortly before becoming a Top Coordinator, and there was this part of me I just couldn’t ignore that told me to take the chance and start a family.”

Something awakened in Serena at this revelation, and her eyes were oddly intense. Fists balled on her legs and shoulders slightly bunched up, she asked Johanna another question—

“Wasn’t that hard for you?” She said. “Just giving it all up for love?”

Johanna shook her head. “I didn’t see it as giving up. No matter how you look at it, the only thing stopping me from going back to that life someday was myself.”

The girl seemed to relax a bit, meditating on this revelation, as if it were something deeply important for her to internalize.

“Sure, there were days when I missed performing alongside my pokémon more than anything…” Johanna said, and turned to give her sleeping glameow a gentle scratch on its head. “But as fate would have it, I had a wonderful daughter. I got to watch her find her own way… and in a lot of aspects, watching her grow made me feel the same way I did when I was going through those early motions, too.”

The room stayed quiet, allowing her words to sink in, before she spoke once more.

“That’s when you know you love someone,” the woman said, adoringly. “When their successes, no matter how small, are your successes as well. When their pain is your pain, their joy your own.”

The statements as they stood, back-to-back, resonated with every single person in the room, in vastly different ways. For some, the silence as they quietly settled in was comforting by way of reflection—for others, it was the exact opposite.

Jessie shifted in her seat, trying to quiet her aching, blazing veins as they pumped more hazardous memories directly to her heart.

“It’s getting late,” Johanna noted. “Do you all know where you’re sleeping tonight? You’re free to stay here, if you like.”

“The offer is much appreciated, but we’ve actually already set up camp a little ways out of town,” James told her.

“Pity ta waste it, but them’s the breaks!” Meowth added.

“I think I might actually go with them, if that’s okay?” Serena said. “We haven’t really had much of a chance to catch up, actually!”

Johanna smiled, amused at their gumption. “There’s much more to be said for a warm reunion than a warm bed. But if you do change your mind, feel free to drop by.”

The group mirrored her hospitality with a resounding ‘Thanks!’ Serena quietly rose to her feet, picking up her empty cup and keeping the conversation going as she made her way to the kitchen.
“You better believe I’ll be back tomorrow, though!” The girl beamed. “I wanna run the improved routine by you if I can!”

“Sounds like a plan!” Johanna said, standing up herself. “Looking forward to it.”

The stars of the countryside hung bright as ever in the open cosmic abyss, and Serena found herself almost lulled to sleep by the warmth of the fire and the atmosphere of the quiet town. She was leaning on Greninja’s shoulder with her knees cozily pulled against her chest, and the former Rockets present at the campfire couldn’t help but fixate on this. She made it look so easy, being so close to the pokémon. They weren’t sure if it meant that they were too rotten or Greninja was too particular.

Serena had been trying to catch up with them to no avail—they had stories, sure, but there was a lack of gusto and drama that she’d come to expect from Team Rocket in her short time knowing them, and she wondered if it was just how they were now or if it was a fault of her own. That morning, they had seemed same as ever, albeit far more behaved. Now, James, Meowth, and Wobbuffet all seemed despondent, and Jessie had taken off to run some sort of errand almost as soon as they had hit camp.

Well, if there’s something I can do… Serena thought. No point in sitting here wondering.

“Hey, uh…” she said out loud, during one of the many silences of that night. “I didn’t do something to upset you guys, did I? You’ve been kinda quiet.”

Meowth immediately matched her concern, giving it to her straight. “Ah, geez. Sorry, twihpette. It’s not’in’ poihsonal.”

“I promise we’re trying to be jovial,” James added. “But when Jessie’s down, group morale plummets a touch.”

“Wobba,” Wobbuffet punctuated, his voice absolutely broken.

“Wait, back up!” Serena said. “Jessie’s upset? She seemed fine this morning, what happened? I feel so bad, I didn’t even notice…”

“Don’t sweat it,” Meowth told her. “She’s real good at hidin’ dat sorta t’ing. We only notice ‘cause we spend every wakin’ minute wit’ her.”

“You mentioned that win she had with her Dustox,” James said. “I think it might have unearthed some memories she wasn’t exactly ready for.”

“Oh no,” Serena panicked, and with the statement came the sudden realization that she never remembered seeing Dustox in another contest after that.

“Ya couldn’t have known, kid,” Meowth said.

“Her and Dustox… parted ways shortly after that contest.”

“Do you…” Serena picked her words carefully. “Do you know what exactly happened?”

“Dustox fell in love,” Meowth mentioned, simply. “And when da time came for her to choose between love and poihformin’, her trainer kinda lost it. Da subject musta been somet’in’ real touchy for Jessie, ‘cause she smashed Dustox’s pokéball right den an’ dere, screamin’ t’rough her tears for her ta get lost. She wasn’t about ta let her give up on love t’ stay beside her.”
A hard pang of empathy hit Serena. She swallowed the painful feeling, unprepared for it to get at her so fully and completely. Without saying anything else, the girl rose to her feet and began to bound off in the direction Jessie had gone earlier.

Greninja made a quiet noise of confusion, and Meowth, James, and Wobbuffet were far less graceful in their surprise. Meowth uttered an unflattering sound and called out to her before she could make it too far, desperate to know what it was she was doing.

“I’m gonna go find Jessie!” Serena shouted, as if it was the only acceptable answer. “If she’s hurting, then I should try to help her!”

“No offense, twerpette,” James said. “But Jessie didn’t even ask Wobbuffet to come with her. I don’t think this is a battle you can win…”

“You’re probably right!” Serena said, optimistic smile betraying her words. “But I have nothing to lose by trying and a lot to regret if I don’t! See you guys in a bit!”

She offered them nothing else, certainly not an opportunity to persuade her further. Serena turned tail and ran off across the dirt road, her shoulders looking broader than they ever had as the moonlight illuminated her outline and she disappeared from sight.

Greninja crossed its arms and let out a sagely, amphibian chuckle.

When Serena found Jessie, she was sitting on the shores of Lake Verity, her legs bunched up to her chest much in the same way Serena’s had been back at camp. The pose on her was far less comfortable, even from a quiet distance, the girl could see the anguish hiding beneath her façade. When Jessie took note of and addressed her, it almost amazed Serena how nonchalant her tone sounded in contrast to how miserable she looked.

“Oh, hey,” Jessie said, looking up at the girl. “Awfully late for children to be having quiet lakefront contemplations.”

The statement made Serena laugh a little, and she strode closer to Jessie.

“I came to find you, actually,” she said. “I mean, I feel like before, we barely got any time to catch up. And they miss you back at camp, too.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jessie responded. “Those crybabies can’t handle five minutes without my wonderful presence. I wish they’d learn some self-sufficiency.”

“Something tells me you don’t resent it as much as you’re letting on,” Serena winked, and Jessie couldn’t help but grin.

“When you’re right, you’re right…”

Their gentle banter trailed off a bit, and Serena motioned to Jessie with a gesture that asked if she could sit. Jessie nodded, and the pair took in the sight of Lake Verity. It was a humble little landmark, probably one of the more interesting quirks of Twinleaf. When night fell, its waters ran near still, their visage becoming a brilliant, picturesque mirror. The lake was not just a body of water
in the wake of the moon—it was a vast, swimming cauldron of stars.

It was hard not to be taken by the sight of it. Serena was unsure if she had ever seen something so beautifully reflective and crisp in her life. It might have been a trick of the mind, but the cosmos hanging above her looked even more brilliant, burning even brighter, as they rippled softly near her feet.

“Is there…” Serena said, a bit unsure. “Is there something you need to get off your chest?”

“I can’t imagine what it is you mean,” Jessie retorted, her voice sharper than she would’ve liked.

The girl inhaled. “It’s just… the Jessilee I know… heck, even the Jessie I know was always loud and passionate in what she did.”

To this, Jessie turned a bit, her gaze reluctantly on Serena.

“But it seems like…” Serena continued. “It seems like you’re running on embers, right now. And I just wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

Jessie sighed, sounding more bored than anything. “This journey has really taken it out of me. Easy to be unapologetically evil—you never have to consider the consequences of your actions or the things that you feel. Now that we’re on the same side, I can’t go a single day without getting upset and then wondering if my emotions are justified.”

Serena listened to her words carefully, trying her best to get herself into the mindset, even if it was hard for her to understand from the get-go. She closed her eyes, propped her head in her hands, and thought really hard about what she wanted to say next.

“Wanna know what I think?”

Jessie didn’t answer, merely turned to face her again, and she continued.

“I think your emotions are always justified. It’s just up to you to decide what you do with them,” Serena said. “I mean… you can’t help feeling a certain way. Why should you apologize if you feeling that way inconveniences other people?”

Jessie’s eyes widened, a little. It was… incredibly validating to hear, something she didn’t know she needed, info she wasn’t aware she was privy to. She lifted her head up, and looked wildly to her left, then to her right, then to Serena once more.

“Alright, cut it,” she said. “Did the others set you up on this?”

Serena shook her head. “They tried to stop me, actually.”

The woman wasn’t sure how she felt about that. On one hand, good, please don’t draw any attention to my heartache, thank you! On the other hand, wait, why aren’t you worried about me? Don’t you love me? Don’t you want to help?

From beside her, Serena took a deep breath. She let it go shakily, and what she said next was so blunt and so simple in its phrasing that Jessie almost couldn’t believe it was being said out loud by her of all people.

“You know,” Serena said, her voice trembling a little but trying to keep the air of composure. “I loved Ash Ketchum about as much as anyone could at that age.”
The flutter in her voice told Jessie that putting ‘loved’ in the past tense wasn’t entirely accurate. Still, she remembered Serena far more timid than this near-stranger sitting beside her. There was a sense of pride there, as well as a sense of longing. Jessie ached for the days where she had less birthday candles behind her, when feelings like that were new and exciting. When love wasn’t the scariest thing she could imagine and the only thing she wanted all at once.

“Saying it out loud is a big step…” Serena reflected. “I couldn’t even say it quietly to myself a year or two ago! Silly, huh?”

Jessie gave her a soft, knowing smile. She had a feeling that Serena was content to just let her listen, that she was building to something here. Her voice faltered a little, but the girl pressed on.

“There came a time, at the end of our journey together, where I had to choose between what I felt in my heart for him, and what I felt in my heart for performing.”

Jessie softened almost entirely at this, a little taken aback. Obviously, it was something she didn’t know, but…

“You chose performing…” she said to Serena, a small shock hanging in her voice.

Serena nodded, and a confident luster entered her eyes as she brushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Did you know, Jessie?” The girl asked. “You helped me that day. The day I decided.”


“In the wake of the rebuilding of Lumiose, Shauna and I decided to put on a performance for the people of Kalos,” Serena explained. “And mid-way through that performance, who would show up but Jessilee…”

Jessie vaguely remembered it, now... a stage in one of the smaller parks surrounding Centrico Plaza... tailing the Twerp there and then darting off to perform instead…

Serena kept on. “Sure, it’s a conclusion I probably would’ve come to on my own eventually. But the three of us on that stage together? The way we all made people smile, even after such a terrible disaster? In that moment, I was that much more sure of what I wanted to live for.”

Jessie dragged her gaze from Serena out to the sparkling, star-stained waters. Did I make the right choice...?

“That day, I went out,” Serena said. “Shopped a little... took one last look at Lumiose. And you know what I learned?”

Jessie turned back to her, eyes fighting off anguish. “Hm?”

“No matter what storms rage inside you… no matter how hard it is to make a decision like that and know with certainty if you were truly right…” Serena told her. “You’ll be able to make it through if you can learn to rely on your friends, and let them rely on you.”

The redhead let the words sink in. They didn’t exactly come from a place of ignorance… Serena’s choice was Jessie’s choice once, and Dustox’s as well. Jessie felt strange at precisely how comfortable she felt having a talk like this with Serena, her mind asking her why she couldn’t gain that same kind of comfort in even the idea of confiding in her closest friends.

“Someone important to me told me that... and it’s always been true to my own experiences,” Serena
said. “I just wanna let you know that if you can’t open up to your friends just yet… maybe someone who’s more of a stranger… someone who you’ll have minimal contact with in the future… could also offer you some much needed solace.”

Jessie sighed, deeply, wholly, like her life depended on it. This was such a bad idea. This was not what she wanted to do. She was going to regret this. Opening up to anyone in a moment of neediness and weakness was like indulging in a microwaved meal—it’s divine at first, and then you reach the frozen tundra dead center.

“My dustox… did the opposite of what you did,” Jessie said, the words tumbling from her lips. “She chose love. Well… if I’m being honest, I don’t know what she chose.”

“Yeah?”

“She seemed okay with it, until the very end,” Jessie said, her throat tightening. “She came back for me at the last second, and I just couldn’t stand to watch her be hurt the way I was. I couldn’t forgive myself if I put her through even a fraction of what I had been through.”

She gasped a little when the sentence left her, letting out a quiet ‘oh…!’ By the time she had realized just how much she’d divulged into her own past, it was far too late to take any of it back.

Make a joke, her brain screamed. Laugh or something, what are you doing?!

“Goodness, listen to these dramatics,” Jessie rolled her eyes. “I’ll admit, I’m making this a far bigger deal than it should be, but…”

Serena peered into her. “But?”

“Look at you, twerpette,” Jessie said, pouting. “You’re so happy with your choice. I remember you as such a pitiful little thing, never speaking too loud, walking like you’re always scared. You’ve grown into such a woman with conviction.”

Serena’s face flushed a deep pink. Jessie of all people, complimenting her on her personal growth? The night had taken a rather interesting turn.

“It’s just, if you did this, and you’re happy, and Dustox did the opposite… I mean—” Jessie stuttered a bit. “I forced Dustox to do the opposite… what if she’s just miserable, wherever she is?”

The girl was quiet a moment before she spoke. “But what if she isn’t? Look at Johanna.”

Serena had a point… Johanna had chosen the same as Dustox, and there wasn’t a trace of regret in what she had said before. She truly seemed to be at peace. The mental image flashed briefly in Jessie’s head of Dustox with her partner, a tiny wurmple snuggled in between their sparkling wings, that wide-mouthed smile she remembered so well painted on her pokémon’s face, Desperately, her heart grabbed at it as it faded—she wanted so badly to photograph the happy vision and keep it in her bag for every rainy day, now and forever.

“I suppose that’s true…” she said as the dream began to dissipate. “I just hope what I did is right.”

“Right and wrong are way more complicated than that,” Serena said, her wisdom far beyond her years. As if aware of this, she followed it up with a lighthearted “Y’know?”

“Unfortunately, I’m coming to realize that, yes,” Jessie sighed once more. “It’s making it a lot harder to do good and be confident in the good I’ve done.”
“I can see you trying,” Serena told her. “I think others can, too.”

“I hope you’re right.”

It seemed like a good end to the talk. Serena was a little amazed at how much she had gotten Jessie to say, and she had to fight off the satisfied smile that so badly wanted to creep its way onto her face. Helping anyone just felt too good, she wondered if it was alright that she allowed herself to take so much enjoyment in an activity that, at its core, was meant to be selfless.

From beside her, Jessie closed her eyes and loosened her sitting position a little, letting the arch in her knees become wider. A wind seemed to pick up, skimming across the water playfully, and she let the quiet sound of the small waves it produced take her somewhere else.

Jessie tried to let the words offer her some solace as she focused on the quiet of the night… there was the chance that Dustox was happy, and there was also the chance that she regretted leaving every day of her life. It was clearer, then—what was hurting Jessie deepest wasn’t parting from a dear friend, wasn’t the end of a chapter—what was tearing her apart was that lack of an answer. The racing thoughts, the raw anxiety, the feeling of papercuts inside of her, lining her frame. If Jessie were to explain what her emotions felt like to someone who felt less intensely, she would liken them to bleaching your hair with a ten-dollar dye kit. That cold, agonizing burning—but inside of you at all times, screaming in pain unless you find a way to numb it or focus the static, manic energy on something else.

With the pain came a twinge of resentment she didn’t want to acknowledge or address—*why does James get his perfect reunion with the friend he had to part ways with? Where is mine?*

She tried to shake the thought from her mind, to tell herself it was unfair. James was her best friend and eternal partner, she had no business being jealous or resentful of him, she was happy that he was happy and that was that. Her thoughts were growing louder as the waves at her feet grew louder, banging on iron, clanging around wildly in her head, their dissonance absolutely agonizing, forcing a crease in her brow and her teeth gritted and her fists balled hard and—

Something was wrong.

Jessie felt things more strongly than the average person, yes, but this was unprecedented. The pain was more physical than anything she had ever felt in her life, harrowing and enveloping and dreadful. Claws on her heart, squeezing the life out of her, noise, noise, noise—insects squirmed under her skin. She couldn’t breathe, there was something coiled around her lungs, something living in her bones. Trembling, she tried to move, to speak, to do anything. The sense of fear and powerlessness was unlike anything she’d ever known. Her eyes snapped open.

Silence.

Soon as it had come, all the suffering was gone. Jessie leaned, then fell forward, palms pressed hard against the grass for support. There was no tranquility in this quiet, no relief in the sudden absence of pain. There was just… nothing. She felt *nothing*. Her thoughts were quiet, her heart was quiet, the storm inside her was not settled—it simply ceased to exist in the first place. She could hear the blood running through her veins.

The silence was a million times scarier than what was previously there, the lack of worries inhuman and unharmonious. Who was she? Who *was* she? What was this?

Jessie’s unkind, intrusive, toxic thoughts were lifelong companions. Abusive, traumatizing, horrible lifelong companions, yes—but anyone who knows what they’re talking about will tell you that abuse
is an addictive substance like any other. The phantom of the night had taken them away from her all at once with no opportunity to detox. Her stomach turned, and she shuddered fiercely, fingernails nearly breaking as they dug into the dirt.

The screaming silence intensified—something was chattering from above her. Through the painful lack of pain, she turned to take in her surroundings. The edges of the world were foggy. Serena was gone. Meowth was not here, James was not here, Wobbuffet was not here. She was alone in a burning photograph, the flames quietly making their way to the center. The sound rang out again, from upwards, and she mechanically moved her head up to take it in.

Her eyes spawned galaxies. A single light floated in the night sky, across the moonlight. Starting only a simple speck seemingly universes away, she watched as it slowly came closer.

A single emotion returned to her, in that moment, and the silence began to exit. A creeping, hopeful euphoria, lining her weakened voice as she shakily choked out her desires—

“Dus...tox...?”

The falling star grew blindingly bright as it neared her, as if it actually was a chunk of the cosmos coming into scale with the tiny blue planet. She reflexively pulled a hand to her eyes, trying to block out the searing radiance, her weight shifted onto her other arm.

Then, soon as it had come, the light flickered out, a single red beam shining through it in its place. Jessie put her hand down, squinting in a desperate attempt to make sense of the figure—but there was no way for her to put words to or comprehend what it was she was looking at.

Blue and pink, twin tails, a blood red gemstone on its head. This creature stared at her, tilting its head almost curiously as the two of them locked eyes. It was unlike anything she had seen in a long, long time—beautiful, serene. It was not Dustox.

Jessie screamed.

With everything she was, with everything she had, she belted out a primal, unending shriek. She cried for the reunion she was cheated out of, she cried for the never ending list of people she’d had to part ways with, she cried for the trials and tribulations of the journey and what little reward she had gotten. She screamed until her throat was raw, screamed until she was sure she could taste copper, screamed until her lungs gave out and until her body screamed right back at her to stop. She was so much more than the world wanted to acknowledge, she deserved so much better than the hand she had been dealt, she had worked so much harder than anyone or anything, so why, so why—

“Jessie!”

There were voices on the outside of the burning photograph, speaking in syllables and buried in her shouts.

“Jessie! Please!”

She shook her head, willing them to stop. Whoever they were, they had no place here.

“Wake up!”

The tornado within her halted. She breathed deep, choking breaths, the kind of breaths that a person takes when they breach the water’s surface.

Serena was back in her peripheral, her hand clasped over her mouth in trepidation. Meowth and
Wobbuffet were beside her. Staring her down with his hands gently holding onto her shoulders was James, his viridian eyes trembling with tears.

“Jessie,” he whispered, his voice like a prayer. “Jessie, are you with me?”

There was a tenderness in him she could not find the words for. His hands were shaking as they touched her, as if he saw through her tenacious front and knew how human and breakable she actually was. As if too much of him would shatter her to pieces.

Two perfect trails of silent tears fell from her eyes, one after the other. Jessie forced herself further upward— to her knees—and reached out slowly, cupping James’ face in her trembling palm. She slowly traced down the outline of his jaw, willing herself to focus of the feeling of her skin on another person’s, her mouth still hanging open in utter shock. James tilted his head into the motion, his expression burning with questioning and concern.

As if to reciprocate, he moved a his palm off her shoulder, tucking a messed lock of hair behind her ear, trying to pierce the veil once more.

“Jessie?” He whispered.

She took her hand off of his face, looking startled at the sound of her name. As if she had momentarily forgotten that she was a person with a name, with a place, with a favourite colour and hopes and dreams and…

And.

Jessie couldn’t take her eyes off James, and he in turn could not look away from her. Their profiles stood symmetrical from each other against the backdrop of the sparkling, cosmic lake behind them, the full moon hanging above. In the center of the bittersweet portrait’s background, hovering quietly in the space between their faces, was a pokémon neither of them knew the name of, nor had the concentration or resolve to learn.

“Jessie,” James repeated again, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “Can you speak? If you can’t, that’s okay, just…”

His words trailed off, and her eyes filled with more tears. They were different, this time—stained with an emotion she could identify, but refused to. James was staring at her as if she were the only thing that existed to him, his touch poignant and warm and watchful. A gesture that said I know your soul, and I promise to take care of it when your chips are down. Deep inside of her, something quietly stirred, awake and breathing after years of neglect.

James sat there, the world unmoving around them, gaze transfixed. There was a quiet fire burning somewhere within him, and he wished with all he had that it could be as big and as bright and as all-encompassing as Jessie’s own. How did she keep it ablaze after all these years, with so many people constantly hosing it down? Looking at her now, the hurt she had seen in her life had never been clearer. She didn’t deserve to sit there and be forced to hold it all inside, she deserved to cry freely, to laugh freely, to be herself without the stifling guise of strength. She deserved to know that there was valor in tears, in mourning. She deserved, more than anything, to take her armour off after a long day of fighting. She deserved someone by her side who would bandage her broken fists and massage her wounded heart.

In the wake of a life falling apart, Jessie was the one person who could easily pick up the pieces of her tattered world and face forward. This was an undeniable truth. James only wanted her to never have to be forced to again.
“I’m here now,” he said, his mouth running to quell his own anxiety as much as hers, same as ever. “You’re here now. Whatever happened, between the two of us, it can’t hurt you. We have a white tomorrow to chase after.”

He caressed her face as she had his, desperate to transfer any semblance of care and protection to her, desperate to keep her safe as she had so often kept him. Warmth radiated from the area where his skin touched hers, and though it was a gesture that he had done time and time again throughout their history, something lingered there that she never took note of before.

“James,” she choked out, finally, and she had said his name a million times and then some, but never like this.

In their peripheral, the mysterious pokémon started to glow with a rose light, its expression focused and its gaze still firmly on them. As if it were honing in on something, as if it were greeting whatever it discovered there like an old friend. Jessie and James refused to register anything beyond each other as the creature glowed brighter and vanished out of sight.

The clearing darkened, went back to swimming in nothing but starlight. Jessie seemed to snap out of her reverie, looking around wildly as if trying to gain herself back. James abashedly took his hand off her face, wondering what it was that had made him so embarrassed, suddenly? Had he done something stupid just now and made a fool of himself? Why was his face so hot, why was his heart beating a mile a minute?

Jessie seemed equally flustered, so at the very least, if something had happened, they had made fools of themselves together in their usual, comfortable fashion. Serena was also looking a little red, but she quickly shook it to scramble to Jessie’s side, asking her if she was okay. The woman’s words came easier, this time.

“I… I’m not sure what happened,” Jessie said, sounding more lost than any of them had ever heard. “I—I mean, I suppose I’m fine, but…”

“You disappeared…” Serena marveled. “It was like a fog rolled in and you just… you were gone…”

“Curious…” Jessie muttered, not knowing what to say to that.

“Wait… Jessie…” James began. “Did you… see a pokémon, by chance?”

“What are you—?” she began, then caught herself. “I mean… I think so… it wasn’t exactly like that, but…”

“Did you guys… really not notice?” Serena butted in. “There was… a pokémon watching you from the lake the entire time you were sitting here, just now. It was in plain sight.”

“What?” Jessie said, sounding almost fearful in her confusion. “I didn’t… wait, I did see it, but it was gone, when did it—?”

She sounded like she was trying to piece a puzzle out of nothing, and James looked equally confused. From beside them, Meowth and Wobbuffet stayed almost uncomfortably quiet, exchanging subtle, but incredulous looks at each other.
“Listen… whatever happened, just now…” Serena said. “I think maybe it was out of our understanding.”

“The girl has a point,” James said. “As long as you’re safe, Jessie… maybe this is a mystery better left to wonder about tomorrow. What do you say?”

_I say “no,” I feel… incomplete_, was her instinctual answer, but it hung on her tongue. Years ago, she would have torn away, angry still at the lack of answers and blaming it on the first person who dared to stop her from pursuing those answers well into the morning.

Now, she was taking in James, his being so open and so tied up in knots over her. Jessie looked out for herself more than anything—she loved her team, but the fact of the matter was, it didn’t matter how much someone claimed to love you right back. In the right mood, anyone will abandon you. That was a truth that had kept her safe, an acknowledgement that made the blow so much easier to take head on. James had chosen someone over her before, and he easily could again, but…

She zeroed in on his expression, again, and her heart lurched. For the first time in her life she felt _angry_ at herself for daring to think this man would ever run from her. The thought made no sense—he ran like his life depended on it, right? The idea that James who ran and Jessie who people ran from would one day fall into a game that was predestined for them was nothing special, nothing that hadn’t always been lingering in the back of her mind.

Usually, when the thought occurred to her, she was mad at him. How dare he hypothetically abandon her? After all they’ve been through together? She’d either spend the day in a rotten mood with him nervously stealing glances at her, wondering what he had done wrong—or she would force the feeling down, not wanting to deal with troublesome thoughts like that when she had a job to do.

She didn’t want to acknowledge what she saw in James’ eyes, but its benevolence made her furious with herself for that lack of faith in him, now. The feeling was alien, and it bubbled ominously beneath her skin like magma around her heart.

“You’re right,” she said, putting a lid on the emotion, trying her best to quiet it. “I’m exhausted.”

She stood up, suddenly composed, a facade that the group knew all too well. It didn’t do much to help for their concern, but it was something they all knew they couldn’t parse even if they were to try. James followed her lead.

“Twerpette,” Jessie said, turning over her shoulder to look at Serena, who was also following. “I hope I didn’t startle you.”

Serena tilted her head, a bit caught off guard by the gentleness in Jessie’s voice. “It’s not your fault. Let’s focus on resting for now!”

“Sounds like a plan,” the redhead smiled, and Meowth and Wobbuffet lingered behind as she and the others marched forward.

The pair of pokémon stared at the silhouettes of their backs rising and falling through the night as they walked, unbelieving and unsure of what to feel.

“I can’t believe it,” Meowth uttered, quiet enough so only Wobbuffet could hear it. He turned to the pokémon. “Did yous know about dis?”

_No way…_ Wobbuffet responded, just as amazed.

“Well, well, lookit dat…” the cat said, forcing himself to walk forward, his gaze transfixed on his
After the night’s debacle, Jessie knew she had to be on her guard to appear less outwardly moody. She was tired of her team’s general vibe being down, tired of not dazzling everyone they met with their usual demeanour. If they weren’t going to have the allure and dramatics of Team Rocket, they needed to work twice as hard to still be the lovely, charming individuals they knew they could be at heart. She wasn’t going to let anyone take that from her, from them.

Serena and Johanna were embracing, right now, and Jessie couldn’t help but take note of how easily they fit together, there against the blue skies and emerald fields. Despite their different hair colour and skin tones and faces, despite all the differences between them—with the kind of love Johanna so warmly radiated, they looked just like a mother and daughter.

“Serena,” she began, strength in every ounce of her voice. “Your confidence is something to be admired, and it doesn’t come without humility, either. You’re easily Top Coordinator material. Keep working hard, alright?”

“Thank you so much, Miss Johanna! I will!”

Serena really was different from the girl they had all known before. Granted, their relationship was tumultuous and not exactly one where either party were privy to the details of the other’s life. Still, there was an obviously acquired sanguinity to the way the young girl carried herself.

As if on cue, the sheepish girl they were used to flashed in her eyes if only for a moment, and she turned her head a tad to catch the former Rockets in her peripheral. Shifting the tone, she inquired—

“Hey, um…” Serena said, picking her words. “Do you think… do you think everything would have turned out alright for you if you had kept performing, too?”

“Who can say?” Johanna had an answer for her almost instantly. “I turned it over a lot in my head… I constantly battled with the idea of if I was settling and if it was my time yet. But you know what, Serena?”

“What?”

“I knew my worth and I knew who I was,” she said, eyes ablaze with resolve. “There’s no point in turning over those ‘what if?’s in your mind. You’re an amazing, strong young woman. No matter what choices you make in life, happiness is always achievable if you fight hard enough for it.”

“Thanks again, Johanna!” Serena said, and it sounded, underneath everything, as if she was reading off a script, mashing buttons in the cutscene to get to the secret ending. “I think so, too.”

Jessie brought her eyes off to the side, trying to hide the feeling of exposure with the promise of some sort of optimism. She followed her own script, said her goodbyes, and did what she always did: kept walking forward.

Serena cast a longing glance back at Johanna as their collective footsteps echoed on the humble dirt roads crisscrossing Twinleaf, and Jessie used the opportunity to crystallize her own final portrait of the home of the woman living a life she feared and envied all at once.
Don’t look back, she had always said. Just this once, she allowed herself.

Johanna was smiling. A pride in her expression that was impossible to put justified words to, a maternal energy that permeated every heart it touched. Safety. Security. The promise of a family.

Jessie watched her, there. She took in the scene in full. She thought about Dawn, a girl with an equally bright smile, a smile that had been forged by a kind upbringing, a smile that had been forged by Johanna.

Must be nice, she thought, tearing her gaze away from the quiet respite, reminding herself that even if she were still a wicked thief, there was no one in the universe who could steal something so intangible, so precious.

A mother who raised you, waiting at home for your safe return.

Jessie held her chin high and kept on walking.

Chapter End Notes

i hate this chapter a lot and i’m sorry you were forced to come on this trash journey with me lol. i promise it'll be better next time.

sorry it took so long and that the result was not very good! i was very sick for the entire first half of this chapter and i don't know how much of my fever-induced ramblings i was able to edit out.

some tough news to break is that i just got a job that i'm uncertain on the hours of, and i have no idea how much time i'm going to have to be writing DTE now. i know the update schedule is already atrocious and for that i'm very sorry... i hope you're willing to be patient and bear with me. i'm still going to be writing it whenever i get the chance. beyond that, ven and i are still in kind of a 'loose concepts' stage with hoenn ideas, so it might be a little while before chapter 11 OTL im sorry. but you'll get it. make no mistake.

sorry i don't have much to say, again i'm feeling kinda bad about this chapter. i know it's another one that's kinda heavy! alas. i'm getting kinda tired of apologizing for the sads and i kinda just wanna write what i wanna write knowing what the end result will be, i hope thats okay.

as always, i will do my best.
An upset in luck wasn’t something that was exactly foreign to the former Rockets, but an upset in luck triggered by a single, simple word was certainly something they hadn’t seen in quite a while.

DELAYED.

It hung around them, an ugly adornment on an unfortunately large array of screens, almost taunting in its vibrant red. Beneath the cruel painting, Jessie was on her knees with her arms raised to the sky, screaming—or as much as she was able to, out of breath from running through the airport alongside her team. From beside her, they pathetically collapsed, unsure if they were disappointed or relieved that they had run so fiercely for nothing.

Saffron’s airport bustled hectically around them, far more than any of them had ever seen it before. With their connecting flight AWOL, they remained there in the center of the chaos, motionless for a lagging moment, unsure of what to do next.

“Hoenn’s going to have to wait for us to grace its grounds, I guess,” James mumbled out noncommittally.
“But for how long?!” Jessie said, agonized. “We have a system here! The world is not allowed have other plans for us!”

“Wobb~a!”

Around the group, the frantic discord continued, and they all sighed in exaggerated unison.

“Welp,” Meowth said. “We’s stuck in Kanto. Who’s gonna be da one to find out how long?”

They mechanically raised their heads back up to the breathing universe, and several yards ahead, noticed a crowd forming. With a shared look, James brought himself to his feet and began inching forward, the others following him in resigned step.

The crowd was murmuring darkly, hushed in trepidation. As they made their way through it, offering quiet ‘excuse us’s and ‘sorry’s, on the way there, the four of them couldn’t help but pick up on words that had to have been, must have been a trick of the mind. There was a cold chill that ran through them when they saw the officer at the head of it, her dark eyes pointed sharply towards the scene. She took turns muttering into her radio and controlling the mass behind the flimsy police tape, painted lips pressed into a firm line.

Noticing the tepid air wafting off her team, Jessie ignored her immediate gag reflex and accepted what fate had in store for her, complaining loudly in her head the entire time. They followed behind her, their steps far more shaky.

“Evening, Officer,” she said, and the words even still tasted like acid on her tongue. “Am I right to assume you might have an idea of what prompted this chaos?”

Jenny turned to face her, melting into that strange, contradictory aura she and everyone born into her family so easily excelled at—that of a helpful, loving mother who will ground you if she catches you even breathing the same air as the kid who didn’t do his homework. Raising her voice high enough above the cacophony of confusion, she dove straight in.

“If you can’t tell, everywhere past these gates are on complete lockdown,” she said. “We had some pretty hardened thieves bust in and try to make off with all our Pokéball Policy cases. They didn’t end up getting away with any pokémon, thank goodness, but we still need to finish sweeping the area on the off chance they left anything behind to identify themselves.”

Jessie’s eyes widened. It was a perfect crime. There were pokémon that were forbidden from boarding most planes due to the imperfect technology of pokéballs as a whole—the large, blue toddler clinging to her leg could easily attest to that—so most trainers were required to register and present their pokémon when going through security. The balls would be placed in high-tech machines that locked in their power to subdue the pokémon for the flight, and be given back to trainers when they landed.

Making off with the sorted-ones laying around the back rooms and ready to be boarded or sent off to baggage claim… even for a hardened thief, the precision of the plan and the signs that they were able to get that far was… well, it was—

“There’s no guarantee,” Jenny continued, over Jessie’s line of thought. “But we’re pretty sure it was some rogue agents left over from Team Rocket.”

The quartet’s blood ran cold as soon as she’d affirmed it. James shifted uncomfortably where he stood, acutely aware of his appearance, now. Were his sunglasses dark enough? Should he have worn his hair back? This was not a disguise, and Kanto was once their playground, and they’d
definitely breathed this Jenny’s air more than once before.

“I see,” Jessie squeaked out nervously, her phenomenal talent as an accomplished actress failing her at the most inopportune moment. “Thank you for getting us up to speed.”

“We should be able to update you on your flights once we get this place cleared out. Until then, Saffron has plenty of hotels and a Pokémon Center where you can stay!”

Almost on a dime, the officer was intense, smoky eyes boring into them all, shooting definite daggers into their hearts.

“Let any of us know if you see anyone acting suspiciously or who looks like they might’ve been with those rogue Rockets,” she practically ordered.

“Yes… ma’am…” the group affirmed, mechanically turning their backs to her and blearily carrying their suddenly weighted forms through the still pandemonious mass.

As the chaotic morning became smaller and smaller from behind them, they broke into an anxious power-walk before bolting straight out of the airport.

“I really can’t bring myself to be takin’ in dem Saffron sights,” Meowth whined, slumped over timidly as he walked down the worn sidewalk.

“Things were so much nicer the last time we were here, eh?” James asked, skyscrapers brandished around him.

“What do you mean?” Jessie shot right back. “I lost a contest by technicality after that gaudily-dressed, eggplant-headed menace took the pacifist route on us!”

“Yeah, an den you twos left me all alone ta man da noodle stand we was runnin’!”

“Then Wobbuffet abandoned me for a measly kirlia in the midst of all of us getting stalked by a multitude of ghosts!” Jessie finished.

“Wobbu~ffet…” he muttered under his breath— I said sorry...— and Jessie rolled her eyes, her annoyance equal to his own.

“Yer brain broken, Jimmy?” Meowth crossed his arms. “What about dat was fun to ya?”

“I was trying to remain optimistic for once!” He huffed. “But if you must know I was referring to the first time we chased the Twerp down these parts.”

Jessie’s resentment waned, a little. “Oh! I vaguely remember that. You complained the whole time about how cold our disguises were...”

James blushed at the snapshot, flustered at how selective her memory tended to be. “Not every flower can bloom in the chilly air as you can, dear.”

Meowth let himself grin, fangs protruding. “You lot will look for any excuse ta t’row on a grass skoiht.”

“Strange to see you playing the optimist,” Jessie told James. “You’re usually the first to complain.”
“A new life, a new me,” he stated, matter-of-factly. “Besides, I’m rather fond of Saffron City.”

“It does have its perks,” Jessie said, taking a look around at the towering buildings framing the road. “Though, it would be nice to get some retail therapy in and not have to worry about where we’re sleeping tonight.”

“I never did end up in any of the hotels, despite how often I was around these parts as a youth,” James mused, curiously. “...strange, I wonder why—”

He stopped in his tracks, there, taken by how mindless he had been. Of course. Of course! The team noticed his stagnancy and quietly backed themselves up to follow wherever it was his train of thought had decided to park itself.

“You in dere, Jimmy?” Meowth inquired.

James stayed quiet for a beat, his demeanour taking an even higher note as points began to connect themselves in his head. Within the minute, a delighted grin made its way to his face, and he actually giggled in pure and complete joy.

Jessie looked to Meowth, bothered at how endeared to this behaviour she was, an eyebrow raised. “Should I ask?”

“Let ‘im have dis.”

“I know where we’re sleeping tonight!” James finally announced, excited to be the one sharing this news with his friends. Without another word, he took off running down the road, toward the surrounding forest.

“James!” Jessie stammered, hoping for more of an explanation than that. “James, wait up!”

Meowth launched his paws off the concrete behind her, and Wobbuffet followed suit, tripping over his stubs.

James kept his smile bright as he tore off ahead of them, the sun shining right through his skin, warming his soul.

The forest blurred into a steady emerald around them, and when James had finally slowed down, his mood had kept itself in tact. The team were far too out of breath to press him any longer, exhausted by what the morning had thrown at them. Down at their core, at least two of them shared a fear that James was going to lead them to some cave he remembered on the outskirts of town as if it were paradise.

Naturally, when Paradise actually came into view, they practically halted right where they were, awed.

James would have been lying if he claimed there wasn’t a kind of excited nervousness blooming in the pit of his stomach as he began to recognize the sights, the dips in greenery and landmarks along the road. Once he took in the long driveway of the luxurious mansion, it all melted off him, falling into a vast sea somewhere far away.

He broke into a ran, again. It was the only upper-class housing in the universe that was magic enough in its healing power to do that to him. James felt sick at the sight of luxury, found himself existing slightly to the left of his body at fancy balls, had to swallow his shaking words whenever a plan called for him to disguise himself as a proper gentleman. Nestled away in the quiet outskirts of
Saffron’s hills, however, was a respite from all those feelings—the warmth of a humble home, cloaked in a veil of casual affluence.

The team lagging behind him, suddenly realizing where it was they were, struggled to keep up—caught off guard at their teammate being turned into a smiling child so suddenly. They watched him tear through the passcode on the gates effortlessly, throw open the imposing fence with reckless abandon.

Jessie couldn’t help but catch herself grinning at the sight, despite the ache in her lungs from trying to keep with his pace. Normally, she found confidence on James a little grating—he was only ever confident about things that didn’t seem to matter, much. There was something so enchanting, though, about the way the green of his eyes seemed to sparkle in the sunlight. Of course, she was always happy when her team was happy—but there was a hidden charm in James’ smile that she swore she’d never seen before, and it set her heart at ease despite everything the world had been throwing at her as of late.

James practically skipped up and knocked a small tune against the glossy finish on the mansion’s doors, ignoring the golden knocker entirely. The others were finally able to catch up behind him, standing their distance from him as he bounced idly on his feet, waiting to be answered.

When the doors opened, he was suddenly humbled again, smiling sweetly to accost his family, a sheepish arm stuck behind his head. Jessie and Meowth watched their faces light up when they saw him standing there.

“Hello Nanny, Pop-Pop,” he greeted. “I hope you don’t mind us dropping in so suddenly…”

“I’ll be,” Pop-Pop responded in earnest, looking up at him. “Is that Li’l James?”

“It’s been so long since we’ve seen you ‘round these parts!” Nanny beamed. “You been well, I hope?”

“Life has its ups and downs, of course,” James smiled. “I’m sorry to trouble you so suddenly, but our flight was delayed by a skirmish at the airport, would it be okay to ask—”

The woman put a hand up, quieting him with a smile. When he hushed himself, she took her hand in his own, gazing lovingly towards him as she spoke.

“There’s always a home here for you, sugar,” she said. “And bring your friends along too, you hear?”

James had to consciously keep his eyes from welling up with tears, touched always at the warmth in his nanny’s voice. His oasis of peace had never faltered, despite the turbulence of his own life. Always there, waiting for him, ready to welcome him with arms outstretched.

“Thank you so much, Nanny!”

Jessie and Meowth shared a nervous look as the couple disappeared back into the lavish home, and James seemed to sense this, turning over his shoulder and offering them a grin that told them not to think too hard.

They followed timidly behind as he practically floated through the doors of the mansion, his breath lighter than it had ever been, his shoulders dipped in serenity.
“You been touring the world, huh?”

“Something like that,” James said, sipping at his cocoa. “You might’ve heard, my business
deavour all fell apart.”

“We were pretty concerned when we saw Team Rocket gettin’ raided on the news,” Nanny
commented. “Never did understand why such a sweet child like you fell in with that crowd.”

The word *necessity* hung on James’ tongue, and he had to remind himself that even in the comfort of
his everlasting safe space, there were things he couldn’t always allow himself to say. These people
were kind at heart, and he refused to turn them into victims of his life.

“To be honest, it caught me by surprise, as well,” he said, almost wistfully. “Maybe someday, I’ll be
a braver man, and I can tell you both the story.”

They seemed to sense the topic was not one he could bring himself to talk about, and quickly
retreated their prying to smiles and understanding nods. James felt himself relax—strange, he didn’t
realize he *could* settle any more than he had—and thanked his lucky stars that whoever was pulling
the strings out there gave him this. He shuddered to think of the person he would’ve become without
his grandparents—if he even survived, that was.

“Whatever happened to those friends of yours from the last time we saw ya?” Pop-Pop inquired.

James set his cup down. “Friends?”

“That crowd of younger folk,” he clarified. “With the munchlax?”

“Oh!” James said. “Actually, they’re more or less responsible for my being here, you see. It was one
of them who urged me and my companions here to make something useful of ourselves after Team
Rocket disbanded.”

His nanny turned to face him with tenderness in her features. “Heavens, that’s a turnaround. Though
I’m not surprised you were able to take it in stride, darlin’.”

“You flatter me,” James blushed, unprepared for the pride in her voice. “It hasn’t been nearly as
glamorous as I’ve made it sound.”

*Goodness, the time really has flown on this journey…* he found himself lost in the thoughts as they
hit him. *We’re nearly done, and it’s felt like the blink of an eye.*

“Had a good feeling about those kids,” the woman continued. “Glad we were able to help ‘em out.”

Jessie leaned back, practically swimming in the chair adjacent to them. There was a part of her that
anxiously tapped its foot, demanding to be acknowledged, but it refused to make clear what it was so
huffy about. It couldn’t have been that she had little place in this conversation? The luxury
surrounding her more than made up for it.

Meowth and Wobbuffet were propped up, leaning cozily against each other, content passengers on
the conversation’s voyage. Jessie had rarely seen them this satisfied with shutting up. They had to
have questions, right? Inquiries? Contributions? Wobbuffet at the very least seemed to have self-
oriented object permanence directly related to how loud he was being.

The way James talked to his family had such a rhythm to it, however, and she found herself unable
to get a word in edgewise. Watching him in his total and complete comfort zone with words flowing
off his tongue was like watching poetry exist tangibly in front of her. It was warm, and beautiful, and
for once in her life she felt as if she did not have a right to make herself a part of it.

The consensus on if she was friends with that feeling was still up for debate.

Jessie stayed there, stealing glances at him, trying to feign far more disinterest than she had as she watched him settle in. He halted the fluidity of his demeanor, suddenly, and it was only then that she phased back into reality and realized the conversation had taken an unexpected turn.

“So, didja bring Mime Jr. along with ya on this pilgrimage?”

James’ words would have caught in his throat, if he had words at all to justify the question.

To say that the topic hadn’t crossed his mind was… not entirely accurate. There was already so much stress and hard truths to face in this journey, however. He’d put that one on the backburner for so, so long—pushing it down, refusing to acknowledge it, waiting for the moment the universe would grab him by the shoulders and force him to face it head-on.

Well. Here we were.

Mime Jr. was at headquarters, and headquarters was… who knows what had become of it? News would pop up on James’ tech and he would quietly minimize it, his eyes dulled to the words in a fit of constant fear, his brain blurring them to spare him the pain. He wanted to stay ignorant in these matters. He didn’t want to know, in any capacity, what terrible things had become of his friends. Always avoiding. Always running.

He swallowed. One more act of cowardice. One more fearful dodge. After this, no more. After this, he was going to face forward.

“Oh, that little tyke!” James beamed, sunlight from a flickering fluorescent bulb. “Well, the journey has been quite rough-and-tumble, so I let it spend some time on its own in a luxury facility full of other pokémon!”

A pang of something hit both Jessie and Meowth at once, and they found themselves meeting each other’s eyes once more. One shared look on a long list of quietly-kept secrets that day.

*It isn’t… entirely a lie*, James justified. *I shouldn’t trouble them with these fears. This is my burden to bear.*

The swiftness with which he was able to choke out the statement surprised him, he was so certain he’d lost his crafty tongue somewhere along the quest to be kinder.

*Old survival mechanisms die hard, I suppose.*

James’ fear lessened some in the wake of his grandparents’ faces—they seemed content with that answer, nodding happily to each other. The problem lingered, like roots in his heart, but it was something he could prepare himself to confront—something he could take at his own pace.

*Try not to think about how lost you feel in the wake of this,* he coached his racing thoughts and aching heart. *Find some gains to combat those losses.*

“So long as we’re… catching up on old companions,” James said. “Is…”

The man’s voice immediately dropped into a far softer tone—longing, and childish, and naive in its simplicity.
“Is Chimecho here?”

The old couple shared a knowing look, almost mischievous in its benevolence—like a room full of people waiting to surprise someone for their birthday.

“Was wonderin’ when you were finally gonna ask!”

James practically threw open the doors to the larger enclosure, and the breath of easy air it sent him felt like the kindest home. It was something he was certain he’d never grow used to—the feeling of thriving, exotic greens on every side of him, the way his lungs grew so much lighter in their wake. There was a rush of joy that sent his heart soaring, smile growing a size wider, threatening to crack itself in two.

Within its crystalline walls, the telltale chattering of species among species of pokémon doppled. Pidgey soared above, bellsprout shimmied through the bushes, poliwag ducked into the bustling ponds. Their voices mixed into one beautiful cacophony, set apart by definition, together now by circumstance. Every last one content and happy.

“I gather you know these parts by now,” Pop-Pop said after a moment. “Make yourself at home, I’m sure you two will run into each other soon enough.”

James turned over his shoulder and nodded, euphoric expression stuck to him. Gently, as if the ground beneath him would shatter, he let himself be carried forward, farther into the breathing paradise. The earth below was soft, yielding, home.

Jessie, Meowth, and Wobbuffet followed with their heads swimming against the colourful backdrop. Jessie was struck almost instantly with the realization that she didn’t have nearly enough time to marvel at the scenery the last time she was here—far too focused on grabbing the nearest pokémon and running. In retrospect, it was strange that she’d spent so much time trying to pilfer the place—why didn’t she just enjoy the luxury while she had it? Hedonist that she was, she still didn’t think of herself as one to be that greedy. What had come over her?

The woman kept walking through the lively enclosure, her mind trying to retrace steps with a memory that could’ve been better. She was so focused on dastardly deeds back then because… she had been offered them as… solace? Because—

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of her partner quickening his own pace to a run, practically bolting through a thicker patch of jungle. She snapped back to the scene, unsure of what had caught his attention, a little tired of how often she’d been forced to follow quietly behind him as of late.

When her and the others managed to catch up with him, he was stopped, facing a quiet clearing amongst the overgrowth. James’ stance was timid, his shoulders drooping, as if his body was only now realizing how unprepared he was in mind and spirit. She heard him make a quiet vocalization, and attempt to make up for the lack of words in his throat with a meek, outstretched hand. At little more than his presence, the scene began to quietly unfold.

Standing opposite, far right of the clearing, were several pokémon. The taillow was several sizes larger than one would expect, its feathers ruffled in anger. Babbling angrily at it was a furret, up on its hind legs, its tail flicking back and forth in short spurts. Dead center, in between them, was Chimecho.

The angry pokémon continued their discourse, and right when it looked as if they were about to start
a full-on skirmish, the group watched as Chimecho softly sounded its bell. The tune filled the clearing—dizzying, lulling, indescribable. As if they were swimming through honey, or just on the precipice of falling asleep on a sunny hill.

With it, the taillow relaxed itself. The furret dropped its front paws to the forest floor. They made a couple cheery noises of agreement at each other and darted off in opposite directions, leaving only Chimecho.

James shuffled forward, his heart set at ease, his worries somewhere else, his confidence at an all time high. At the sound of his footsteps, Chimecho turned to face him, its eyes slowly but surely filling to the brim with stars.

“Chimecho?” He muttered, overflowing.

The pokémon began to float towards him, and James delicately inched his arm forward once more, as if he was unsure if this was real or some beautiful, serendipitous dream. All at once, Chimecho hastened the quiet reunion, diving right for its trainer, a comet en route for embrace.

He made a small noise of surprise as the pokémon hit his torso, and it quickly shifted itself, staying buried in his arms for only a moment. Chimecho floated upwards, nuzzling James’ face, tears just barely staining its eyes. James couldn’t help himself from crying as well. When he spoke, there was no preparation to the words—they flowed on their own, no filter to process them from emotion to tangible thought.

“I’m sorry I’ve taken so long,” he said, voice tender. “I hope I didn’t worry you.”

It uttered an equally soft ‘chii-ime’ and wrapped its long tail around James’ eyes, small arms still cradling his face with love.

“Where have you gone?” He teased in response. “No fair, we’ve only just reunited!”

The rest of the team and the old couple watched the scene unfold, content to be privy to such a quiet, warm meeting between friends. It was simpler than Jessie would have expected it to be—far less dramatic, as if they’d only spent a week apart, rather than years upon years. Some part of her was still in an irritated mood but refusing to clarify why, so she mentally told it to shut its rude mouth and focused her heart on the sight of James at his happiest.

He was holding Chimecho close, now—cradling it in his arms as if it were a child and he were a man fit to raise one. The feeling of his pokémon there where it belonged again, after years of emptiness, was not something he found himself able to put words to.

James looked back to the group, then, a touch embarrassed to be the star of this heartfelt movie. There was little tact in the layover from this joy—all he seemed able to offer was honesty.

“I didn’t quite make it this far when I was playing this scenario out in my head,” he said, bluntly. “What now?”

Meowth rolled his eyes. “What do ya wanna do?”

The man considered the question. It wasn’t something he gave thought to often—what he wanted to do was more often than not overshadowed by what his teammates wanted to do. Not forcefully, just because he was more content to come along than to really give any weight to his own desires. To be given priority so matter-of-factly was… a quandary he didn’t know where to begin with.

He pried it apart, point-by-point. What he was feeling right now was... unaltering love, more than
anything. At his dear friend, at the world for bringing them back together. Within that was gratitude. Gratitude towards the people who had looked so carefully over his friend in his absence. So, what he wanted to do most was probably…

“Nanny, Pop-Pop,” James said. “Is there anything… anything at all that I can do to make your life a touch easier?”

“Whaddya mean, Li’l James?” Nanny asked. “You already do a fine job of bringing that sunshine to us.”

“It’s just…” he stopped to craft his words, delicately. “I’d like to make some use of myself, while I’m here. Even if it’s just cleaning, or tending to the enclosures. I feel it’s the least I could do in exchange for all you’ve done for Chimecho.”

The couple shared a look, and James realized the silliness of the question. Why rely on him when they could just buy the service of someone far more efficient?

“There are a few errands we’ve been meanin’ to get around to,” Pop-Pop said, to his surprise. “You up for a shopping trip?”

How quickly they presented the opportunity to him was both surprising and typical—it warmed his heart how eager they were to hear out his frivolous requests. He was about to launch into another grateful tirade when he noticed his friends standing off farther back, looking a little lost.

“Thank you so much,” James simplified his feelings best he was able, then strode forward to his team, pulling them aside discreetly, lowering his voice.

“Promise me,” he said. “Please, please don’t give them any trouble.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “James, we’re entirely neutral good now, where have you been?”

“And I am a man comprised almost solely of anxiety,” he countered. “Where have you been?”

“It’s fine, Jimmy,” Meowth piped up.

“Promise me.”

“We promise,” Jessie offered, far too noncommittally for her partner’s tastes.

“Let me see your hands,” James told her.

“Oh my god,” she rolled her eyes, holding aforementioned hands up, resigned. “We promise.”

“Meowth?”

“What she said,” he added, paws brandished. “Promise. We was doihty last time we was here, I remembha’. If yer really worried ya can have da Twoihp’s greninja babysit us.”

James stood up straighter, satisfied with the answer. His logical mind didn’t think that his friends were going to try anything sneaky, but the doubt that so often flowered in his heart could rarely be swayed by something as feeble as logic. He steadied himself. He needed to have faith in his friends and their better days.

“I’m trusting you,” he said, hoping that affirming it out loud would set him at ease.

James turned from one family of his to the other, feeling more like a messenger pidgey than anything.
The day had barely begun, and he was already exhausted.

“So,” he said simply. “Let’s get to work!”

“Chiiime!” His pokémon added, wiggling excitedly out of his arms, and he couldn’t help but smile at it despite the quiet feeling of something unknown awakening somewhere within him.

There was a definite fear in retracing steps back to Saffron, but James was focused on being a better man and working past those roadblocks. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to atone for the wrongdoings he’d done in the past—moreso, that being stuck in a jail cell for years upon years wouldn’t give him nearly enough time to cover ground with the people who mattered most. Some atonement, in this case, needed to be forsook for others.

He figured that yes, karma probably wouldn’t forgive them entirely for running from that crime. But he hoped she would understand a little, at the very least.

This time, he’d done more to shield his appearance. His hair was pulled back under a hat he was practically swimming in, sunglasses adorning his eyes despite the general lack of sun in the sky. There was anxiety on top of his anxiety that he was too obviously dressed like a man with a secret, but as time had passed he’d learned better techniques to convince his over-dramatic, damaged mind to quiet itself.

James exhaled, turning to his pokémon floating along the breeze. Its eyes were brighter than he had ever seen them before, practically golden against the crisp air, and there was an excitable twitch to its tail as it rode the silent winds.

“Look at us,” he marveled, smile unable to keep itself from his voice. “Off running errands for family as if no time has passed at all.”

“Chii~me,” it responded, absentmindedly doing some tiny flips in midair.

“It’s good to see you so lively after the last time I was here,” James said, and when the words left him, he couldn’t help but linger on the memory of his friend weak and run-down, barely mobile. The overwhelming sense of powerlessness was something he never wanted to experience again.

Chimecho had responded to him while he’d been lost in painful nostalgia, but the meaning of the words hadn’t entirely registered. His stream of consciousness pressed onward, lacking a filter of its own.

“Are you warm enough?” James asked, to which Chimecho tilted its head a little. “Here, why don’t you…"

He reached out to pluck the pokémon from its drift, only for it to read his worries and drape itself around his neck, softly uttering its name. Caught off guard, but satisfied, James grinned and pulled his jacket up higher to offer some extra coverage. He brought his hand to his friend’s head, stroking it affectionately as he spoke.

“You’re darling as ever,” James told it. “And quite the fashion statement, if I’m being honest.”

“Chimechiiime!” It affirmed.

“Lucky as always I have a soothing presence like you here,” he sighed a little. “Every time I’ve walked away from Nanny and Pop Pop’s estate, I’ve definitely gotten the feeling that I wouldn’t be there again for a long time. Even now just making a trite trip for groceries, it feels so much farther
“Chime?” It rung a little, sensing his uneasy heart.

“You don’t seem phased at all, though!” James made an attempt to cheer himself on. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say this is the kind of trip you make all the time.”

“Chiiime!” The pokémon boasted—*Because it is!*

“Well!” He responded, a little surprised. “What brings you out here that often? You aren’t running off to get silly on sodapop and have secret raves with all the other psychic types, are you?”

Chimecho giggled heartily, the mental image far too amusing for it to not. Psychic types were a rare treasure—it rarely got to meet pokémon that had such interesting things to say—but despite Saffron’s reputation, it’d never seen many itself.

“Chiimechii~ime,” it elaborated, and James almost stopped walking as he registered the feel of its meaning.

*I’m always out here running errands!*

“...always?”

It kept on talking, and James listened in a quiet trance. It was going on and on about how it broke up fights and calmed down pokémon, how it hovered tools around, how it cooked and cleaned and kept people warm, just like it was now...

James stomach twisted a little, and he willed it to calm itself. The feeling wasn’t something easy to put words to—mostly a nervous kind of pride, but underneath it, a subtle twinge of solemn that he wasn’t around to see his pokémon grow. He kept on walking. It was easy to focus on the bitter—he wanted to start focusing on the sweet.

“You really are special, Chimecho,” he quietly said, and held the pokémon closer to his face as they traveled.

The hardware store they were eventually parked in was a notable attraction that James remembered fondly from his childhood vacations. It was a quaint little building parked in a rather luxurious city, with worn hardwood floors and a skitty that quietly snoozed in its aisles.

It wasn’t until he was at checkout that he remembered the other thing that made it so special—at the front and only register, there was a rack filled to the brim with all manner of sweets. They sat there in their cute, minimalist packaging, perfect eye level for any twerp who was willing to tug on their parent’s sleeve and ask for *just one more thing?*

Chimecho had a cylindrical package of dark chocolate-covered oran berries nestled in its tail, and it was looking to James with excited, sparkling eyes. He shot it a look, maternal in his authoritative tone.

“There are a million better things we can get to eat,” he scolded. “You *must* know that.”

Chimecho’s eyes got wider, their glittering amber wobbling with yearning. It let out a soft whimper as it flew in closer, begging him to reconsider.

James sighed, lazily gesturing to the counter where his items were being scanned. Chimecho recovered from its devastated state almost immediately and dropped the treats there, ringing out a
clear ‘thank you!’

“I suppose between my sweet tooth and your adorable face, we weren’t going to win that one,” he chuckled, and Chimecho easily joined in.

Halfway through mopping the muddied hallway leading out of the enclosure, James’ water bucket started hovering away into the great yonder, and that was the anticlimactic way he was made privy to the fact that Chimecho had learned Psychic.

The reception to this was nothing short of a trainwreck. James was startled, then confused, then overjoyed, then immediately wrought with worry. As Chimecho floated off with the object, the man skidded forward, nearly slipping and jamming the mop into the ground like an undignified cane.

“Chimecho!” He called to it. “Where are you going with that?”

“Chime?” It turned around, confused at the commotion, then registered his question. “Chii~iime!”

“You don’t need to change it yourself!” James stammered, tripping over his feet on the polished floors as he tried to catch up. “Let me help you!”

Chimecho giggled a little and whispered its name playfully—*looks like you’re the one who needs help!*

Brightly, it picked him up too, carrying both him and the bucket over the soapy floors and into the kitchen.

James was still catching his breath even being carried into the room, and he practically tugged himself over to where Chimecho was calmly changing out water. The pokémon sung a gentle tune as it worked.

“Please—” its trainer panted. “—I can—take care—of it—”

Chimecho just laughed more, brandishing to him the completed job far before he could finish his sentence. Quick as it had come, it left back out the same door, and James despaired only a little bit as he followed on foot, this time.

“Chimechimechime~” Chimecho chirped, and James felt a doting parent with an ornery child. He smiled weakly, despite his heart’s protests.

*Try to keep up, silly!* His pokémon had said.

“Was that Psychic?” James said, a little later, as they were sharing juice pouches during a break in work.

“Chime!” Chimecho said, affirmatively.

“How did you—” James stopped his thought. “*When* did you learn that?”

“Chiime,” it began, following the statement up with a few more soft sounds.

*That’s what happens when you gain enough experience!*
“Please don’t tell me you’ve been battling in my absence,” he responded, apprehensive.

“Chimechimechime!” it said. Of course I have! I’m a pokémon, after all.

“You don’t have to battle just by virtue of being a pokémon, you know,” James said, as if it were simply a truth of the universe.

Chimecho sipped at its juice, letting the sugar stain its tongue before speaking again.

*Been awhile since I’ve heard this lecture.*

James huffed as he registered the sentiment of the pokémon’s chattering, feeling called out in his predictability. He tried to play it off humorously.

“I’m only telling the truth!” He crossed his arms. “Battles are so terribly unnecessary, there are a million more blissful things one can do without overexerting oneself!”

“Chi~ime...” it muttered a little, and James did a mental double-take, wondering if what he caught was actually what his friend had meant to convey—

*You never said that to Cacnea...* 

James looked to his left, opposite of Chimecho, almost dejectedly. He murmured his words to the side as if he were spitting out tasteless gum.

“Cacturne,” he corrected, voice low and meek.

“Chi-hi-hiime!” the pokémon laughed out loud, nearly dropping its juice.

*I rest my case!*

“I’ll have you know it only became a cacturne after I parted ways with it!”

“Chimechime~” it taunted. *Likely story!*

He sighed, obviously defeated. James would have to decide for himself if Chimecho was any good at battling in the traditional sense, but as far as intellectual debates went, the pokémon had him beat. He sucked his pouch dry, nervously fidgeting with the narrow straw stuck in it. He had never been comfortable with the idea of Chimecho putting itself in danger. It just wasn’t something he ever wanted to live with the guilt of. He turned to it again, this time trying sympathy—

"You said you were born on top of a mountain, right?"

"Chime," it answered, a curious yes.

"...did you battle much up there?"

Chimecho tilted its head, and the emotion that accompanied it was... not exactly the response James wanted. It seemed almost disappointed that the conversation had circled back around in such short time.

"Chimechime," it started to say, a little apathetically, and then continued—

*There was no one at the top to battle but my own kin*, it had told him. *That's why I was so happy when I met you.*
James softened, breaking a little at the sudden transition from lukewarm to sunny. He felt something. He couldn't identify what his emotions were doing, tangled together like a writhing mess of angry ekans. He pushed the cruel aura down.

Chimecho continued to talk, but James was afraid that the nuance of its words were lost somewhere in the language barrier. It seemed to be saying how elated it was when it heard James' heart calling out to him all those years ago—but in that talk of elation, James heard little joy displayed in Chimecho's tone. His nervous pulse quickened. More than anything, he wanted to apologize. What for, he was entirely unsure.

The pokémon sensed his solemn, and quieted its words. It flew to his arms and rested there, curling its tail around the appendages. James swallowed, syllables coming out muddied and loose.

"Do you hate me for abandoning you?"

Soon as the question left him, he almost didn't register it was him who had said it. As if some unfamiliar phantom had taken the reigns for a moment, puppeteering his body. Running his fingers over the smooth texture of his friend's head, he willed himself to focus on reality, to not lose himself like he so often did.

Chimecho looked as if it had been hit as he asked the question. The pokémon floated out of his arms, making sure to line its eyes with his own. When it spoke, its words were heavy with conviction.

"Chime," it told him, holding his face with its tail. "Chime chime ."

No chance, Chimecho said. It wasn't your choice.

He closed his eyes tight, nodding, hoping that affirming it to himself would make it easier to believe. He couldn't move past the way Chimecho's voice seemed to be laced with... disdain? Resentment?... As it spoke about their meeting. A logical part of him said that it was only perceived, or related to something that wasn't just him by definition. A much louder part that had been with him all his life told him it was because he was born into wickedness and would always remain that way, 'til death do us part.

"Sorry for going soft on you like this," James said.

"Chimechime," it smiled. You were always soft .

"I suppose you're right," he told it. "Should we get back to work?"

"Chime!" The pokemon cheered, and started to float off toward the next goal. James grabbed the box of expensive light bulbs off the floor beside them and straightened up the ladder he'd been lounging on. At the sound of the metal folding in on itself, Chimecho felt its mood dip.

"Don't get too excited, Chime!" James shouted ahead, and the nickname almost sounded cruel to its ears.

"I'll be the one working that chandelier!"

Meowth was practically catatonic on the bed, surrounded in blankets made of the world’s finest cotton, spoiling his dinner with mouthfuls of mochi balls. There was a part of him that felt like he was riding James’ coattails, sure—but something told the scratch cat that his friend probably didn’t want any help in the first place. He’d been oddly introverted, lately.
“Man,” he said, swallowing the last mound. “I could really feel at home in a place like dis!”

“Keep dreaming,” Jessie rolled her eyes, and the brief moment put a hole in her defenses. Wobbuffet turned his controller—as if that would help him—and passed her on the virtual racetrack, taking first place in the last few minutes. To this, she screamed into the nearest pillow, dropping her own controller to the floor. Her pokémon directed a victory salute to no one in particular.

“YOU DON’T EVEN HAVE THUMBS!” Jessie shrieked, chucking her pillow at him. It bounced clean off him and knocked her back onto the couch.

She let her rage fall out of her as she laid there, eyes on the golden chandelier above, transfixed. Last time she was here, she remembered this position, too—staring up at it in this exact guest room, her head swimming in thought. Last time, though, it was overwhelming… something had pushed her deep into her thoughts, tangled like nettles around her heart.

She shouted again when Meowth came into her vision, his pointed ears cutting a sharp silhouette into the glistening object above. Bringing herself to a rushed sit, he threw his paws up in surrender, scared to face her ire for breathing in her space the wrong way.

“What?!” She asked him pointedly, curious as to what was important enough that even he could be swayed out of his comfortable little den.

“Not’in’!” He shot back. “Jus’ wanted ta make sure yer brain didn’t shoight out!”

“As if,” she offered. “I’m fine, there’s just something strange happening here…”

“Whaddya mean, Jess?”

“I keep having this thought,” she said, and Meowth felt it odd to hear her speak so freely. “How long do you think we’re going to be in another one of James’ wonderful homes before we’re chased out again?”

“Heh, dat did seem ta be a runnin’ t’eme fer a while, huh?” Meowth pushed himself up to sit by her feet. They didn’t look at each other as they spoke.

“Logically speaking, we’re in the clear, right?” Jessie asked. “But old habits die hard, I guess. I can’t help but feel there’s a catch to all this luxury.”

“Well… in all fairness…” the cat said. “Last time it was technic’ly on us dat our stay here was so quick.”

“Uh,” she stuttered, and it occurred to her that he was a well of vivid memories untapped where she had none. “It was?”

“Didya seriously forget?” Meowth marvelled. “We was even nastier dan usual!”

Jessie wracked her brain. Right, right… her and Meowth were on a raiding spree… because he offered it to her… and she accepted the offer because… she felt…

Jessie threw herself against the arm of the couch, letting out a sharp, heavy breath and hoping it would get rid of some of the pressure twisting up her insides. She’d slipped away as soon as eyes turned off her, making her footsteps loud and her strut aggressive. Hoping, wishing, begging that he
would notice her disdain and come after her. It was a frivolous thought, of course—people don’t chase after Jessie, if they run at all it’s in the opposite direction. And even if James had, that conversation really wouldn’t have played out well. She could see it now.

“What’s wrong, Jessie?” He would say, with his stupid soft considerate voice and its stupid worried tremble, stifling her feelings even more, steeping her in guilt.

“Nothing,” she would say, lying through her teeth.

“Are you sure? You seem agitated, and I just want to make sure…” James would continue, pushing and pushing.

“Are you calling me a liar?!” Jessie would snap, and James would look as if she had kicked him, and hug himself a little before apologizing and running off like a dejected growlithe puppy. And she would collapse on the couch and scream into a pillow, because how can a person want someone to love them so bad, and then push them away any time they try to?

She loved herself, but hated the stupid, twisted-up way her emotions contradicted each other. Logically, she knew she would always be miserable and alone if she kept up these predictable conversations and didn’t work on reaching compromise. She knew she couldn’t expect to find a friend who was quiet and patient and understanding and comforting and somehow, psychically tuned into her every thought and feeling.

...okay, more than one friend like that.

Certainly not James. And if James was one of the best friends she ever had and even he wasn’t magical enough to soothe her at her most volatile, what were the chances of her ever meeting anyone better? What were the chances of her ever falling in love and settling down and being someone’s wife?

Which brought her back to… now.

Jessie laid with her eyes fixated on the chandelier, seething anger sending tears to her throat. Her eyes burned and she swallowed the sobs. She was not doing this here. Her makeup looked too nice today and she was in a damn castle, for god’s sake. There were better things to think about than the fact that James had said, without even a second thought, that he would rather die than marry her.

What did she care, anyways? It’s not like she wanted to marry him. James was cute, sure, but he was also James. The future spouse was a sexy brunette doctor with a fat wallet or a gorgeous blonde girl with candy-pink lips. And a fat wallet. James was a nervous goofball who let carnivorous plants chew on him and kept so many bottle caps on hand that he jingled during heists.

Lack of romantic intent didn’t matter, it seemed. It just wasn’t something she wanted to hear from her best friend. Sure, if one of them asked the other to marry them, they’d probably just bust out laughing at the absurdity of the idea. But the sentiment there was two people comfortable enough around each other for anything, and Jessie felt almost betrayed that she had shared so much with James, yet he was sickened by the idea of a piece of paper between them.

Marriage could mean everything or it could mean nothing. Didn’t he understand that? What was his problem? And why did she care so much?

Even if he was that disgusted by the idea of spending a lifetime with her, there were a million nicer ways to phrase it than “I’d rather die!”

“Jess?”
Meowth tore her out of the trance, and she jolted upright, banging their heads together almost comically. She groaned in pain as she rubbed the impact of solid gold against her skull away, temper on the verge of exploding.

“What?!” She barked, not wanting to deal with this.

Meowth smoothed out his tail in his paws, fur still standing from the startle. Things were tense. Jessie was obviously on edge, and the only thing she wanted was an apology from James that fate definitely didn’t have in the cards. Even if he was psychic enough to read her mind, he was as emotionally distraught as he could possibly be, tending to his sick friend and equally sick with worry. The whole team was in bad shape except for the scratch cat and it was quickly building toward emotional chaos. Meowth exhaled, a nefarious grin flashing on his face as if his preoccupations were nothing. His azure eyes shone up at Jessie, almost amorous in their radiance.

“Let’s pulverize dis pretentious palace,” he said, offering her a paw. He couldn’t think of a single, feasible thing that would cheer her up more.

Jessie considered the proposition for only a moment before confidently, eagerly shaking it with a firm hand.

“Last one to the fridge is a slowpoke,” she mirrored his wicked smile with her own before darting off down the halls.

“Oh,” Jessie said, the full weight of the memory hitting her. “Oh. You’re right, aren’t you?”

Meowth was made painfully aware in that moment that she had forgotten how twisted up she was last time they were here, and that he’d inadvertently awakened that buried memory in her.


Shit,

he thought. Don’t tell me I’m gonna have to play mediator again…

As if reading his mind, she immediately seemed to cheer up.

“Oh well!” She said, masking the sudden shift in thought. “We’ll just have to be better this time. We did make a promise, after all.”

“Heh, yeah,” Meowth said, uneasy. “We’s did.”

He hopped off the couch back over to his nest of comforters, curling into a tight circle and hoping the humans wouldn’t lose their minds while he got some shuteye.

James squinted a thousandth time at the large, imposing wall of machines in the generator room of the enclosure, brain deciding to abandon him in the most convenient of moments. From outside the door, Chimecho hovered, watching.

Years upon years upon years, he’d been able to thank his dreadful excuse for a father for one thing and one thing alone—the knowledge that was imparted down the family line of how to make any machine, no matter how complex, putty in your fingers. It was no ten-figure check, but it was one inheritance James was glad to take and run—one that had earned him a vast amount of respect in Team Rocket and kept him and his team on the winning side more than once.

He could build mechs from scratch, uproot security systems effortlessly, program entire operations without breaking a single sweat. Yet, here he was, fans and gears and lights swimming around his
head, lulling him to the void.

Chimecho sensed his apprehension, floating into the room beside him. It chimed at him softly, inquiring at the problem, LED displays dancing off the gold of its bell.

“My rational thought seems to have fallen straight out of my brain,” James said, a little embarrassed. “Pop-Pop said it was the generator, right?”

The pokémon nodded, jingling a little.

James brought himself to a kneel, running a gloved hand over the mess of wires and steel. He was seriously rusty—no pun intended—and cursed at himself a little for not anticipating that turn of events. The most he’d done since turning to the good side was fix the balloon’s hearth and make a few mindless robots here and there. Still, there was no reason something as simple as fixing the generator adjacent to the pokémon enclosure would stump him. He was starting to become worried that there were some underlying anxieties he was unconsciously ignoring, meddling with his state of mind.

*Ridiculous,* James scolded himself. *Don’t you know you’re safe here?*

He had the latch of the machine open and was working it almost mindlessly, now, hands moving on their own, trying to focus. As he began to troubleshoot top-to-bottom, he thanked his lucky stars that he was dealing with machinery belonging to his mom’s side of the family. God help him if he ever had to face the ire of the mechanized maze that was anything his paternal side owned.

Chimecho suddenly let out a thrilled cry and zoomed forward, eyes lit with purpose. It was circling around the machine, opposite direction to where James had been perched, working its tiny arms to gain some leeway on the intimidating, twisted box. James was snapped out of his concentration, diving after it.

“Chimecho,” James grabbed it, turning it around so that their eyes met. “Be careful! I know this contraption isn’t on, but you can never be too careful…”

“Chii~me!” it said, sounding upset.

“Please,” James told it, sensing its agitation. “I’m the one whose senses have been dulled to countless electric attacks, not you!”

Chimecho kept on making tiny, frustrated vocalizations, gesturing wildly, and James was torn across a line of wanting to calm it down and wanting to keep it safe. He swallowed, willing himself brave enough to protect the people he loved, even if it was just in the mundane day-to-day.

“I said no, Chimecho!” His voice was sharper than he would have liked it to be. “I appreciate the help, but it’s too dangerous for you!”

Chimecho’s expression morphed, from irritation to hurt back around to annoyance. With one fell swoop, it whipped its body back around to the part of the generator it was previously inspecting, whacking the protruding bit with the end of its tail. A small dust cloud whipped itself up, settling on the still air, and Chimecho floated quietly out of the room.

James took only a moment to register the pokémon as it exited before bringing his line of sight down on the silhouette of Chimecho’s tail against the machine’s fan. He brushed the rest of the dust off it effortlessly, heart sinking a little when he turned the generator back on and heard the telltale signs of it running fine as ever.
Feeling low, he rose to his feet and followed meekly behind his pokémon, sorries hanging on his tongue.

Jessie was transfixed on the starlit portrait hanging outside the massive windows as she worked. Her manicure was chipped and her fingers were waterlogged, but she couldn’t bring herself to be up to par with her usual level of annoyance. All factors were telling her that she should have been, but the anger she usually found so easy just wasn’t taking. More than anything, she wondered if the screaming inside her heart had just gotten so loud that it had turned to white noise for a while.

Somehow, though, she remained mostly serene, watching James out in the towering gardens having a heartfelt conversation with his pokémon. He was carrying himself with that typical remorseful hunch, and she so badly hoped he wasn’t wallowing in self-hatred again for the circumstances outside of his control.

She tuned back in and Meowth was humming again. He’d been going on and off for an hour, and Jessie had never seen him so eager to work. It was almost jarring, especially with the close proximity to a sinkful of water. She wondered, with a stifled laugh, if this was his own variation on a housecat.

Jessie passed another soapy plate to Wobbuffet, and he meticulously rinsed it off before passing it down the line to Meowth, perched atop his step stool. They’d made a pretty good dent in the post-dinner haul already, and with a quick glance at the clock, Jessie realized she hadn’t felt time passing around her at all.

James’ nanny shuffled into the kitchen, and Jessie seemed to be the only person who took note of it. Without making much noise, Nanny stood gazing out the wide window at her grandson, now far more relaxed and hugging his pokémon close as the two of them took in the breathtaking sight of the forest’s night sky.

Jessie broke from her work to go watch alongside her, and her team turned their heads one by one, watching but not moving themselves. The two women lingered there beside each other, eyes fixed on James and Chimecho. When Nanny spoke, her voice was soft, overstocked with affection’s pay.

“That boy sure is on my mind a lot,” she said, smiling despite the twinge of sadness to the words.

Jessie shifted a little, never good at these soul-bearing activities. She bit her cheek, trying to grasp at words.

“He…” the redhead began. “...seems to carry a lot within him.”

“Li’l James was always so bright and happy when he was visitin’ as a child,” Nanny responded. “Troubles me to think of what mighta happened between then and now.”

Jessie was quiet, listening to the sound of running water and the soft clinking of glass dinnerware hitting against itself. Outside, a gust of wind blew through the trees, and she watched James shiver a bit before Chimecho wrapped itself around his neck. He melted into the gesture, their heads touching. Jessie felt something inside her flutter nearly undetected, sending her words out before she had much time to consider them.

“We try our best,” she spat out, unsure exactly what the end to that sentence was and uninterested in elaborating. Her heart finished the thought a split second later— to keep him safe.

“Don’t have to tell me that, honeypie,” Nanny turned from James to look at Jessie. “Never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you.”
Jessie swallowed, ears burning a little at the comment, the corners of her mouth suddenly uncomfortable where they rested. The last time James’ family started talking like that, it was followed by ‘are you his fiancé?’ which was a question they got in all forms and all ways, but the ‘nah, I’d rather die than marry her!’ was a surprise she’d grown sick of dwelling on.

“He’s my best friend,” Jessie said, and it felt good to say it out loud and mean it about someone who’d been around and stayed around for so long. “He’s an incorrigible buffoon, but it’s hard to imagine my life without him.”

The old woman turned back out to look at her kin, closing her eyes fondly and exhaling a gentle breath. Feeling she’d said enough, Jessie returned back to her post, where her friends shot her quiet glances and continued their work.

“Y’all are sweet for offerin’ to wash up after dinner,” Nanny said as she turned to exit the room. “If you dears need anything, don’t hesitate to let me or Pop-Pop know.”

She shot a motherly smile at the group while they were turned, and Jessie felt a sudden flush creep across her cheeks. She excelled at many things, and as she sat there scrubbing at the dish harder than she probably should have, going down a list of those things was the only distraction she could afford.

Reacting to a mother’s affection without twisted insides was a bullet point she never ended up hitting.

There were prison bars on the mansion’s walls, suddenly, and James wondered why he’d never seen them there before. As soon as he blinked, they vanished, but the darkness of the fading day lingered in the room, cartoons quietly drolling on through the pristine pixels of the television.

“Honestly, James, dear,” said a voice from beside him. “Whatever is it you see in silly little shows like this?”

Her voice was teasing, but not cruel, edging on playful. His heart still lurched at the bubblegum pink drawl, as if the sugar dripping from it was sickening, constricting. She’d been nothing but smiles and chaste touches since he arrived, almost sheepish in her affection. He wondered how much of his memory had played tricks on him, spoiled brat that he was. Spoiled enough to contrive a whole tragic tale in his mind where he was not a villain, but a victim.

“They make me laugh,” he said, simply. She chuckled a bit.

“You’re such a babe at heart,” she told him, and something turned in the pit of his stomach when she leans her head on his shoulder and traces ghostly circles into his chest. “I’ve always loved that about you.”

He couldn’t stop himself, this time, filter lost somewhere in the incredulous yonder.

“What are you talking about?” The words tumbled from him, bolder than anything. “You constantly told me that I was a childish brat and that I needed to grow up. You repeated it like a mantra.”

Her sharp manicure stopped in its tracks, and in its stillness, calamitous fear roared in James’ heart. She was silent for only a moment before her voice pierced the air of the room again, soft and taken aback and confused.

“I think you’re confusin’ me with someone else, sugar,” she said, far too genuinely. “I don’t recall ever sayin’ something so heartless to my betrothed.”
There’d been this creeping feeling, ever since he’d run, that he really had made the whole story up. What kind of boy runs from luxury? Only one driven to his absolute limits, and was that him? What other memories had his brain forged to justify his cowardice, his abandonment? What other sick coping mechanisms was his heavy heart willing to conjure?

In reality, he was not a beaten waif, of course. James was a spoiled brat. Born into a rich bloodline, with a mother and a father who loved him and fed him and put a roof over his head, with a doting fiancé who so obviously thought the world of him. He had it made, what was he thinking? Running from home, living a lie, joining gangs and associating with fair weather friends who left him when he needed them most...

“You’re right, Jessebelle,” he said, voice a guilt-tinged whisper. “Must be my mind playing tricks on me.”

The bars flashed across the windows again, like quiet thunder.

Sensing the weight in his voice, she inched forward, hands hanging on him still, her lip gloss shining in the low light of the dimmed chandelier above. Precise, fluid, calculating.

“I forgive you,” she said, voice low and breathy, eyelashes against his cheeks.

When she kissed him, he was hit with a freight train. It was not romantic. It was not poetic. He did not love her. His insides tore themselves apart in agony, and he held his face to hers for only a moment before recoiling, hyperventilating and sick and soaked in cold sweat.

His breath caught. His head throbbed in agony. There was something—something desperately trying to be remembered. Grass stains on his knees... tears...? A foul smell, as if something had gone horribly wrong when a flower began to bloom, constricted lungs... and...

...her?

No. No, those were contrivances. They had to be. There was just no way that was his life—there was no way—he was a good person back then, just a child, and that kind of thing doesn’t happen to good people, and—

He opened his eyes.

Jessebelle’s face was no longer that of a timid, amorous meowth. She had evolved into a persian, with sharpened claws and dripping fangs and slitted eyes that narrowed with insatiable hunger.

“On one condition.”

She pinned his shoulders against the arm of the couch, her entire weight on top of him, ravenously crushing her lips against his again. James struggled, and yelped, and she only seemed to revel in his agony more as she took him in.

With a lucky break, he was able to knee her sharply in the stomach and pry himself away, gasping for air and wrought with tremors as he stumbled back against the wall. His eyes zeroed in on his attacker as she struggled to her feet, burning with the inability to cry as they watched her. James waited, body trembling, the wicked poison of her lip gloss stuck to his face. Waited for her to lunge forward and sink her teeth into him once more.

She moved her hand from the point of injury, slowly, to a sharp salute under her chin. With it poised
there, Jessebelle cackled euphorically and with reckless abandon.

Her laughter was cut off shortly, and she turned with her gaze burning into him, smile unfaltering.

“Oh, James,” she sickeningly crooned. “How many times must we go over this?”

Her stilettos echoing on the spotless white marble floors like a funeral dirge, her hands hovering inches away from the pocket where she keeps her only pokéball.

“You’re not lovin’ me proper…”

A grotesque, blindingly bright cyan filled the room as the ball was tossed reverently into the air. The pungent smell of decay that always followed—all-encompassing, suffocating, familiar.

“Let me show you the correct way.”

James shot up from his bed, drinking in the night air as if he hadn’t breathed in centuries. His mattress was soaked with sweat and tears and his blankets had long since made their way to the floor. Mechanically, shuddering with primal emotion, he frantically brought his gaze to take in the rest of his surroundings.

The sight of mansion walls made him sick to his stomach, and he involuntarily brought a hand to his face, tightly clamping it over his mouth, willing the nausea back.

Where am I? His mind raced. I don’t know where I am. I don’t know what year it is. Why am I in a place like this? I escaped, right? I escaped? I escaped, right?!

Powerful sobs wracked his heart, and he had to hold back from choking them out, stifling the noises into his open palm. He sat there as they took him, lost and scared and disoriented more than ever. From beside him, something stirred.

Chimecho tilted its head blearily, peering into James. It took a moment for the pokémon to register what was going on—it had been a long, long time, after all. Soon as its eyes focused and the scene came into view, however, Chimecho was easily content to reclaim its role. With a warm, sleepy smile, it floated closer to James and sounded Heal Bell.

James was not snapped, but gently pulled out of his terror trance. Choking in the stormy waters, it was the moment where he was overtaken and his vision began to fade before he drowned for good. Chimecho was the lifeboat captain who came just in time and wrested him out of the dark, heavy seas.

The pokémon quieted the move in a pleasant diminuendo, hoping that it hadn’t lost its luster as the years had passed. James seemed better, now—body relaxed, tears fading, trying to gather himself. Chimecho hovered towards its friend and wiped a stray tear off his face with its tail.

“I’m sorry,” James said, curiously.

“Chime chime?” The pokémon asked— what are you sorry for?

“I don’t know,” he whispered to the darkness, chuckling a little at the absurdity of it all. “...thank
you.”

In response to this, it nuzzled up against him, happy to have helped.

“Just like old times, I suppose.”

It was a tried and true routine, not anything strange at all—service pokémon were common, and James had always felt grateful and a little bit undeserving of the one he’d gotten for free. Sometimes, fate was kind, even to the wicked.

James took a deep breath and tried to register his surroundings without the clutches of post-trauma slapping ugly glasses over his eyes. He was in a mansion, but a far kinder one. It was an unfortunate coincidence, but only that. Moonlight shone through the colossal window to his right. Meowth was splayed out with his blankets kicked half-off, sound asleep. Jessie and Wobbuffet were equally knocked out, holding onto each other for dear life in an endearing little cuddle pile. The sight of his friends safe and beside him made any traces of fear he had flicker back out. This was not the home that shackled him. He breathed in deeply, holding the exhale. He was free.

When he drifted back in, Chimecho was stealing nervous glances at the door. He’d noticed its eyes darting a little moments before, but now it was starting to concern him. The pokémon’s stress seemed to be building, and James was picking up every trace of it.

Chimecho seemed to cast a lingering glance at its friend, looking him up and down once more, and James got the impression it was to make sure he was okay. Once it had confirmed that James would probably be alright on his own, the pokémon rushed out the bedroom doors.

James had to stop his voice from coming out high and noisy, his whisper already sounding like a siren in the darkness as he scrambled out of bed after Chimecho, lost and fearful.

“Chimecho!” He would have wailed if quiet weren’t of the essence. “What are you doing?! Where are you going?!”

It kept on, clearly intent on its mission, growing more and more frantic by the second. Chimecho turned back only briefly to offer nervous fragments of its name at James, its tail trailing behind it as it zoomed down the halls toward the enclosure like a zubat out of Hell.

Sure enough, it threw open the doors with a psychic attack, shouting into the darkness of the greenhouse with a voice not meant for intimidation. Its bell went from its normal comfort to an uproarious jangle, warning whatever dwelled within the dark of the trees that it was not messing around.

James followed, practically yanking the pokémon from the air when he caught up to it. It struggled away from him, gesturing wildly towards the lower level of the enclosure, still in hysterics.

His instinct was to try and calm it down as it had him, but in a curious glance over the ledge, it became clear to him what Chimecho was so fired up about.

Standing there like deerling in the headlights were a quartet of figures, their expressions twisted up in frustration, their eyes locked maliciously on James and Chimecho. Beside them, several large cages of writhing, crying pokémon. Across their chests, a familiar letter painted an ugly, bloody red.

“Shit,” one of them said, almost too plainly. “Jig is up.”

With that, Chimecho tore down to the lower level, and James dove after it, unthinking. He collided with the pokémon in midair, grasping it in his arms again, and it made a small noise at the impact. It
broke its focused rampage on the Rocket agents in front of them only for a moment to lower them both safely with its psychic powers.

“Chimechime chime!” Chimecho shouted towards them, adding as much of an edge to its soft-spoken voice as it was capable of. James had never heard it so unbelievably livid.

James stepped in front of Chimecho, making himself far bigger than he ever could have been, throwing out his hand to block off the pokémon’s path to danger. He wanted to angle something intimidating and clever in their direction—but it was like staring into a worn, framed photo. There wasn’t a single turn of phrase that would have changed his mind when he was standing on the other side, so what use was this song and dance? He swallowed hard.

*What would someone heroic and noble do?* His internal monologue raced, running through a list of the people who fit that description. *I suppose I’ll just have to pretend that’s me for tonight.*

“Unhand those pokémon, directionless miscreants,” he hardened his stance, ignoring how his voice shook as he forcefully injected utmost malice into it.

One of the Rockets actually cackled at the sight of James—an incredibly soft-looking man, standing there in his pajamas trying to seem far scarier than he was.

“And who the hell are you?” she said, after her laughter ended.

James sucked in a breath, balling his fists, raising his voice.

“I’m the person who’s going to ruin you lot in approximately ten seconds if you don’t get the hell out of my home!”

The Rocket standing front and center—presumably the leader—suddenly marveled a little bit as the clouds parted outside and the moonlight fully illuminated James’ form. When she spoke again, her voice took on an almost mystified tone.

“Hey, wait,” she said. “No way… I remember you...”

At the comment, he willed himself not to recoil. He’d done enough confronting the past tonight, this was supposed to be his safe space, this was supposed to be a place where those racing thoughts quieted themselves—

“Look at you,” she persisted, voice dripping with condescension. “Superstructure Sasaki, all softened...”

She stepped toward him, and her eyes shone ominously as the moon hit them.

“People used to respect you, you know.”

Chimecho defensively flew in front of James, thundering out more wrath-wrought ringings at the people threatening him. It mixed in with the anguished cries of the pokémon still caged adjacent to them, an unkind, unearthly cacophony of torment.

“Idiot,” the Rocket scoffed over the sound. “What a damned waste of talent. You should be standing alongside us, not opposed us.”

He pushed out from behind Chimecho. “The life I live now is far more comfortable to starving on the streets and waiting for the direct deposit that decided whether or not I would survive the next week!”
“And look at what that spoiled life has done to you!” She countered fiercely. “No marketable skills, no fully reached potential… if you were living for Giovanni, you’d be a better man!”

“Giovanni is rotting in a jail cell,” James said, voice dark. “And you lot should be, too.”

She gritted her teeth, expression tight, before lunging for a pokéball and tossing it into the tension of the air, reciting a creed she knew better than the breath in her lungs.

“Steal pokémon for profit!”

Her teammates, relatively quiet up until this point, joined her in verse as they all threw their own balls upwards, their partners shimmering to life.

“Exploit pokémon for profit!”

“All pokémon exist…”

“…for the glory of Team Rocket!”

Chimecho tried to float forward once more, and James cut it off and ran towards the light show, pure fight-or-flight overtaking him. He had his bare fists raised and was mid-lunge when his pokémon darted in front of him, headbutting him softly as it could and forcing him backwards, chiming frantically at him.

“You can’t!” James exclaimed, throwing an arm out. “I’ll take them myself!”

Chimecho shot another sharpened “chime chime!” at him and raced forward anyways, and he stuttered himself after to yank on its tail, digging his feet into the yielding soil below, trying to subdue the pokémon without pain. It hastened its chattering to a frustrated crescendo, turning back to him with an almost tortured expression on its face.

“Chime chimechime!” It argued.

“I know I don’t have any pokémon!” James said right back. “I don’t care! I’ll fight them with my own two hands if I have to! I’m not risking losing you again, Chimecho!”

Its expression softened from frustration to solemn understanding, then to something almost regretful. As it wriggled free and flew into the fray, the cry that James let out almost completely smothered the sound of his team busting into the enclosure. He couldn’t see them, but on the upper levels, the three of them were frozen in shock at the sight of the attackers below.

Chimecho charged toward their pokémon—a crobat, a grimer, a beedrill, and a nidorina—unflinching and ready. The outcomes quickly gripped at James heart—visions of it getting poisoned and going down and being indisposed again, because of him, because of his mistakes—

The pokémon took a direct hit from the nidorina in a moment of lowered guard and fell backwards, crying out. James shut his eyes tight, blinking away tears. All that tough talk for nothing, his courage had flared out and all that was left in its place was a horrible phantom of hopelessness.

There was a stillness in the air, suddenly, punctuated by a couple sharp noises from the attacking Rockets opposite of him. The noises of battle silenced themselves all at once, the whimpers of the caged pokémon the only sound left. James opened his eyes, slowly, to see both the rogues and their pokémon suspended in the night air, glowing with the same eerie azure that now lit up Chimecho.

With a shrill, powerful battle cry, Chimecho focused all of its psychic energy on them, raising them
higher, higher—before letting out one last windswept roar and firing them off. Up past the trees, shattering the glass, far, far into the night sky, where they drowned in starlight and disappeared from sight.

From the upper level, the rest of the team stared on, curiously drawn to the sight.

“Being on the other side of that…” Jessie muttered, incredulously.

“...feels good.”

“Wo~bbuffet…”

Like it were any other day—almost effortlessly, Chimecho floated over to the caged pokémon and pried the lock apart with another Psychic, setting free the creatures within and sounding its Heal Bell to calm their fearfu
“And look what happened! You barely exerted yourself at all and wound up too sick to do anything in a few months’ time! If I had been better, we would have never had to part like this!”

Chimecho let out a particularly strong utterance of its name, voice tearing through James, and Meowth persisted—

“‘Ya can’t protect me from living my life!’”

James stopped, heart sinking, a little taken aback by the phrasing Meowth had chosen, wondering how close to Chimecho’s intent it was. He spoke, and his voice was quiet, now, curious to quell his darkening cloud of anxiety.

“What…” he said. “What do you mean by that?”

Chimecho started chattering again, still fired up, waving its small arms, its tail moving in a distraught zigzag.

“‘T’ings are gonna happen ,’” Meowth continued. “‘I’m gonna get hurt sometimes! Dat’s how life is! Yer a smart human, ya gotta know dat dere’s no one in this woihld who’s talented enough to keep any ot’er poihsn safe from all da bad.’”

James gritted his teeth, turning away, tears staining the grass beneath his feet. “I still want to try ,” he choked out.

“‘You’re my best friend,’” Meowth said for it. “‘An’ I care about ya more’dn anyt’in’. But I don’t wanna be smot’ered like dis, day in and day out, you always tellin’ me where ta stand an’ what ta do an’ who ta be!”

The man’s heart sunk. Something uncomfortable rattled around inside him.

“‘I want ta feel pain an’ take risks because I know as long as I’m beside ya, t’ings are gonna be okay,’” he said. “I love ya. But ya need ta let me be free.’”

The word free lingered in the air, and James was no longer a man pushing thirty years. His hands were small, and shaking from within royal blue sleeves—perfectly tailored, not a stitch out of place. His face was soft with youth, despite the fearful darting of his eyes and clenched jaw and uneven breath as it passed through him. He raised his fork above his head to eat, and the woman beside him smacked it down hard.

The room was different now, with higher ceilings and crystal chandeliers, and his fingers trembled over monochrome keys. The tune that emanated was beautiful and fluid despite the tremors, an aged piece that carried sorrow within it. James closed his eyes for a moment, trying to steady his breath and ignore the eyes affixed firmly on him. In a moment of mindlessness, his hand veered off course, and the offkey note it produced was punctuated by a ruler coming down hard on his knuckles.

After the ballroom emptied, James slipped away to scour the surrounding gardens. Coming back empty-handed was rare, especially on a night like tonight when so many people had attended. Usually, there was just enough time to make a quick runaround before his parents came, yelling at him to get into the limousine and keep quiet. As he was trudging through the dark with squinted and focused eyes, he spotted it—that familiar shine as the moonlight hit its surface—and he pulled the object off the grass, tenderly wiping mud off it with his thumb.

His eyes widened as he saw the insignia emblazoned on it—who on earth was drinking something like that in a joint like this?! The feeling of joy that bubbled up within his heart as he held the priceless bottle cap in his hands almost washed away the residual anxiety from the ball itself.
his parents called for him, he brandished it as if it were a treasure rich enough to dethrone even them, hands flapping around like an excited seel, smile bright. His mother grabbed them firmly in a halt, words dripping with apathy as she told him to keep his arms down or she’d throw his scrapmetal away a fourth time.

The scene shifted, and it was dark once more, and James slipped away through the tunnels beneath his childhood home. A heavy bag tugged at his arm, and tears welled up in his eyes as he saw the leavings of bright orange fur that festooned it. He ran. He ran until he hit the surface, the night air and the starlight and the wind running through his hair. His tears kept flowing as the mansion disappeared behind him, and he smiled.

It was a cruel thing to tell anyone they would eventually wind up like their parents. Not only does the statement do terrible things to anyone who bears scars from their kin, but it simply isn’t a truth at its core. Standing there staring into the tearful eyes of his pokémon as it begged to breathe like any other creature in the universe, James never felt lower. Not when lying, not when cheating, not even when stealing others’ pokémon and throwing them in cramped cages, wicked laughter lining his throat. This was the deed he was most ashamed of—a creature in his care who he swore to protect, shouting words at him a mirror image of ones he said so many times to the people who abused him and whittled him to nothing.

James closed his eyes, unclenched his fists. He let out a shaky breath and relaxed, taking himself back to those stifling moments of youth, and to the words he would have wanted to hear, to the words that wouldn’t have put him on such an unkind path to ruin.

Courage, he decided then, wasn’t always charging into the fray with sword sharpened and ready. Sometimes, courage was being brave enough to break the cycle of war.

James slowly walked over to Chimecho, eyes softened, words sleeping. With a single hand, so as not to be more imposing, he reached out to gently caress its face. Tears threatened his voice as he spoke, and he quietly swallowed them.

“I’m sorry, Chimecho,” he said. “I should have asked how you felt before I decided you were never to make your own mistakes.”

Chimecho seemed taken aback by the sudden shift, leaning into his touch with a curious “chime?”

“You’ve grown so strong since we last met, haven’t you?” James smiled, almost sadly. “I’m so proud of how much you’ve accomplished in the time we’ve been apart.”

The pokémon’s eyes wavered a little, touched at the peace in his words and how genuine they seemed to be despite their contradiction.

“From now on, I’ll try and remember that,” James said. “That is, if you can forgive me for my selfishness.”

Chimecho only took a second before it headbutted his torso once more with tears in its eyes, moved and grateful. The quiet ringing that accompanied its happy cries rhythmically assuaged any tension that lingered in the room. From outside, the sun was slowly rising.

Meowth and Wobbuffet were on the sidelines of the scene with tears in their eyes, a tried and true routine. Jessie was more confused at the sudden change in mood than anything, oddly drawn in by the serenity in James’ words and the way he seemed to relax so quickly. There was something happening beneath those calm waters, and she found herself oddly compelled to dive in.
She was yanked out of her quiet contemplation by the sound of frantic footsteps on the upper level as Nanny and Pop-Pop practically tumbled in, anxiously inquiring—

“What’s all the commotion?! ”

The scene must have been to die for. James and Chimecho in tears and hugging. Trees uprooted and a shattered hole in the ceiling. All of them standing there in their pajamas, looking a little lost. At the realization that James was in no condition to be expository in any manner, Meowth nearly leapt forward, his tears dissolving and his fanged smile jovial as could be.

“Oh, just a little late night gat’erin’ between pals!”

Their worry morphed to confusion as they looked to each other, then to the group below.

“It’s a long story,” Jessie yawned. “And I’d like to get back to my beauty sleep. Can’t we take a raincheck on this one?”

Meowth elbowed her leg, his grin mechanically painted on. She groaned, but her annoyance fizzled out when she caught a wave of James’ muted panic behind her.

“I mean, um…!” She heightened her tone. “Right, right, nothing to worry about here! We’ll clean this mess right up!”

She didn’t know how they were even going to begin to tackle a task like that, but they’d definitely made do before. The minimal explanation seemed to be enough for the old couple, who shot each other a knowing look and shook their heads in quiet acceptance. It was easy to see why James got along with them so well—they seemed to have a knack for taking the strange in stride.

“We’ll leave you folk to it, then,” Nanny offered, and they all breathed a sigh of relief as the two of them cheerfully waved and trudged back off to bed.

“Those two are really somet’in’, Jimmy,” Meowth said.

“Aren’t they?” He smiled warmly. “Come on, then. We have a tarp to hoist and a tip to call in.”

“Wobbuffet!”

Chimecho flew off towards a nearby door to gather supplies, happily chiming. James watched it as it went, eyes bright.

It was closer to sunset than sunrise, now, and James’ heart ached as he packed his bags. There was never an easy way to leave the towering respite from the world, even if he knew he had to. With the airport cleared and the journey set to continue, he knew he had to make the right choice. That’s what this entire journey had been about. Shutting his suitcase, he swallowed his pain.

“Y’know, Jimmy…” Meowth suddenly said, sensing his mood. “It’s pretty incredible dat you’ve been able to reunite wit’ so many of yer pals.”

“You think?” James said, heart lifted. As one dark energy began to disappear from the room, he swore he felt another flare up from somewhere else. He shook it. From one side of him, Wobbuffet shifted anxiously.

“Yeah,” his friend affirmed. “Ya gots a real good heart.”

James slung another bag over his arm, smiling.
Against the chilled air, he broke the hug with his grandparents, and Nanny pressed a minimized pokéball into his hands, the lines on her face softened in a warm expression. He swallowed as he pawed the ball, turning it over in his hands, nervous and scared and unsure.

“It’s time,” she told him, hoping to transfer her confidence to him. “Both of you have been waitin’ for this moment for far too long.”

Chimecho floated towards him, eyes burning with purpose. James’ heart shot words upon words to his throat—‘but’s and ‘what if’s and ‘i’m not’s—and he turned them into silence as he exhaled and sent them off on the wind. He met his pokémon’s gaze.

“You’ll be leaving a very comfortable life, here,” James told Chimecho. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

No matter what Chimecho said, James knew what he wanted—for it to stay safe and by his side all at once. There was no point in betting on something unrealistic, so the decision remained up to Chimecho.

It nodded, without a moment’s hesitation, expression still determined. Unlike anything James had ever seen within its eyes before, dedicated and ready and unafraid.

*If even a timid creature like Chimecho can know strength, James thought, so too can I.*

“Chiiime,” it softened before it whispered to him, and just in case he didn’t catch the sentiment, Meowth began to speak.

“Chimecho says…” he told James. “‘All I want is ta ring in every new day beside yous.’”

James stepped forward, almost tripping into the embrace, holding Chimecho close. Not out of dutiful protection, not out of fear that if he let go the pokémon would disappear—James held Chimecho out of gratitude, out of unending joy.

“Thank you, Chimecho,” he murmured. “From now on, we’ll always be together.”

Time passed far too quickly as they said their goodbyes, the lot of them all bowing and thanking the generous old couple for their time. The conversation lulled, no one wanting to walk away from it. Pop-Pop opened his mouth, then, to say something unexpected, curious.

“You know Li’l James, it’s funny you came to us when you did,” he mentioned. “Your Growlie was here on vacation not too long ago.”

Something in James shuddered, a little—a sick kind of convulsion that left him feeling colder. There were still so many he had to save. Some, more difficult than others.

“Was it happy, Pop-Pop?” James asked, voice wavering.

“Lively as ever,” he smiled. “Slept in your childhood bed the whole night, like always.”

James closed his eyes, and a single tear escaped him. He hadn’t even noticed it brewing. Despite it, he smiled. Sad as it was to say, he was happy his pokémon was alive and well.

“Thank you for telling me,” he said, and with that, they took their leave.

As he walked away, further and further from the mansion, James found himself unable to stop crying. What had started as simple ripples on the ocean were now nearing tidal waves, crashing
along the shores. He didn’t want to leave the only blood he’d ever felt serene around. His heart ached for a kinder life.

Chimecho sounded its Heal Bell, and James sucked in a shaky breath, the tremors in it slowly petering out as the noise took effect on him. James’ team watched as he blinked himself back, staring out at the ocean next to Saffron. Beyond it, Fuschia and Cinnabar and another towering mansion, where a loyal pokémon sat inside its doghouse, waiting for its master to return.

“Some day,” James said, hoping that if he forced the conviction to his voice, he would grow to believe it.

His team didn’t know with precision what it was he was torn up over—there were a lot of options to assume—but Kanto had a way of bringing up old demons, and they could easily see that James still had more to face. Jessie nodded, stepping forward, placing a hand on her partner’s shoulder.

Meowth and Wobbuffet followed suit, each standing with an equally comforting palm on James’ legs. Chimecho curled its tail around his neck, softly.

“But for now,” Meowth finished his thought. “Hoenn alone.”

They all nodded, their connection unbreakable, as they turned their backs to Kanto with one last quiet promise—

_We’ll be back for you._

Miles away, a lone growlithe howled to the faded stars.

**Chapter End Notes**

Hoenn? PSYCHE!

So hey. That job I got decided they love me. I’ve been working 36 hours a week. Two days off per week.

That's why this took a MONTH. That, and it ended up LONG. Almost 16k. Ven and I really wanted to work on this mini-arc with James and Chimecho, but we didn't want to introduce another conflict to the long-term story as a whole beyond the ones we have planned. So we had to make it happen in one heavy mammoth of a chapter.

We finally got a new cast member! I'm so excited to finally start growing this main cast. There's even more coming in the following chapters, so prepare yourselves!!

I hope it's okay that this was technically a Kanto chapter. Battle Frontier has never felt like Kanto to me, to be honest, even though I logically know it is. Yes, this means Hoenn technically only gets two chapters, I hope that's okay... despite what it might seem like, Hoenn is actually my favourite region.

We have WAY too many Kanto chapters planned, and one of them is kinda similar in theme to this one, so I just feel it fits better at this point in the story. Hope we aren’t disappointing anyone with that move.
I don't know if chapters are gonna always take this long--if they do, I'm sorry for making you all wait! I think this one turned out really nice, though, so maybe pacing myself like this is helping the quality of my writing.

Thanks again for everything, you guys! I'm sorry I've been lazy at replying to reviews lately! I've just been beat. I'll try and be better going forward.

As always, I will do my best!
Chapter Notes

Hey all! We ended up doing a lot with this chapter, and I think it's kind of a mess! It's got... A LOT of flashbacks in it, because I feel like there isn't much I can do as a writer to put weight to the circumstances in the present. IT'S ALSO ALMOST 20K, FUCKING WHOOPS? Hope that's okay.

If you notice some discrepancies surrounding pokemon dialogue, it's intentional and I'll talk about it in my closing notes! Not here though, because spoilers. Also those below if you know your episodes well enough or looked at the character roster.

Per request, the episode alluded to in this chapter is:

-AG006 (A Poached Ego)

If you've seen it before, you should be good. If not, maybe give it a rewatch!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The blue of the sky had been gradually fading as the herd made their way north, and Arbok broke its slither to periscope higher. Narrowing its eyes, it let the open air hit its tongue, taking in the scent of the tropics around them. It’d attributed the darkening skies to the bits of ash that floated along the breeze the farther they’d gotten, but it quickly realized that was only half of it.

“Rain,” it hissed to the halted herd behind it, and the ekans and koffing all muttered amongst themselves. In their hushed concerns, both Arbok and Weezing scanned the area for shelter.

Were this Kanto, things would have been a lot easier. For pokémon, they could easily boast that they were far more traveled than a lot of the others they knew. These lands, however, were new and unfamiliar, and they had no set path for this migration. More than anything, they found themselves just trudging on until they found somewhere comfortable and far, far away.

“Let’s keep moving,” Weezing said to Arbok, loud enough so that the others could hear it. If the rain was going to menace them, it would just be one more thing they would have to endure. Annoying, yes—but they had their lives and their freedom. Better free and soaking than dry behind bars.

As if looking out for them, the path they followed produced a cave at the base of a towering peak. The herd collectively sighed in relief, all of them darting toward it as fast as their lack of legs could. The koffing lagged behind only a little before the skies cracked open and unleashed a tropical downpour.

The cave was somehow much bigger than they’d envisioned, with a stone finish that seemed more golden than slate. Inside it, the walls glittered like starlight, and the area stayed bright despite no sun reaching it. There was water somewhere deeper, a sound more like a crashing waterfall than a quiet stream. It mixed with the rain, sinking into their forms, and the soreness of their muscles finally hit.

Arbok and Weezing took another look around the curious little home. There didn’t seem to be anyone too territorial at the mouth of the cave—a couple zubat hanging in the distance, a strange
orange pokémon ducking into the shadows, out of sight. If they stayed toward the entrance and didn’t make too much noise, it was unlikely that anyone would take issue with their being there. Arbok slithered to the corner and coiled itself, resting its eyes. The others followed.

Weezing deflated itself enough to descend beside its longtime friend, the purple of their bodies melting into a noxious gradient. Fluidly, as if it were a dance practiced a thousand times over, Arbok unfurled itself to pull the pokémon into an embrace, tight enough for comfort and loose enough to breathe. They leaned into each other, trying to focus their hearts on the feeling of being together despite everything. Trying to steer themselves away from the racing thoughts that hadn’t left them since everything changed.

The knot of ekans and bubble of koffing were quick to follow, huddling against the pair more out of need for contact than warmth. There was a chance they weren’t going to be able to forage for food tonight, but that was okay. While the herd were all individual pokémon with different thoughts and feelings and motives, there was a collective respect and feeling of undying gratitude and loyalty toward the two pokémon who had given up everything to lead them to safety.

They’d never faltered, despite everything. Fearful nights, blistering winds, heavy rains—Arbok and Weezing kept onward. Even when it seemed they should have quit, they didn’t. And for what? What was the point of this?

One ekans in particular, naive and what the others would describe as “lacking in manners” had finally gotten to a point where he’d found these questions maddening. As he opened his eyes and snaked across the tangle of poison pokémon, Arbok stirred at the sounds and took him in—gangly (even for an ekans) and bright-eyed, features soft with something untapped. Obviously young. The most distinct thing about him was the oddness of his pattern—where most ekans had a bright yellow stripe across their neck to match the gold of their rattle, he had nothing. His body was the same solid shade of purple all across, and his eyes were a shining red.

He slithered closer to his evolutionary counterpart, tilting his head curiously as he neared. The rest of the herd watched him, wondering what the strange pokémon was up to now, more than a few of them a little nervous. His voice was a little too loud when he spoke.

“Hey, big sib!” He hissed curiously, and more than one ekans in the knot dragged their tail across their face, humiliated.

“What?” Arbok replied, mirroring him with surprisingly equal interest, unperturbed by the strange manner of address.

“How come?” he said, not elaborating much.

“How come?”


Arbok looked to Weezing, a little unsure of how to answer. Neither of them wanted to leave. It was just what they had to do. The pokémon found itself lost deep in thought, picking words from its limited vocabulary carefully.

“Sometimes…” it began. “When you travel with Master… you learn thing you can’t learn alone.”

“That just more strange!” Ekans responded. “Why leave that?”

Arbok willed itself to sound wise, to impart its feelings onto the child.
“Masters were hurt on the inside,” it said, voice shaking a little. “Other humans unkind to Masters. Even people that Masters thought friends. Masters did many bad thing because hearts hurt so much.”

“Yeah!” Ekans agreed. “Don’t trust humans. Humans put me and all my friends in cage. Even humans not trust other humans!”

It was Weezing’s turn to pipe up a little, the quieter of the pair hoping its words would mix nicely with Arbok’s.

“Sometime, though,” it said. “Masters would do something they didn’t want to. Always hurt other pokémon. Always wanted to be selfish. But sometimes they didn’t.”

“So?” the kid said. “What that have to do with anything? What you learn from human like that?”

“Still good in Master,” Arbok said, simply. “Even when she do bad thing. Even when she want to take, sometime, she give.”

“Wanted to stay with Master,” Weezing added. “But Master taught me that sometime, not about what you want. Sometime, you have to be kind.”

“Don’t understand,” Ekans pouted a little. “They good humans, or bad humans?”

Arbok shook its head. “Not that easy. That what you learn when you get Master.”

“Pokémon always good,” Weezing said. “Humans good and bad and everything in-between. Hard for humans to just be one.”

This wisdom seemed to enchant the ekans, and he ached to know what it was the pokémon meant. The question took a beat to come to him, and when he finally spoke, his voice seemed softer.

“Were they good masters?”

Arbok and Weezing shared a look, their eyes sparkling with something bittersweet. In unison, they answered.

“Yes.”

Ekans peered into them, unblinking. The herds around them shuffled in the quiet of the cave. The sound of water persisted.

“Even bad human,” Weezing started.

“...can be good master,” Arbok finished.

The little ekans was unsure of so many of the sentiments they were sharing. He supposed they were right—a pokémon who had a master learned things that a pokémon who didn’t never could. Humans were scary, but why else would so many pokémon spend their entire lives hoping for one to stroll by and befriend them?

Even if he hadn’t believed a lick of it, the love and clarity in their voices would have convinced him in a heartbeat. Some kind of adoring aroma wafted off the word ‘Master’ whenever the pair said it, and it was warming unlike anything he’d known.

“We take care of you,” Arbok said, willing its words to sound like her’s, a flash of crimson hair and blazing blue eyes kindly inching it forward. “Because it what Masters would want. Still loyal to
"Master, even though we far apart. Love Master always."

"Masters always with us," Weezing corrected. "Only far in sense."

The rain began to peter out, outside. Ekans began to crane their necks, koffing rose up off the floor, eager to see its end. The trio continued to converse.

"What that mean?" The mono-coloured ekans asked, confused.

Arbok and Weezing looked out to the sun as it broke through the clouds, a literal light at the end of the tunnel. Neither of them felt the tears on their face as they continued to impart their feelings.

"We are who we are..."

"...because of Masters."

Their eyes smiled despite the mournful droplets framing them. Ekans watched as their bodies slowly became enveloped in the blinding light as it hit the puddles outside, and the herd advanced.

He tried not to fall behind as they all moved onward.

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"We’re not flying over it, Meowth, that idea is absolutely ludicrous!"

"Come on, da’ t’ings dormant! It’d save us some time! We’d be able ta hit da hotsprings and live like kings!"

Jessie crossed her arms, unmoving. James, Chimecho, and Wobbuffet elected to zone out in a corner while the pair argued again.

"All that volcanic ash can’t be good for one’s beauty," she said, not convinced. "And James is allergic to like, everything, he’ll whine and pass out."

"I feel like you only remember that about me when you need to win an argument," James said, suddenly present.

She ignored him. "Are you going to do that to our dearest friend, Meowth? Are you going to put him through that?"

"Yer killin me wit’ dis, Jess," Meowth rolled his eyes. "An’ Jimmy’s hardier dan ya give ‘im credit for!"

"Thank you," James added, heading back to his corner.

"We are not flying over the volcano," Jessie said, remaining firm. "It’s hot enough in Hoenn, and I don’t need embers singing my beautiful face, and—"

Jessie suddenly stopped herself, something catching in her peripheral vision. Her team reacted accordingly, all of them following her line of sight to the forests below.

Hoenn was a region they were grateful to finally grace. Jessie had quite a bit of sentiment toward it already, memories of a particularly kind and supportive foster home flashing in her head. Face pressed up against the glass at Mauville’s Game Corner, shaking hands pulling the cord on the hybrid busses from there to Verdanturf. Coming home to caretakers who were patient with her, watching the Coordinators in Lilycove perform with stars in her eyes. Beyond that, it was where she herself started contests, and she couldn’t help but feel elated to be back. Her mood, as usual, had a
tendency to bleed into her teammates, argument notwithstanding.

They were just south of Fallarbor, now, making their way across the region in a bit of an unorthodox zigzag. There were trees upon trees framing the mountains, and Jessie was the one who loudly announced that they’d be hitting Rustboro next. She’d claimed that perhaps the son of the president would be there at Devon’s HQ, and perhaps they’d run into each other and bump hands reaching for the same pastry at the cafeteria, and perhaps he and his buckets of cash would fall madly in love with her and marry her on the spot. Perhaps.

Meowth, on the other hand, was set on taking the detour to Lavaridge for some relaxation, apathetic to her delusions of meet cute.

Wherever the debate was headed, it was lost to the wind, now, as they all peered over the edge of the basket, trying to make sense of what they saw below.

There was a near endless sea of green, but somewhere beyond it, a clearing amongst the trees. A massive, lush field untouched by the shade of the towering pines, almost intimidating in its extent. Were it empty, the loneliness of it would have been eerie. It was not empty.

The clearing was absolutely decorated with purple, like scattered pixels on a greenscreen. The dots of bright colour moved around below, indistinguishable but still with a liveliness seeming to radiate off of them and upwards. Chimecho seemed mystified, but there was something present in the others’ eyes that it couldn’t entirely detect.

Goosebumps upturned on their skin as they continued to stare transfixed at the breathing scene underfoot—both enraptured and terrified at what the moving colours meant. There was… no feasible way, right? There couldn’t be.

The former Rockets shared a stricken look amongst each other, emotions a tangled web of conflict. A hope hung over them that was undeniable, uplifting, euphoric—and an ugly thought that came with it that said there was no chance life was this fair. Without words, they shared this understanding. And yet…

One last look between them. They nodded to each other.

James steadied his shaking hands as he worked the descent, electing to land the balloon a little ways away, where there was enough of a part in the treetops to managed it safely. They had to know. If it turned out the mass of purple was not what they suspected, the worst that could happen was debilitatingly dashed hopes. If they merely ignored it, they would regret it for the rest of their lives. Even if it wasn’t… that, it was a large group of probably pokémon that showed the telltale marks of being dangerously venomous. Jessie spoke, her voice quieter than normal, far less optimistic than her usual self.

“Get in front, James,” she said.


“What was all that about being hardy? Well, you’re practically immune to poison at this point,” she noted. “If the situation turns hostile and one of us has to take a stinger to the face, I’d say you’re the best candidate.”

“You are standing,” he said, incredulous. “Next to a wobbuffet.”

“That is my darling you are talking about!” Jessie dove to hug her pokémon, nuzzling his face while
he looked generally apathetic. “I can’t put him in that kind of danger!”

James went to call her out on the dangers of babying her precious blue psychic friend, and Chimecho shot him an amused look that begged him to try it. He sighed as he moved himself forward, compliant, and his pokémon hurried to his side. It had been a long time, but hopefully his developed vitality against toxins would hold up if things went bad.

They hadn’t landed far from the clearing, but the minutes passed agonizingly slow as they made their way down the path. The silence of the forest was equally maddening—with an eerie serenity and little room for the usual pleasantries of pokémon amongst the trees. James could practically feel the anxiety radiating off his team in waves, and he thanked his lucky stars that for once he wasn’t the only one with sweating palms and airless lungs.

Jessie balled her fists. James took a deep inhale. The trees became fewer, and the clearing came into sight. Hearts tight, eyes burning, muscles ragged, they mechanically carried themselves forward, out of the dark shade and into the sunlight.

The gathering was even more bustling up close, and the group found themselves awestricken at the sight of it. Ekans and arbok and koffing and weezing as far as the eye could see, sharing meals and sparring with each other and excitedly emerging in and out of a collection of bases and dens. Chatter amongst the pokémon as they made idle conversation. It was a beautiful sight to take in—they were certain that to see this many pokémon in one place was a natural rarity, and the sight of it filled their hearts with curious wonder.

The joyous scene quickly faded, however, as the pokémon began to notice one by one that there were others in their territory. The ekans and arbok rose their heads ominously, the koffing and weezing floated higher and inflated themselves in defense. Their talk turned to murmuring, and their murmurs to silence. Meowth caught their shining eyes—hurt once, but never again.

Before much time could pass at all, the clearing was pulled into a petrifying hush. Not a single creature made a sound. One arbok ducked into a den. James shut his eyes, feeling sick to his stomach, anticipating the onslaught. Chimecho floated a little ways ahead of him, readying its type advantage.

The opposite groups stood there at a stalemate for what felt like forever. An arbok’s hiss rang out from far into the hive, and with a few reluctant looks toward each other, the pokémon in the clearing began to shuffle apart.

It was a sight unparalleled, impossible to put words to—the lot of them moving so in sync and all at once. A ravenous crowd working as one living, breathing entity. They spread, creating a fine part cleanly down the middle, forming a break akin to an aisle of a chapel that Jessie and James were certain they’d never walk the halls of again. On every side of the former Rockets was an assortment of arbok and weezing. At the end of it was Arbok and Weezing.

The pokémon remained there, frozen to the spot, expressions pulled apart in shaken astonishment. Their former trainers mirrored them entirely, their hearts still connected despite everything.

The sunlight seemed to cast the opened path aglow, the only sound the whistling wind and Chimecho’s bell up against it. The patrons of the clearing with their eyes warmly locked on the humans, like they’d been waiting forever for them to arrive. As if moving through a nigh impenetrable forcefield, James slowly, shakily let himself be carried down the aisle. From beside him, Jessie did not hesitate, and bolted to its end.

She ran. She ran faster than she knew she was capable of. She ran until her feet felt as though they
weren’t even touching the ground. Until she was practically flying. Arbok was far less quick, body halted in shock, moving by inch. Jessie blinked her tears out and they dissipated against the wild winds around her, sparkling like diamonds in the sun. She leapt off the forest floor as she neared the end and dove into Arbok’s embrace.

It let out a startled ‘char!’ as the two of them made contact, the breath in its lungs being knocked somewhere else. They collapsed in a pile on the forest floor, Jessie’s shaking fingertips gripping worn scales, Arbok’s tail coiling itself around her body and squeezing with little care for her comfort. No pain it caused her was feasible to her mind in that moment. She felt nothing but untarnished rapture, and she wailed.

It was a sound not a soul in the universe had been privy to before, alien in a way that was uncannily breathtaking. Her team had never heard her cry so unprotected, nor had her pokémon, nor had her mother. No one but Jessie herself. She buried her face in Arbok’s hood, stifling sobs into it, her whole body wrought with tremors. After a minute, she quieted herself, shakily bringing her palms to cup the pokémon’s face, caressing it as if she’d suddenly been struck with the realization that maybe this was some beautiful dream. Arbok moved in closer, flicking her tears away with its tongue, and she collapsed onto it all over again, resuming her unrestrained bawling.

James was midway down the parted path, his legs halfway to buckling, Chimecho floating curiously beside him. It was the third reunion he’d been given in a fairly short time, but what made this one different was just how intangible it had always been in his mind. In his happy fantasies, he had pictured himself reuniting with people like Chimecho and Cacturne. Never Weezing. Getting the hope in his head was dangerous, a daydream that never could have been, and yet…

His pokémon was floating with equal disbelief, equal hesitation, both of them so unsure and so hung up on the blessing they were living through in that moment. While Jessie had torn a clear trail to her partner, waves of relief practically flying off of her, James could only shamble forward. When he was close enough, he ran a trembling hand against the thick, rough, rubbery texture of Weezing’s larger head, moving his gaze from one pair of eyes to the other, all of them lost in tears.

James fell to his knees, losing himself. His pokémon floated to him, bumping itself against his torso, and he held it close. His throat burned with his head angled toward its spewing craters, but he found himself comfortable with the sensation despite it. James would take a thousand needles in his skin, a thousand fangs buried in his hair, a thousand drops of venom in his blood if it meant he could feel this happy forever.

The four of them sunk there on the dampened grass, their pant legs stained with what would soon become an important memory never to fade. As the last pair made contact, something incredible happened—the pokémon all around began to cheer.

It was deafening, beautiful, harmonious and discordant all at once. Hundreds upon hundreds of exuberant cries, blanketing the team and keeping them safe and warm. The hostility they had felt only moments before vanished and a deep sense of belonging had taken its place.

Meowth brought himself to James’ side, silent sobs taking him, and placed a paw delicately on his friend’s heaving shoulder. As he did, Chimecho hovered closer and wrapped its tail around James’ other arm. From beside them, Wobbuffet stumbled over to Jessie, crying a fraction as loudly as she had been. As he neared her, he tripped and fell onto her and Arbok’s cuddle pile, and the snake shot a few affectionate tongue flicks his way, happy to see him again.

The toxic crowds continued to sing victory around them, rattles and hisses like steady percussion, plumes of gas toward the sky like fireworks. In the center of the clearing, the former Rockets and their pokémon all drew in close to each other, tears unending, hearts lifted above all else.
Jessie turned to her side, arms cradling her torso in an undignified position, trying to quiet her racing thoughts. The shoddiness of the bedding wasn’t helping her mood, and try as she might, comfort just wasn’t going to find it’s way to her. She shut her eyes and heaved a sigh, wondering why she was so bummed to begin with. It was the same as every other year. No reason this one should be any different.

The door to her dorm opened without a knock, and she stayed where she was, too deep in her own brood to really pay much mind to anything. Few things could get her so down that her usual optimism was untappable and this just happened to be one of them. At her silence, the other occupant spoke.

“Gonna be hard to blow out all those candles with your face down in the dumps like that, hun.”

Jessie lazily dragged her gaze to Cassidy, standing at the side of their bunk with a small, wrapped box in her hand. When she caught the blonde’s smile, her heart fluttered in a way that offset all the darkness pooling around it, blanketing its wicked tentacles in light. Feeling immediately less alone, Jessie was able to bring herself to a sit.

“Please tell me you actually brought cake,” she said, voice low.

“‘Fraid not, love,” Cassidy responded. “You know I don’t make enough green for the illegal sugar market the Grunts are running in the tunnels.”

“Is…” Jessie said, curiously. “...are the tunnels real?”

“They’re about as real as the swimming pool on the roof,” her girlfriend laughed. “So, not at all. But god, could you imagine?”

Jessie found herself laughing along, catching herself in surprise when she realized just how quickly the woman had turned her mood around. It was a talent, really—one few people she’d ever met had come equipped with. She let herself keep the smile on. It felt a lot nicer on her than the permeating scowl she’d been wearing since midnight.

“So hey,” Cassidy said when they’d stopped giggling. “I got you something.”

Jessie peered into her, not comprehending. “Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’” The blonde cocked an eyebrow. “It’s your birthday, Jess.”

“Eh... yes...”

“You’re supposed to be spoiled silly on your birthday,” she told her. “I mean, like I said, I don’t make nearly enough green to accomplish that in this trash heap, but...”

Jessie found herself stumbling through the exchange, lost and a little flustered. She’d never been invited to birthdays. She’d never really celebrated one herself. She’d just known it was another year closer to her beauty fading and her appeal being lost, one year farther from ever being able to be someone’s wife. There was a fuzzy memory in the back of her mind of a woman with loving, slate-grey eyes singing to her, and she shook it away soon as it hit.

“Anyways, here,” Cassidy said, shoving the messily wrapped box in Jessie’s arms. “Happy birthday, hun.”

Jessie felt her face go red, only darkening when her fingertips brushed against her girlfriend’s to
take it. She was… unsure how to react at being given something for free. What was the catch? What
did she have to sacrifice for this? Her eyes burned, and she swallowed hard. It was only in moments
like this where it hit her that maybe her childhood wasn’t as glamorous as she’d so badly wanted to
believe.

The redhead peeled the colourful paper off the box, trying to ignore the way her hands hesitated a
little at the folds. It was small, only a little bit bigger than her fist, and when she opened it, it was
clear why—inside, covered in careful padding, was a plain red pokéball, unexpanded. Jessie pulled
it out and set the empty container on her nightstand, staring curiously into the ball. She pressed the
button, feeling it growing in her hand.

“I found it out on a mission the other day,” Cassidy crossed her arms, grinning. “Go on.”

A flickering anxiety rested in Jessie’s lungs, and she hesitantly nodded. She’d… never had a
pokémon before. Not one that belonged to her, certainly not one she’d been allowed to keep.
Pokémon were a constant in most anyone’s life, but to be able to hold on in her hands? She almost
didn’t want to throw the ball. She wanted to memorize the feel of it as it rested there, scared that if
she let go, it would vanish.

Nevertheless, she brought it to a gentle toss, sheepish in her movements. When the pokémon inside
sparkled to life, she felt as though she would collapse from pure, unbridled joy.

“Ekanssss!” It cried, in a hiss that sounded more like a squeak than anything. It was obviously
young, only a good three feet or so, and its tiny eyes shone with youth. Jessie’s own filled with tears
as she saw it, and she dropped to her knees to meet its gaze. It was the most adorable thing she had
ever seen in her life, and it was hers.

“Cassidy!” Jessie cried ecstatically, pointing at the ekans, unable to articulate herself.

“That’s me,” Cassidy said, an accomplished grin on her face.

“It’s so cute!”

“Then you’re a perfect pair,” she said, and Jessie’s heart fluttered. “It reminded me of you.”

“I can’t believe you remembered!” Jessie beamed.

“Pff, what, your birthday?” She said. “Of course I did, I wasn’t raised in a barn.”

“No, you…” Jessie wiped at her eyes. “You remembered that I love ekans.”

“Oh!” Cassidy said. “Ha, that? It was a cute story, babe. Hard to forget something like that.”

Jessie smiled up at her, lip quivering affectionately, overcome with emotion. She brought her line of
sight back to Ekans, cautiously reaching out a hand, testing the waters.

“Ekans, is this okay?” She said, and Cassidy’s heart couldn’t handle the care in her voice. What on
earth was Jessie doing in an organization that specialized in capturing and exploiting these
creatures for cash? Here she was, looking more like a mother to one than anything.

Ekans tilted its head a little, but its expression didn’t seem to carry hostility. Tenderly, Jessie brought
her open palm to the side of its face, stroking it with as much endearment as she could muster. The
pokémon leaned into the touch, shutting its eyes at the feeling of safety, hissing its name amorously.

Jessie had to stop herself from letting out an undignified squeak. This was a dream come true. This
was the best birthday she’d ever had, and it was barely noon. She picked the pokémon up off the rough carpeting, and it seemed to lose its form in her arms, melting itself in an affectionate drape across them. Lovingly, it slithered up one and hung itself across her shoulders. This time, she couldn’t help herself—she let the silent tears fall.

“Thank you so much, Cassidy!” She cried, smiling despite her sobs. She turned to Ekans. “You’re so cute, Ekans! From now on we’ll always be together!”

It rattled its tail a little, and whether it understood her meaning or not, there was a clear message that it was happy to be a part of her life. The sound of it washed over her—beautiful, bittersweet nostalgia.

There was a part of Cassidy that almost resented the attention that Jessie spent the next few weeks giving to her pokémon rather than her love-starved girlfriend. There was a much louder part of her pushing forward a ridiculous notion that if everyone in Team Rocket were a little more like Jessie, her day-to-day would be far more pleasant.

The blonde smiled at the sight of Jessie planting quick, loving kisses onto soft scales. She realized, in that moment, that this might have been the first time Jessie ever leapt into the arms of a friend without the notion that they would someday abandon her.

Incredible girl, Cassidy pondered. If no one had ever hurt you, you would be unstoppable.

A contradictory aroma of silence and bustle hung around the clearing all at once. The tangle of pokémon muttered to themselves as they carried out their nights as normal, but neither the former Rockets nor their old friends had it in them to speak a word.

The fire was crackling, a solitary sound of universal calm, and the lot of them watched its gentle embers rise up and melt with the orange of the fading sun. Arbok was in the middle of Wobbuffet and Jessie, both of them leaning on it, eyes looking forward in an almost dazed manner. James and Chimecho were equally propped up against Weezing, James almost equally lost within himself. There was so much to say. There was nothing to say.

“I’ll be honest with you, Arbok,” Jessie began, and its name on her tongue almost made her tears come back. “I didn’t plan on this, and my natural finesse for articulation seems to have failed me in its wake.”

“Charbo,” it said, in a voice that indicated a clear mirror in emotion.

James seemed to come out of his trance a little. “It’s been so long… how do we even ask what your lives have been like? How do we even tell you what ours have been like?”

“I can summarize,” Meowth said, voice sweet with snark. “We was bad, den we was good, we never gots dat pikachu, I had da brilliant idea ta fly over dat dere volcano, and now we’s here like not’in ever changed.”

Arbok and Weezing shared a look, eyes smiling a little, thoughts mingling—same old Meowth.

“Wait a second,” Jessie interjected. “This only happened because I wisely decided not to fly over the volcano!”

“Pff, n’you t’ink we wouldn’ta ended up here anyways?” Meowth shot back. “If not’in else, dis journey shoulda taught you dat fate is real and loves contrivance like a cat loves coins!”
“Yes, that’s absolutely the one thing we should have pulled from this,” James said dryly. “None of that drivel about being a better person and atoning for your mistakes, heavens no. Just that life reads like an episodic drama novel sometimes.”

From within the small gathering, Arbok and Weezing shared one more knowing look, before dissolving entirely into laughter. The sound, when it hit their former trainers’ ears, was nigh indescribable, like instant morphine.

“And just what are you giggling at?” James grinned, shoving Weezing playfully. The pokémon pushed back with equal jest, both it and Arbok speaking surprisingly fluidly in their combination.

Sorry, it’s just… James registered from one side.

...you haven’t changed much, Jessie from the other.

Their pokémon seemed to have only grown closer over the years, their minds in a synchronicity that had only been a seed even deep into their journey. Now it was a towering sunflower, bright and wonderful and nurtured, and along their sense of pride was a deep longing to have been there to watch it happen.

We should have been there, Jessie found herself thinking, a bit solemnly. The more she re-memorized the feeling of her palms across Arbok’s skin, the more angry she felt at the idea that she’d ever been forced to forget.

“We’s always gonna be da same brand of lovely and charming we always was,” Meowth boasted.

“But, hopefully,” James added. “Some of the less pleasant aspects of our whole routine have changed.”

“Weez?” His pokémon asked, confused at the meaning.

“Headquarters is kaput, you see,” James answered it. “Team Rocket as we know it is gone.”

The pair of poison types took a moment to register the comment, a grave statement said so casually and with such little care. Their expressions twisted slightly, and Arbok turned, a little insecure about what it was feeling and hoping that Weezing would mirror it.

Team Rocket was an awful, demented group of cruel and relentless humans who used pokémon for their personal gain and were no better than the hunter who had driven the colony into these mountain-hugged forests. Rare exceptions existed, but for the most part, Team Rocket was a stain on the world, and its downfall was welcomed and celebrated by human and pokémon alike.

On the other hand… there were memories at headquarters. Sentiments the pokémon couldn’t ignore. A young girl’s hands incredulously fiddling with an ekans’ shed skin, a timid boy pretending to be tougher than he is as he clutches his koffing like his only lifeline. These memories would be worth forsaking if it meant that building would burn and never rise up once more. But when you spend a good chunk of your life missing someone dearly, your memories alongside them are often all you have.

Meowth seemed to sense the tension in their hearts, his selective empathy growing more precise in its radar, and he rose to his feet to reassure them before they could say a word.

“It makes sense dat ya would feel weird about it,” he told them both. “Ya got special memories wit’ Team Rocket, dontcha?”
“Ya ain’t alone dere,” he said, closing his eyes and placing a balled paw on his chest. “I’ll nevah forget how my legs was shakin’ when I went in ta meet da boss for da foihst time. Or how much my empty stomach hoiht when we was all alone trainin’ out in da wilderness. Or how happy I was when Jessie ‘n’ James shared deys’ food wit’ me. It’s hard rememberin’ all dat and realizing dat if ya went back to where it all happened, t’ings would nevah be da same, huh?”

There was a tenderness in his voice that Jessie and James were almost amazed by, not having heard him speak so openly and softly in a long time. It was always such a strange and charming sight—Meowth’s sharp voice doing what it could to quiet itself and transform into something nurturing and kind.

“But ya still got dose memories,” he said, opening his eyes with a soft smile. “Dey ain’t goin’ anywhere. And ya always have chances to make new ones too. Ones dat are much better dan ever before.”

The pair were genuinely comforted by this, and it wasn’t until then that everything had really, truly hit them. This was real. They were sitting here alongside their friends who had changed them irreparably, their friends who had sacrificed everything for them, their friends who had shaped their concept of humanity more than anything or anyone they’d ever known. Their friends—the ones who they had accepted they would never see again, long, long ago.

Arbok pulled itself back into a smile, blinking away happy tears and prodding at Meowth with its tail. Weezing let out an affectionate puff of smoke at the scene. The cat felt pride swell his heart, and he tried to ride the high of it. It was so much nicer than the devious flower that bloomed when he was revelling in evil deeds—how did he become addicted to that instead?

“Something tells me you’ve already made some fond memories here,” Jessie smiled, giving her pokémon a soft stroke on its hood. “We’ve given you the basics of where we’re at, now it’s your turn, mister!”

Arbok had a look on its face that said clear as day—I do not know where I’d start, and Weezing seemed equally lost at the question. There was no way to quietly summarize perilous migrations and the the passing of generations and the breath of new life. Instead, the pair rose up off the forest floor, electing to hopefully show them, instead.

The rest of the group seemed to catch their drift, curiously getting on their feet. Following behind, the former Rockets realized then that they really hadn’t had the opportunity to take in the colony before—a cloud of nervousness hanging over them, obscuring their view. Now, though, even in the fading light of the sun, it was much more visible, and all the more beautiful. The rest of the pokémon were settling down, herding their young into the dens that lined the grassy floor, pushing foraged berries into a larger niche. To see so many pokémon living naturally and in such a structure was something few humans ever caught a glimpse of in passing, let alone up close. Getting to exist within one felt unreal, and that was putting it lightly.

As Arbok and Weezing lead them, chattering proudly and introducing the areas—this is the nursery, this is where we eat, this is where we spar—the group couldn’t help but take note of how the other pokémon living there seemed to humble themselves in their presence. Not in fear, like the quiver that caught in the herd’s eyes when they’d stumbled upon the clearing. Far more like respect, like love.

Something conflicted settled in the pit of Jessie’s stomach, and she desperately tried to blink it away.

They were at the back of the clearing, now, where a massive tree towered like a sentinel, hanging itself over the end of the field. Its base was hollowed out, absolutely colossal in its surface area, big
enough to fit all of the former Rockets and their pokémon. The lot of them stood there marveling at its size, and Arbok and Weezing excitedly grinned as they beckoned their friends inside—and here’s where we stay.

Within, the sunkissed orange of the sky filtered in weakly through holes in the trunk, illuminating the single nest that lay at the back of the den. Strangely enough, there was another arbok resting there, coiled around something unseen. It raised itself off of pine needles and yielding soil at the sound of footsteps, hissing something quietly to the others.

Their conversation seemed casual, though Jessie and James could only really make out what their own pokémon were saying. There was a softness to the poison types’ voices that was strangely alien, something their humans had never remembered hearing before. Meowth’s eyes widened a little as the trio spoke, but clearly wasn’t intending on exposing why just yet.

The mystery arbok brought its loose coil to an even looser periscope, and that’s when the former Rockets saw it—the pokémon’s hood was completely bare. Where most arbok brandished a powerful, menacing pattern to ward off predators, this one had nothing but the shimmering purple of its scales. The sight of it filled the visitors with a deep sense of discomfort, in a way that was hard to put words to. The initial reaction was that it was… wrong, but the feelings that came after were far more empathetic. Jessie and James’ minds both darted to similar places—were the others nice to it? How has it survived this long? Has it lived a comfortable life, is it okay?

Meowth swallowed something heavy. An arbok without a pattern shouldn’t exist. Neither should a meowth on two legs. Yet fate had not only brought them both into existence, but allowed them to find each other. He didn’t know this stranger, but he already felt ready to lay down his life for it, some beautiful devotion to the outcasted and mutant.

The lot of them were so distracted by the pokémon that they didn’t even notice what it had been protecting like a precious treasure—in the nest, where it was previously resting, shone a deep indigo pokémon egg, a lively green flourishing at its crown. Immediately upon the blank arbok slithering out of the spot to make room, Arbok and Weezing brought themselves to the egg’s side, tenderly bumping it to make sure it was in good shape. The care in their gestures was not unheard of, but rarely seen, and their former trainers felt their faces go red as the sight slowly rendered in their vision.

There is no way, the both of them thought, casting frantic looks at each other, then to their pokémon, then to the egg, then back to each other, thoughts and words both sputtering around their head as they tried to make sense of the picture.

“You didn’t—you both—?!”

“That’s not— i-is that—?!”

Oh god, Jessie’s mind raced, bugs wriggling under her skin. Oh god, no, if I have to hear that thing about pokémon mimicking the personalities of their trainers from Meowth one more time I’m going to be sick, oh god—

Arbok and Weezing broke the embrace with the egg, quickly snapping their eyes open. Oh, whoops. They had forgotten that humans were insistent on applying romance to everything, for some reason. They broke apart, mirroring their former trainers with equal grasp on their articulation.

“Ch—char—!!”

“W~eez!!”
From beside the commotion, Meowth sighed into the void, secondhand embarrassment pushing his tolerance far off into the same metaphorical abyss. He waited for the context to slowly come to him, flicking his ear a little as he tried to zero in over the panicked shouts layered on top of each other.

“Everybody calm down,” he just short of yelled, silencing the chaos. When everyone had quieted and it looked as though Jessie was about to go off on him for ordering her around, he spoke.

“Foihst of all,” Meowth started. “Last I checked, dese two can’t be poppin’ eggs out. Biologically speakin’.”

The two pokémon blushed even deeper, turning away from each other with wide eyes.

“Second off,” he followed. “Dey don’t even know what’s inside dis egg, am I gettin’ dat right?”

With the question, he turned to the pair, inquiring. They both nodded a little timidly, explaining their circumstances. Their voices were soft, quiet, so Meowth continued to translate, just in case the message was lost somewhere or inaudible.

“Apparently some of da ot’er pokémon found dis egg out in da surroundin’ forests one day while dey was scoutin’ for food,” he elaborated. “Dey looked around an’ couldn’t find its family anywhere, so dey brought it back here to try and take care of it demselves.”

Arbok and Weezing nodded again, speaking a little louder this time.

“Charbok…” it hissed, a little downtrodden.

“Weez~ing,” the other punctuated.

“We’re trying to give it a comfortable life, Arbok had said, and its companion finished— but we don’t know what kind of pokémon it is, and we’re not exactly suited to egg-warming…

Meowth caught Jessie and James’ expressions softening in worry, and figured he didn’t need to carry on. They definitely got the jist. Stepping forward, James took a knee, placing a comforting hand on his friend.

“I’m sure this little tyke will turn out just fine,” he smiled. “Hoenn’s got the perfect climate for an egg, you know. I imagine the only thing that would need extra warmth is a fire type.”

His pokémon seemed comforted by the words, but the obvious question lingered— but what if it is a fire type? This is their habitat, after all. James continued to stroke it affectionately, keeping his tone confident.

“It could be. But even in this climate, the Hoenn region isn’t exactly known for its lush abundance of fire types,” James chuckled. “Quite the contrary, in fact.”

Both Arbok and Weezing seemed a touch more soothed at the information. They’d nearly forgotten over the years how comforting it could be to have a human perspective where they themselves lacked one. Pokémon were so often creatures of emotion and instinct, to have a steady balance of logic was something they hadn’t realized they were missing.

“So ya raisin’ dis kiddo as yer own, huh?” Meowth crossed his arms, nodding proudly. “Look at yous two. I can’t believe how responsible ya’ve gotten!”

“Oh my god,” Jessie said, voice rough from lack of use. “I’m a grandma.”
She fell to her knees, emotionally overcome, and Arbok rushed to her side, desperate to offer its comfort. It spoke gentle reassurances at her, that she was still so young and that her beauty hadn’t faded for an instant, whatever it could given what it remembered about her throughout their years together. She laughed, and put an arm around it.

“Oh, Arbok, it’s fine,” Jessie said. “I’m just so delighted for you both.”

“Chaabok?” it inquired, voice small.

“You’ve made yourselves a home…” she told it. “Look at how the others treat you. You’re revered as their leaders. You’ve even have a family here… you’ve come so far.”

The pokémon dropped its gaze to the floor, happy with the praise but feeling… conflicted. It moved in closer to Jessie, bumping its head against her. When it spoke, there was something sorrowful hanging on the syllables of its name.

*We had a home and a family before, too.*

Jessie’s heart lurched, and she cradled the snake’s face in her arms, swallowing quiet tears. These worries were so unnecessary, these anxieties so unkind. Nothing had to be different. Not unless she made it that way.

Still, something uneasy rested there, even with her pokémon in her hands and flicking quiet kisses up against her chin. She could tell that James felt it too, both of them gazing past their pokémon, towards the egg, towards their stability here, towards a steady life they were never given when they were wandering the forests, starving and beaten down.

Jessie shut her eyes and begged. To who, she couldn’t say.

*Please,* her aching heart whispered. *I want to be happy, too.*

James shuffled awkwardly into his uniform, trying and failing to maneuver his sleeves properly into the thin pleather of his gloves. All things considered, he was fond of the way it hung at his waist, but the white of it seemed better in theory than in practice—they were going to be spending more than a few nights in the wilderness, right? Did a light colour really lend itself to camping? And what about stealth? Sure, it looked nicer, more streamlined, but was it practical? He was starting to regret the drunken decision he’d made alongside his companions, full of sake and singing to the stars about white uniforms for a bright, glistening tomorrow.

*We just had to be unique,* he scolded himself. There were a million reasons this decision could quickly become tedious, and he was wonderful at coming up with even more of them, each one more irrational than the last.

The door to his dorm opened, without a knock, and he didn’t have to look to know it was Jessie. She was the only one around who seemed to miss the memo that even criminals should have some manners here and there.

He’d finally managed to work around his finicky clothes by the time she addressed him, and he turned to see her looking slightly off. Jessie and him were… well, he didn’t know what they were, really. They’d been friends for several long years, then she’d gotten upset with him and left, then some incredible twist of fate had lead them back into each other’s arms after years apart. They’d spent the following weeks tense and putting on incredible facades to convince the other they were better off than they were, and then one night Jessie broke and shoved him into a closet with her hands in his hair and her lips hard on his. The embrace had lasted for a solid few minutes before the
two of them dissolved into wheezy laughter in the darkness, whispering softly at the absurdity—

“Probably not,” Jessie had said, her grin obscured in inky black.

“Definitely not,” James agreed, and they shuffled out of it one by one, praying no one saw.

The exchange was something he probably couldn’t easily explain to other people, but somehow both he and Jessie were on the same wavelength when it happened. Both of them were a twisted mess of conflicted emotions, both of them needed to know what they felt for one another. The kiss itself was heavy, and emotionally charged, but more than anything it was relief. They were two people who had spent years desperately missing each other, agonizing over what to say. They had elected, after much deliberation, to not say anything and instead use their bodies.

Effectively, her pulling him beneath those warm waters was not only a sentiment of “I missed you, and any gesture less than this can’t possibly convey it,” but a mute button on all the tension between them, the shaky touches and held gazes and fluttering hearts. The uncertainty of if this was love or two people who were grateful to know each other once again. The only kisses James had ever experienced in his life were ones where his wrists were held against expensive marble or numb and decorated in spores. To be so close with someone he’d always been so fond of made him understand why people sung so much praise of that kind of intimacy.

Since then, they’d been far more comfortable around each other. Changing in the same room, doing their make-up together, talking openly, practically same as they were before everything had fallen apart. A fear still lingered in James’ heart, though, and he knew that Jessie could feel it, too—his words caught in his throat every time he tried to define them aloud. Despite everything, he felt that he wasn’t worthy of calling her his friend.

Jessie was standing against the door, which she’d tapped shut with her heel. Her hands were behind her back and her expression was unsure, stiff, completely unlike her as of late. James was almost immediately struck with the wicked thought that he had done or said something wrong in the last few days that had turned them back to strangers. Silence was maddening against his anxious heart, and he cleared his throat a little, words falling out of him.

“Your uniform turned out far nicer than mine,” he said, sounding way more nonchalant than he felt. “No complaining about being too cold, though.”

“Please,” Jessie rolled her eyes. “Have you ever known me to complain?”

He opened his mouth, a prepared list ready, and she spoke before he could. “Don’t answer that.”

James complied, grinning, happy to see her loosen up a bit. There was still a rigidness to her shoulders, but he had to start reminding himself that she would go at her own pace. No need to rush just because he was a nervous wreck—compromises were important.

“Hey,” she said then, looking elsewhere. “Merry Christmas.”

She tossed a pokéball in his direction, and he quickly stuttered his shaky hands forward to catch it, the object slipping and bouncing from hand to hand as if it were a hot coal. He marveled at the ball when he finally got a grip on it, unsure exactly of what was happening.

“Um,” he choked out, and Jessie nervously tried to explain herself, voice sharp and flustered.

“We’re agents now!” She said, volume a bit too high. “You need a pokémon. And I figure I owe you something, after…”
Her words caught. She didn’t know how to do this. She’d never had to before, never met someone who deserved it. Guilt was so foreign to Jessie, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d loved anyone worthy of making her feel it.

“...after I left you all alone when we were kids.”

James’ eyes immediately filled with tears, and he desperately tried to redirect them somewhere else. He could feel Jessie’s emotions radiating off of her, loud and clear—she did not want to talk. She did not want to dwell. She wanted to say sorry without words, for her sentiment to be understood, and for them to never speak of it again. She had humbled herself to an apology, and James immediately felt poised before a violent goddess who had chosen to show him mercy. A giant electing not to crush an ant beneath it. He was wrought with gratitude, but simultaneously felt as though he wasn’t deserving of seeing her so vulnerable like this. He blinked his tears away.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” he said, diverting in an attempt to make her feel less exposed. “I forgot it was December.”

“Ugh, right?” She said, a flash of deep appreciation in her smile. “Would it kill the higher-ups to put up a tree or something? Add some white stripes to all the ‘R’s on the walls? Where’s the festivities?”

“I thought you hated Christmas,” James noted.

“I do,” his partner responded. “But I hate drab routine with little diversity even more. At least that ugly red and green ensemble offers a change of pace.”

“Fair enough,” he said.

“You’re absolutely killing me,” Jessie told him. “There is a pokémon inside that ball and they’ve been waiting very patiently to meet you. More importantly, I have been waiting very patiently!”

James snapped himself back to the sphere in his gloved hands. “Oh, right!”

He gave the ball a casual toss, options swimming in his head as he watched the lights swirl on the walls. He’d no idea what kind of pokémon Jessie would gift him... it wasn’t something he had ever discussed with her, his favourites and whatnot. There was a deep, chilling fear settling in the pit of his stomach, suddenly—he prayed she hadn’t picked a grass type. As of late, he’d started breaking into cold sweats around them, his legs twisting up and his breath refusing to leave his lungs properly.

Willing himself not to shut his eyes in fear at the thought, James stayed brave. The pokémon materialized in a gorgeous flash, letting out enthusiastic plumes of gas, an ecstatic grin permanently affixed to its face as it cheered its name.

James’ eyes filled to the brim with stars. Poison types, it seemed, were still on the table despite everything. He tore forward, grabbing the pokémon out of the air and hugging it close to his face. Koffing accepted the embrace, just as excited to be close to him.

“Oh, Jessie!” He practically wept. “I love it! You’re so good to me!”

“Ugh, shut up,” she said, blushing. “I didn’t know what kind of pokémon you liked, so I hope it’s alright.”

“My dad would hate that I have this,” James grinned, trying to assuage her worries. “I absolutely love it. It’s perfect, Jess.”
Pride flared within Jessie, and she crossed her arms, satisfied. She noticed James was sitting there, baby-talking the pokémon as he rubbed their cheeks together, sniffling desperately with streaming eyes.

"Are you allergic to that thing?" Jessie raised an eyebrow.

"Absolutely!" He boasted, not a trace of regret in his itching voice.

Looking at James there, a contradictory gradient of misery and adoration, Jessie couldn’t help but half-smile into her sigh. He was some kind of beautiful mess.

All things considered, they were perfect for each other.

Mid-way through cooking dinner on the group’s second day in the clearing, James had offhandedly thrown out a comment that had reminded Weezing of something clearly of the utmost importance. The pokémon had started frantically and excitedly beckoning James to follow alongside it, and thus he was dragged away from the hearth and far back into the dens. Jessie shot him a look as he left her side, her eyes burning a clear sigil—so help me god, if you leave me alone to cook one more time, James...

Weezing was leading him back towards the tree, where the strange arbok was still dutifully looking after the egg, not paying them much mind. James’ former pokémon was almost embarrassed, prattling on about I can’t believe I forgot this and I waited YEARS to show you that, frantic speech made almost comical by the slow manner in which it so often spoke. James couldn’t help but chuckle a little as he followed it past the nest—to say it was endearing was putting it lightly.

It had taken him to the very back of the den, where a single, large stone rested. Weezing kept its gaze affixed on it, eyes shimmering almost proudly.

“What’s this?” James asked, curious.

“Wee~zing!” the pokémon boasted—my most precious treasure!

It was about to drop lower to the floor to nudge it, but James inquisitively reached out his arm, turning to his friend to ask, without words, if the action was okay. Weezing nodded both its heads at once, elated to see his interest in the matter. With a shove, James moved the rock aside, and his face lit up at what he saw inside.

“You…” he started to say, but his words turned to tears somewhere along the way. There was a shallow hole beneath the stone, filled to the brim with sparkling bottle caps in a variety of colours. James extended his arm again to run a trembling hand across them, relishing in the sound of metal brushing against metal. A sound that had always soothed him when the excess energy itched up through his shoulders and rested at his fingertips, his brimming heart demanding release.

He’d learned early on he couldn’t move his hands about too much or he’d be struck. But this. He always had this.

His heart swelled as he took in the sight. Now, someone else was able to have it, too.

"How did you..." James started to say, then paused to rephrase. "This is quite the collection, old friend! How on earth did you amass riches like this all the way out here?"

Weezing made itself a little larger, eyes shut in confident satisfaction as it exclaimed its name. James grinned as the words registered, feeling more like a proud parent than he ever had in his life.
Would pick them up here and there when I'd wander into the city, the pokemon told him. Told the others to keep an eye out when they could, too.

"Fancy that," the man grabbed one he didn't recognize, meticulously analyzing its insignia. "You never seemed to have this much of an interest back when we traveled together!"

"Weez," it said, almost timidly, and James lost his focus on the metal in his hands.

Yeah, it had told him. But after we left, it was the closest thing I had to you.

Weezing was not one for such blunt statements. It was quiet, stoic, and tended to bottle up its feelings to a fault. The pokémon's emotions came on suddenly, usually all at once and as a result of it growing tired of keeping them all inside. It was never the most articulate thing, either—it still wasn't. There was a wiseness to its voice now, however, that James found himself grateful for—he meditated on the idea that it had learned to rely on others and open up over the years, let the thought keep him warm.

Without saying anything, he softly dropped the few bottle caps he'd been fiddling with back into the parting of soil. He allowed himself to be taken again by the soft clinking of it, washing over him like a sunbeam. Securing the stone back over the treasure trove, James shifted forward, wrapping his arms softly around Weezing, face pressed against it.

"I'm sorry I was gone for so long," he whispered, and the pokémon felt its heart splintering apart at the way his breathing came out stuttered, the way his shoulders shook.

"Weezing," it uttered into his torso, and James only cried harder, with more feeling as the meaning hit him.

Don't apologize for being a hero.

"Oh, Weezing..." James pulled apart from it, wiping his tears with his sleeve. "I'm no hero. I'm a wicked man who never grew out his silly childhood habit of playing pretend."

The pokémon stayed quiet for a moment, words swirling around inside of it, the subtleties of its expressions a black curtain over what it was feeling. After a beat, it persisted, words slow like dripping tar.

"Weez-ing, weez," it told him.

The people you save don't stop being safe just because you bought your cape at the dollar store.

James swallowed more tears. He was so sick of still seeing the universe in black and white when he knew better. So sick of thinking there were only bad people and good people with no in between. Day and night lasted longest, that was true, but they were not all there was to time’s slow crawl. Why could James love the sunset in its state of temporary transition, but not extend the same care to himself?

He ran his hand across Weezing's head, tracing his palms across protrusions and craters, the feeling of its familiarity suddenly hitting him. It was one of those moments where, despite having been living a strange reality for weeks, months, even years, you feel as though you've only just woken up. As if circumstances hadn't been apparent to the mind until right then and there.

His pokémon eased into his touch, feeling it had done something good for him, finally. It had no qualms about acknowledging that James had done terrible things. It had no qualms about the good things he had done, either.
"Thank you, Weezing," James told it, smiling through the red around his eyes. "I think that might be exactly what I needed to hear."

Jessie was exhausted.

She hadn't slept properly in a week, racing thoughts loudly pounding around her brain, amplifying everything. The ache in her heart, the bugs chirping in the thicket, the sound of her partner Pokémon's absolutely incessant snoring. Beyond that, she'd been emotionally exhausted, constantly feeling like a volcano on the verge of eruption. The bubbling magma refused to quiet itself, dragging her farther down than she had been in a long while. Her eyes ached and burned as she'd cooked, betraying her.

The woman's natural vitality was wearing thin as of late, and that only caused her further stress and perpetuated the cycle. She was getting older. Jessie was long past the point of denying it to herself in the hopes that maybe, maybe it would go away. Here she was, feeling lightheaded after a mere week of no sleep, breath in her lungs lacking simply because she'd been on her feet cooking. It was annoying. A few years ago, she could have run a marathon without a single hour of rest under her belt.

Jessie closed her eyes as she allowed herself to fall back on the grass, the feeling of even a moment's repose a peace unlike any other. The quieting bustle of the colony was not grating, somehow—it almost lulled her straight to sleep. She felt safe, here. Complete.

Strange, Jessie pondered, thoughts blurring in and out of half-sleep. Didn't realize I was missing anything.

She was pulled out of the impending sopor by the cool feeling of scales as they brushed against her forehead. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, and she registered the scene of Arbok standing over her, the end of its tail pressed like a whisper against her skin.

"Can I help you?" She laughed, a bit incredulously. Arbok's expression remained concerned, the scales around its eyes dented in worry.

"Chaaah," it muttered softly, and Jessie immediately sat up, brushing it off.

"I'm fine," she said, succinctly. "Don't worry yourself."

"Charbok," Arbok said, more firmly this time.

"You're cold-blooded!" Jessie half-said, half-shouted, flustered and pink-cheeked. "Everything is running a temperature to you!"

The snake sighed, bringing its gaze to Wobbuffet, who had been silently lurking behind Jessie for the duration of the conversation. The blue Pokémon crossed his arms, somehow communicating a clear vibe through squinted eyes—no winning this one.

"Charbo..." it said under its breath, and when Wobbuffet responded with his own name, Jessie nearly jumped, not having realized he was behind her.

"Are you two gossipping about me while I'm sitting right here?!" She said, unbelieving. "The nerve. The only sick I am is heartsick that my two darling sweetie-pies would betray me like this!"
Arbok rolled its eyes, saying nothing and electing to instead slither closer and cozy up to her. Wobbuffet followed suit. With them on either side of her, she felt what worries she had left dissolve, dandelion seeds against the spring winds. Her exhausted state only intensified at the contact, but not with the sore burn she was so used to. More pleasant, more comfy—asleep in a field of flowers, submerged in a warm bath.

"Chaa~charbok?"

"Wobbuffet!"

Jessie sighed. The energy to argue might have been in supply if it was anyone else. Instead, it was her pokemon.

Take care of yourself, okay?

You have to!

She held them closer. It was going to take a lot of practice to get the hang of not working herself to the bone, running on fumes just to prove to the universe that she could.

If it helped her friends worry less, though, it was more than worth it.

It had admittedly been a while since James had been in this position. There was a time when he was stronger, senses dulled to the pungent stink of rotting garbage, body unyielding and without recoil as he pilfered through sacks of trash. He’d grown spoiled since Team Rocket—never having to find his meals alongside the rattata as they rooted through the bins. Now, everything was different.

It’d only been a few months since they’d met the Twerp, but already, his presence had uprooted everything that they were as people, everything that they were as noble thieves. With their focus on his pikachu, they hadn’t brought in much of anything deserving of a paycheck from the boss, and as of late they’d been stealing more meals and degrading themselves even further to sleep without hunger pangs at night.

This kind of life wasn’t exactly new to James—there was a time when he revelled in it, in some sick sense. It was hard not to find comfort in the cold metal of a park bench when you associated high thread-count sheets with the feeling of shaking hands and stifled breaths. He longed for the mindset again, wondering how on earth he’d eased into it with such aplomb in his youth. Right now, all he really wanted was a warm meal.

James shifted his weight, and a loose bag in the dumpster came undone, its sloshing contents no doubt sullying his uniform and causing him one more chore that he was far too run-down to accomplish. He was really regretting the white uniforms. He was really regretting the sake.

Koffing was floating cheerfully around him, its face pulled into the ecstatic grin it wore better than anything. Every few minutes it would sing its name, letting off a few plumes of gas, shifting into a leisurely twirl. Despite everything, James couldn’t help but chuckle at its enthusiasm as it fed off the repulsive stench coming off the trash heap. Even if it was just what the pokémon was biologically designed to do, the man admired its optimism in dire circumstance.

“I wish I could be more like you, Koffing,” James let out a sigh, more affectionate than sad. “You never stop smiling.”

“Koffing!” it cheered, and James almost doubled over laughing—I was born with my face like this!
“Fair enough,” he said.

James’ foot tapped against glass as he moved over slightly, and he curiously bended over to dig the offending object out of the masses of waste. Brow knitted in concentration, he tried not to become lost in the thought of what had become of his life, how far they’d fallen from grace. Those thoughts weren’t productive right now. After a beat, he was able to grab a hold of it, relishing in the telltale shape of the item as he dug it out of the garbage.

He wasted no time in marveling at the bottle, a full set still in tact, and he turned to his pokémon excitedly, words tumbling out of him without much filter.

“Who does this?!” James had to keep his hands steady, his instinct to move them wildly in joy stifled by his fear that he’d lose his grip. “Who puts the bottle cap BACK on their drink afterwards? Who has that kind of time, that kind of right mind?!”

“Koffing?” his pokémon inquired, unsure of if the emotion James was experiencing was one understandable to any living creature on the planet or if the man had transcended the spectrum entirely.

“It’s got to be a sign, Koffing!” James’ eyes sparkled, knowingly. “I was placed in this very trash receptacle for the sole purpose of finding this bottle cap. Look at the way it shines even in the cloudy moonlight! What are the odds?!?”

“Koff~ing,” it responded, which mostly conveyed the message I’m happy that you’re happy, but I have no idea what you’re trying to say.

“Even waist-deep in deep waste, there is treasure to be found,” he closed his eyes, serene. “Even in the most dire of circumstances, there is a silver lining. It’s romantic, don’t you think?”

“Koffing!” the pokémon said, puffing out blackness in agreement.

“It won’t always be like this, you know?” James said, surprised at how confident he was in the statement. “One day you and I will be kings again.”

“Koffing~koff,” his pokémon stated, a little teasingly.

“Alright, yes, I realize hanging around a dumpster is probably already the definition of living like a king to you,” he chuckled. “In any case, it’s all the more bearable with you by my side.”

Koffing floated to its trainer, pressing itself adoringly against him. With one arm around it, James held the bottle cap he’d salvaged up to the sky, the treasure hanging there as if it were one with the stars as they faded in and out from behind the overcast. He knew this would not be the last time he was in this position, but there was something uncannily optimistic in him that insisted he’d be okay in the end.

“As long as we stick together, things won’t ever be as bad as they could,” he said. “Don’t you agree... partner?”

“Koff~ing,” the pokémon whispered, eyes angled up at the blurring skies, and James knew in that moment that there was nothing to fear.

Jessie practically fell back into camp, her civvies a mess and her hair in desperate need of serious
grooming. Exhausted, but with all the feeling spite’s power could give her, she tossed a bag or two of passable food next to the tree James and Meowth were dozing on, her eyes clouded over with irritation.

Meowth stretched as he stirred, fangs bared in a yawn. “Welcome back.”

“Don’t say a word to me,” Jessie shot back, worn too thin to bother being nice.

“Yikes, awright,” Meowth said, not heeding her advice. “What’s got you?”

“I’m sick and tired of digging through the trash for my meals, you flea-infested ignoramus!”

James flinched a little at her tone, reflexes out of his control. She noticed this, and smothered her fire a little.

“Sorry,” she spat. “You don’t have fleas.”

“‘N’ why does yous get da right to complain?!” Meowth prickled, not assuaged by her apology.

“Ya never let anyone else go when we offer! If ya hate it so much, stop takin’ on da workload by yaself!”

“I have my reasons for what I do and they’re none of your business!”

“Whatevah,” Meowth muttered, dropping back to a sit against the tree. “I t’ink ya just want a free pass to get all dat excess anger out.”

Jessie seethed, predicting her teammate’s remarks but still shaking with rage as they hit her. She wanted to dive forward and brawl the furball, emotions overflowing and near unbearable. She fought the impulse with all she had, instead, voice coming out low and dark and almost chilling, crescendoing into a shout.

“Yes, you’re right,” Jessie said. “I’m just an absolutely unrepentant wretch of a person with no human compassion, and when we got to the Hoenn region all those years ago I decided ‘oh, you know what? I’m going to take whatever opportunity I can to make my friend’s lives harder so that I can gain a few precious moments of release!’”

With that, she trudged off to her own corner, trying to ignore the strange urge to cry as her back turned to her friends.

Even when I try to be kind, Jessie thought. All people do is focus on my anger.

She grit her teeth. It wasn’t fair.

What is the damned point of putting love into the world, then?

The pokéball in her pocket shuddered and unclasped itself, a quiet cyan lighting up the clearing. Jessie willed him not to make a scene, but Wobbuffet’s presence easily carried a connotation when he materialized without an exuberant hello.

“We’re going for another walk,” she said, standing up, not looking at anyone. “Don’t follow us.”

As she disappeared into the forest, Wobbuffet turned back to the rest of camp, bowing a little, arm behind his head. It was a fairly common gesture for him, one they understood— It’s okay! I’ll take care of her.

James felt his heart shudder a little as he watched her go. The guilt-ridden part of him screamed that
if he hadn’t been such a baby, sullen-eyed and quiet-voiced the first time he’d been forced to dumpster dive without Weezing, he could have spared Jessie the pain of taking the burden on herself. If he had just hid his heartbreak easier, she would have been okay, not storming off into the dark woods to break down on her pokémon.

Beneath his blacker thoughts, though, there was a voice far more kind, reminding him how lucky he was to have her, how lucky anyone was to have her.

Some day, Jessie, James closed his eyes. Someday, I’ll have the words to let you know how grateful I am for your love.

*He only hoped that by the time he found them, she hadn’t fallen somewhere unreachable.*

Jessie pressed her face against Arbok’s cool scales, melting into the soothing feeling of it. It was loosely coiled around her, head resting on hers, the both of them a tangled mess of love and bliss. This was the first time in years they’d been able to get a single moment alone with each other, and still, the woman found herself lost for words.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said, too tired to care how naked she felt with such a soul-baring statement. Her pokémon hissed affectionately in response, shutting down any doubts about the idea that it felt any differently.

“Can I tell you something that I don’t know if I can tell anyone else, Arbok?”

“Cha?” it inquired.

“I think I’m still a bad person,” she whispered. “I’ve been working so hard to undo all the wrong I’ve put into the world, but…”

She sighed, shifting a little, bringing her knees to her chest.

“…I’ve been so resentful lately. And the worst part is I don’t want to be.”

“Charbok~ka,” her pokémon uttered, an indication to elaborate at her own pace.

“James and I have been…” she halted, trying to find the right words. “...we’ve been doing the same things. As a team. I don’t feel like he’s worked any harder than I have to undo our mistakes. But…”

“Wherever we go, it seems he’s reuniting with his pokémon left and right. The world is handing him rewards for his hard work. And I, I haven’t… it’s not that I’m taking this for granted, I’m so happy to be here, but…”

She swallowed. *Open up, Jessie. Rely on your friends.*

Easier said than done.

“...I’m angry that it took me this long to be beside you again,” she managed to get out. “I don’t know who I’m angry at. My greatest fear in all this is the idea that I might accidentally take it out on James, just by virtue of him continuing to get his life handed to him like this while I get almost nothing.”

“Charbo~k,” the snake said, comfortingly. It nuzzled closer to her, trying with all it was to let her know how grateful it was to have heard her worries so openly.

*It’s always been that way with you two, hasn’t it? Arbok had said. Maybe the world’s plans for you are so great that they’re taking time to happen.*
Jessie snickered a little, incredulous. “You’re such a wonderful shadow of my past optimism. I aspire to gain it back some day soon.”

“Char!” it told her— you will. That tenacity is what makes you you.

She ran her palm across its head, shutting her eyes. Something incredible was happening, she realized—she’d told her worries to someone who wasn’t Wobbuffet and was met with understanding and nothing close to pity. Miraculously, she felt a little better. A silence came and passed.

“...did I ever tell you how entwined our destinies have always been, Arbok?”

It tilted its head. “Charbo?”

Did you ever have to? Of course we’re meant to be.

“Aha, but it goes farther back than that, you know,” Jessie told the pokémon, and it peered into her, curiously. How she’d gone so long without telling it this story was anyone’s guess.

“You see…” she began. “Once upon a time, there was a young, vibrant, beautiful little girl…”

Jessie curled up inside, safe from the overcast, sapphire eyes affixed on the magazine in front of her as she memorized its layout. Johanna’s newest outfit was in high quality on the page, and the girl so badly envied whoever got close enough to take such an astounding glamour shot. You could see every bead, every sequin, every stitch. The pokémon beside her were just as impressive—the shine in her glameow’s fur a clear indication of just how well taken care of it was.

Some day it’ll be me, Jessie repeated it in her head like a mantra. I’ll make the cover, and everyone will love me more than they already do!

She thanked her lucky stars that money was still flowing into her account, even if she had little say in how much she got to spend, even if the way her caretakers stayed so tight-lipped about its sources pissed her right off. Money was money, and money bought all the Coordinator Illustrateds a girl could wish for.

Jessie pulled her eyes from the page only for a moment, trying not to cringe reflexively when she saw the clock and how much time had passed. She hadn’t even touched her homework.

Oopsie… she thought to herself. Well, no point in starting it, now. It’s not like I’m going to finish.

She laid back in her bunk, lazily grabbing her mini-donuts off the nightstand and shoving a couple in her mouth. Another day was halfway done, and she hadn’t accomplished much of anything.

Jessie sat up again, staring out the window at the drab gray of another forgettable foster home’s property. Scanning the uneventful horizon, she noticed some kind of commotion happening around the boundaries of the backyard. She squinted, willing her vision to focus.

She was able to recognize most of the boys—ugly wretches who had tried their hand at tormenting her, ignorant to her invincibility—they were picking rocks off the ground one by one, chucking them across the fences at… something. The gestures didn’t sit right with her, knowing them—especially with how angled downward their throws were. She couldn’t shake the idea that they were picking on some underdog who was down on its luck and unable to fight back. Jessie balled her fists, shoving...
her bag of treats into her coat pocket.

Might as well get something done today, she said to herself as she kicked the window-screen out and leapt through it.

Jessie was a blur of scarlet against the slate of the property, bolting to the scene with a fire in her heart, not a care in the world for how outnumbered she was. She’d taken on worse, worn the scrapes on her knees like badges of honour, proof that she’d endured. This was nothing.

When she neared the scene, the lot of them turned to her, and she caught sight of who it was they were tormenting. A knot of ekans stood their ground on the soil beyond the fence, bruised and beaten up on, hissing fiercely, tails rattling weakly.

“The hell are you ingrates doing?!” Jessie shouted, rhetorically.

“What’s it to you?”

“You’re attacking defenseless pokémon who didn’t do anything to you!” she yelled.

“Cut it, twerp, they ain’t defenseless,” one of them rolled his eyes. “They’re poisonous and can bite, if they wanted to fight they would.”

“They’re babies!” Jessie seethed. “An ekans that small doesn’t even have a venomous bite! If you lot weren’t so stupid you’d know that!”

Another one sighed. “What do you want, weirdo?”

“I want you to leave those pokémon alone and pick on someone your own size!” she stood her ground. “What kind of coward only attacks those smaller than them?!”

“That excludes you, then,” the biggest one trudged up to her, breath on her nose. “Pint-sized brat.”

“Not if I pummel you right here and now it doesn’t,” Jessie barked right back up at him.

She kneed him in the stomach, and he fell backwards almost instantly, reeling at the impact. Jessie stood unmoving, teeth bared and fists clenched tight, her silhouette making itself bigger against the setting sun.

“Why you—” the injured one coughed out, and as he lunged forward, his friend held him back.

“We should go, dude,” she said. “Miyamoto’s crazy, it’s not worth it.”

Jessie knit her brow furiously, trying to ignore how deep the comment cut her, how nonchalantly the other girl had said it—like a universal, understood truth.

Whatever, she told herself as she watched the group reluctantly exit the scene, spitting crudely on the ground in front of her. Better crazy than weak.

She refused to take her eyes off the group as she watched them go, ominously surprised at how little she had to fight to win that one. Jessie wasn’t sure she necessarily preferring being feared over being loved, but it was definitely better than being nobody.

When they were out of sight, she sighed in relief, slowly and cautiously stepping over to the ekans. They hissed at her as she made her way near, frantically rattling their tails, and she threw her hands up in a gesture of surrender.
“It’s okay,” she said, caring voice a wild contrast to the conviction she’d spoken with only moments before. “I wanna help.”

They seemed a little receptive to her, but only a little. She got down on her knees, crouched at eye level with the pokémon, holding out her hand.

“I can’t believe those awful kids would hurt you like that,” she told them, voice shaking with anger. “You don’t deserve that.”

They slithered a little closer to her, eyes fearful, but curious.

“Oh!” Jessie said, reaching into her pocket. The knot flinched a little when she moved her free arm, ready to flee. She noticed, taking care to make her movements as slow and non-threatening as possible. After an agonizing minute, she pulled out her donuts, carefully opening the bag and offering one through the openings in the fence.

“Here,” she told them. “For you guys.”

They shuffled closer, unsure. Jessie demonstrated for them, pulling a second out of the bag and eating it herself.

“See?” the girl said. “They’re good, don’t worry!”

Just barely convinced, a particularly brave ekans took the donut from her hand, dropping it to the floor and taking a small bite. When the flavour hit it, Jessie watched its eyes fill with stars, and it let out a hiss that was more jovial than anything she’d ever heard from a pokémon. She smiled, pulling out some donuts for the other few and dropping them on the other side of the fence.

“I don’t blame you if you don’t believe me,” the girl said, then. “But not all humans are bad like that. Most of them will be nice as long as you are, I think.”

They tilted their heads, unsure of what she meant entirely, but still thankful for her care, her presence. She reached her hand through the fence again, softly stroking one of the pokémon on its head before she rose to her feet and began to walk away.

“Take care, ekans!” Jessie waved to them. “I hope I see you again!”

They watched her transfixed as she left, puzzled at the duality of humankind and all they were. Jessie sighed a little as she looked at her former bag of sweets—she’d given her last one to the last little ekans, barely getting any herself.

Oh well! She said to herself, trying to remain cheerful. I’m sure some day it’ll come back around.

“After that, the ekans would always stop by while I was out in the gardens studying,” Jessie relayed. “And every time they saw me, they’d rattle their tails with the brightest little smiles.”

Arbok made a small whine, moved tears in its eyes. Jessie petted its head as she kept talking.

“Ekans were the first pokémon I ever knew up close like that, so I guess that’s why I ended up loving them so much,” she laughed a little. “So when I saw you, I felt as though it really was worth it. I felt as though you were a reward for what little good I had put into the world. As though we
were destined to be partners.”

“Charbok…” it said, still crying quietly, and Jessie was surprised to find that she was in tears as well. They slipped out without her knowing, quiet and so much less explosive than she was used to. She was unsure at what they were there for, really—but she settled on a feeling of doubt. Everything seemed too good to be true, having been dealt such an unkind hand for so long in her life. There was no way something so romantic, poetic, something so beautiful had come around for someone like her. But here she was.

More than she was fearful, she was overjoyed. Blessed to be beside Arbok. Even if she did have to say goodbye to it in a few days time. Even if she never saw it again after this. The universe had given her something. That had to mean she was doing okay, right?

Arbok gave her a gentle headbutt, and she went back to leaning her head against its own. Her words shook as they left her, an unsure whisper, vulnerable and open-hearted and unheard of from someone of her ilk.

“She’s still one t’ing unobscured,

Stable ground beneat’ ya feet, don’tcha cry.”

There were people in the world who said Meowth’s singing voice held no melody, grated on the ears. Those people were wrong. Sure, there were nicer tunes from both pokémon and human alike—but something about his, beneath the full moon, as he strummed his guitar, stayed inviting and wondrous. There was an inherent nostalgia in it, for Arbok and Weezing and Chimecho alike, and they melted into the bittersweet feeling of it as they neared him.

“Take a look down at the eart’, memorize its lastin’ touch,
Close ya eyes, and picture in ya head—

It’s blue, so blue, da bluest, it’s too much…”

Greninja peered into the scene, curious. This was a side of Meowth he had not seen, serene and swimming in moonlight, voice a sagely croon to the stars. The scratch cat didn’t seem to be embarrassed as his friends appeared one by one and dropped to a sit beside him, they all stayed with their eyes affixed on the celestial painting above, closing their eyes and dissolving into the pokémon’s tune. Feeling perhaps it was not its place, Greninja leapt into a tree, electing to keep watch on the crew from a distance.

“An’ da planet goes around, people on it spin around, all of us go around, twirlin’ aimlessly around, grinnin’ as we move around,

Happy and sad, swirlin’ ‘round… hand-in-hand on dis journey, as we’re all dancin’ around.”

Meowth’s lyrics trailed off, and he became lost in the musical break, tranquil grin painted on his face as he mindlessly pawed the chords out. Long ago, his favourite song to sing was one about how unsure he was of the future—how alone he felt, knowing he would never meet another pokémon like himself, wondering to the shining moon if it held under it any soul even close to his. Years later—after an event he swore was significant, but could not will himself to remember—he’d grown tired of the pity party, writing himself a far kinder song about how differences didn’t matter. In the end, we all shared the same planet, so what were earth’s creatures, if not brethren by definition?

“Mirrored hearts, but I see it in ya eyes—

Heavy wit’ sleep in da mornin’, weak wit’ stress

Brighten yer face, fake a smile,

I’ll smile back, and in time, we’ll hurt less.

Today is tomorrow, if yer talkin’ ta yesterday’s cast,

And dey matter just as much as yous an’ I do,

Dey’re glowin’, we’re glowin’, more vibrant in the sun…”

He went back into the chorus, the words lilting off him and into the night air. This, this was what Meowth lived for. Nights like these, surrounded in friends, with the delectably round moon hanging in the sky… rounder than a ball of yarn, waiting to be batted at and lovingly hoarded in a pile somewhere. He was born with a love for the round and glittering, and no matter how far he diverted from his biological path, the pokémon always found a purr rising in his throat when he took in the gorgeous sight. It was simply too wonderful to him, the ultimate treasure.

“Yous guys showed up quicker dan I woulda expected,” he grinned when the song was done, after they’d gotten comfortable.

“Was too excited,” Arbok told him, a touch embarrassed.

“Been long time,” Weezing punctuated.

“Guess dat’s fair,” Meowth said. “Can’t tell ya how much I missed dis.”

“We hang out!” Wobbuffet said, almost sounding offended. “Did you forget?”
“Yeah, an’ I cried like a kit when ya ambushed us at HQ after we’d left Unova!” Meowth reminded him. “Havin’ da noihve ta call me forgetful, ya dope…”

Wobbuffet muttered something into the darkness, defeated.

“Chimecho, what’s good wit’ you?”

“Can I be in your band?” it said, without much elaboration. “I’m real good at carrying a tune!”

“Sorry, bud, I’m a solo artist,” he whispered nobly, eyes shut with purpose. “Tryin’ ta t’ink of a good stage name, but all dat’s comin’ ta mind is ‘Nyarth Brooks’”


“I’ll letcha know if I change my mind, kid,” Meowth grinned.

He strummed a couple more chords, but didn’t feel entirely committed to another song in the moment. There was still a bit of a cloud hanging over the group, wanting to catch up, unsure where to start. It was the first time they’d all been together like this in years. Chimecho hadn’t even known these pokémon, merely felt how important they were through its trainer’s feelings. So many questions lingered, so many unexplained answers, such minimal time before the sun rose.

“How’s it feel, yous two?” Meowth elected to say, figuring the meaning would come across without anything more.

“Unreal,” Weezing said, and if there were more words to the statement, they didn’t come to it.

“They different,” Arbok told him. “But somehow still exactly the same.”

“Time has a way of workin’ its magic on people like dat,” Meowth smiled. “It chokes me up ta see ya all happy toget’ah again. Don’t even know where ta begin catchin’ ya up on what we’s been t’rough since we last saw yas.”

“Right?” Arbok said. “Like, when Master and Wobbuffet get so close? They inseparable now.”

“She loves me most!” Wobbuffet cheered, and Arbok shoved him playfully with its tail. “I love her most!”

“Don’t turn dis into a sibling rivalry, I’m beggin’ ya,” the cat pleaded.


Arbok choked a little, turning to him incredulously. Wobbuffet was either on a level of closeness with their shared master that transcended norms, or he was the rudest pokémon ever, to address her so casually like that. Meowth shot the snake a look, as if he were waiting for that reaction. It was always hilarious to see pokémon react to it.

Wobbuffet saluted, blissfully, to absolutely no one.

"You two have more in common dan ya do apart," Meowth told Jessie's pokémon. "Not dat I gots t' tell ya dat. I mean, we're all already friends, huh?"

"I dunno," Chimecho said, simply. "Are these two cool? They seem cool."

"Geez, dat's right," the cat uttered, suddenly. "Ya must be so confused about all dis."
"A little!" the psychic pokémon told him. "But it's important to Master, so I haven't really felt the need to ask y'all about it!"

"S'about da same as yer sitch, Chime," Meowth elaborated. "Jessie 'n' James had ta say goodbye ta dese two a buncha years ago. Only... dere was no guarantee dey'd evah see 'em again. It was a while before Jimmy 'n' you started travelin' taget'ah."

"We go far back," Weezing added.

"Very far," Arbok said.

"So yeah, dey's cool," Meowth said with a smile. "We known each ot'er longah dan my nine lives can recall."

Greninja shifted from its position atop the branches as it watched the group talk, punctuating their words by tenderly shuffling closer to each other. The silhouette of them there, up against the starlight, struck it in a way it was not expecting. They looked... no different from Ash's, from Serena's, from Clemont's, from Bonnie's team, pressed up against their friends and relaxing in their time off from life. They looked like any other family.

There were not bad pokémon in the world, that was just a truth of the universe. If pokémon did bad things, it was because the bonds tying pokémon to their partners transcends morality. This was an unspoken understanding between pokémon, one that they did not possess the desire to argue with each other. It was not a burden upon them—any pokémon who didn't like the way their partner treated them or the things they asked of them was free to walk away.

These pokémon had all universally stayed, though. Not only that, they had been elated to the point of tears to see their friends again. Greninja puzzled at how two humans who made their living by reveling in the pain of these creatures could simultaneously befriend some, and how all parties involved could accept that arrangement. It wondered how they picked and chose what was profit and what was family, wondered what went on inside their heads. The grey morality of some humans made its lawful mind swim in a way it wasn't fond of—it missed people like Ash, who at their worst, were still not ambiguous in the intentions of their hearts.

"Fate had ta have brought us all back taget'ah like dis, dontcha t'ink?"

"I do," Weezing said, matter-of-factly.

"Fate always been in mine and Master's favour," Arbok noted. "We friends long before we met."

"That's so romantic!" Chimecho chimed.

"An' far too perfect," Meowth told it. "I'm prahbly preachin t' da choir, but don't take dat fer granted, ya hear?"

"I hear," Arbok said. "Lucky. Lucky to have Master. Or to... have had her. She still Master in my heart."

The group was surprised to hear Greninja's voice emanate from the tree behind them, low and so easily lending itself to the quiet of the night.

"The bonds between pokémon and master truly do reach harmonious depths," it croaked.

Meowth was inclined to nod, though he was unsettled by the idea of it being privy to such an intimate gathering of his friends. It wasn't an ideal moonlight jaunt, but redemption quest giveth and
redemption quest taketh away.

“Never did ask,” Weezing began. “Who’s that pokémon?”

“One of Master’s?” Arbok added.

“Dat’s… a longer story dan I have the energy for, right about now,” Meowth said. “One involvin’ an even bigger slit’erin’ beast dan you, buddy.”

Weezing and Arbok were quiet for a while as they shared a look. After a beat, the former opened its mouth, words slow, and with feeling.

“Tell us eventually?”

Meowth sat unphased for a moment before the implications of the comment fully hit him. His features loosened, a touch of optimistic awe creeping into them.

“Yer mind’s made up, den?”

The cat looked to them as he said it. They nodded, purpose burning within their eyes.

A breeze blew past, making the trees shiver, the whistle it produced sounding like a strange message of hope and perseverance. Meowth wished the sound was something he could bottle and sell, or at the very least, something he could turn to chords on the guitar at his feet. A moment he wanted to write a song about, but knew he would never forget, even if he didn’t. He chuckled, bittersweet, something undetectable hiding under his joy.

“Must be nice,” the cat whispered, and brought his gaze back up to the round, round moon.

“Bein’ tet’ered to someone who loves ya.”

They needed to stop running from the inevitability of the truth.

Soon enough, it was going to have to happen. They were going to have to pull themselves from this beautiful dream. They had more people to make amends with, more dastardly deeds to undo. The former Rockets simply could not stay in the clearing forever. There was no feasible way, no matter how much the temptation to live the rest of their days there clawed at their feet. The whole point of this journey was to rise above those selfish desires and be better, no matter how much it broke them apart in the process.

They’d never resented it more than they had in that moment. Jessie, especially, simmered like a burbling cauldron of anger, of loathing, of heartbreak. A part of her screamed at her to stop being so ungrateful when she’d finally gotten to see someone she loved again, a louder part of her beat it down and shouted I have the right to be ruined after everything. She was exhausted, listening to them bicker.

Reluctantly, throughout a long, slow day, they began to pack their things up. Wordlessly shoving camping equipment into bags, hefting it into the balloon, eyes on the floor, laughing it off when asked. This goodbye should have been easier, right? It was not fate forcing them apart, they were allowed to take their time, to pick their words, instead of being torn apart by the cruel clutches of fate. The difference was minimal, in the end—millimeters on a long, long yardstick.

Here they were now, uncomfortably shuffled into one end of the clearing, quivering lips and bright eyes, unable to even look at the friends they were parting with. Every poison type in the clearing was
gathered there, not helping the situation, but eager to see them off—they were, after all, two people widely regarded as heroes, in one very small break in forest, hidden away somewhere in the Hoenn region.

Jessie dropped to her knees, her arms around Arbok, exhausted and run down and too tired to maintain the walls around her heart. Beside her, James was holding onto Weezing, his grip weak as his will, pathetically slung around the pokémon.

“I can’t,” Jessie said, tears muddying the words. “I can’t pretend I know how to handle this.”

“Chaa..” her pokémon near-whispered, as if desperately wishing to tell her something, but forced to hold the words back.

“There’s still just… so much,” James added, his voice low and worn. “So much I feel I have to say or I’ll regret it.”

Meowth and Chimecho were despondent, quiet shuffles and downcast eyes, trying to make themselves smaller. Wobbuffet was in tears, the limits of his supposedly boundless endurance being tested. To watch Jessie hurt and feel it not his place to comfort her was agonizing, especially after all she’d dealt with as of late. Something had been eating her up, something she hadn’t even told him. Whatever it was, it was serious.

Finally, Meowth had enough of the routine. Regardless of if it wasn’t the right moment, regardless of if there was a script to follow here, he stepped forward. None of that mattered in the wake of his friends’ pain. This was the closest thing to a family he had, and he wasn’t going to sit around and watch them lose hope in everything.

“Hey,” the cat said, voice beckoning, but with a tone of seriousness to it. Jessie and James rose their heads from where they were buried in their pokémon, watching Meowth give a hard nod to aforementioned pokémon. From a small bag slung around his waist, he unearthed two pokéballs, holding them out without taking his eyes off the humans.

They didn’t say anything, the thought of optimism in this situation alien to even them.

“C’mon,” Meowth urged. “Dey’s yours.”

“Ohours?” James echoed, voice tiny.

He reluctantly reached out to take one, and Jessie looked to him with equal hesitation before grabbing the other. Soon as the objects were in their hands, Arbok and Weezing were standing with their bodies contrasted against the bright red and crisp white, blurring purple silhouettes fading into focus.

Jessie was the first to register the circumstance, the words sounding like a joke as soon as they’d left her.

“You can’t possibly —”

Before she could doubt it, Arbok dove forward and headbutted the ball, the force of its temple against it sending Jessie back on her feet a little, stumbling. Weezing followed suit, doing the same to James, turning from faded purple to translucent scarlet. Both trainers stood there, tripping and uneasy in their stances, staring down in awe at the confident shakes the balls produced. Once, twice, thrice —before a resounding, mechanical click put any doubts in their heads to rest, and their anxieties melted away from their hearts like the night’s snowfall on a sunny mountaintop.
In unison, expressions completely dumbfounded at what had just happened, Jessie and James turned to each other in utter shock as their bodies went entirely slack, and the pokéballs in their hands tumbled uneventfully to the forest floor.

Meowth, Wobbuffet, and Chimecho smiled proudly, the former of the three crossing his arms in satisfaction. Soon as the spheres hit the ground, Arbok and Weezing re-emerged—same as ever, now with tangible proof of that fact. They cried to the open air, their first words as pokémon with trainers once again, thankful tears staining their eyes, falling onto the creases of their smiles. The ekans cheered, the arbok cheered, the koffing cheered, the weezing cheered. The clearing erupted into more celebration as they watched the facts become set in stone, as they saw the good fortune painted on their leaders’ faces with destiny’s fickle brushstrokes. Jessie and James could only remain frozen as quiet tears slipped down their cheeks. There was no way this was real.

“Sorry, yous twos, it’s a done deal,” Meowth said to his teammates. “We all talked it ovah last night.”

“I—” James stuttered. “You—this can’t—”

“An’ hey, easy on da pokéballs!” The cat added. “Spent my own money on ‘em, ran all da way ta Fallarbor! Coulda boughta can o’ tuna wit’ dat dough! I expect ya ta be kissin’ my back paws for da next week, at least!”

Quizzically, Jessie put a hand on Arbok’s face, touch tender and concerned. “Arbok, what about your life, here? You can’t possibly want to…”

To the surprise of everyone who’s name wasn’t Wobbuffet, she quickly became unable to finish her sentence, overcome with emotion. The natural end to it was something she couldn’t even comprehend well enough to materialize as words. It was not a truth she was well-acquainted with.

“You have a home here, you have friends, you’re revered and loved and you have it made,” James substituted, voice shaking with hesitance. “Why… why go back to living the low life alongside us?”

Weezing shook its heads, eyes sparkling up at him as it uttered its name.

I love it here. I love it here, and my home is beside you.

He crumpled, then, dissolving into the sentiment as his heart translated its message.

*Where is the catch?* James’ mind raced. *I don’t understand, why? Why is this happening? When will it all come undone?*

Arbok was coiled around Jessie, now, their faces touching, their tears mixing. The pokémon was crooning out hushed hisses to her, begging her to be kinder to herself, willing her to accept that this truth would not hurt her like everything else had. Predictably, she deflected this, the love in her heart overflowing, working its sick alchemy as the emotions passed through her.

“You’re such an idiot!” She sobbed to Arbok, and it only drew itself closer to her. “Do you know that, you fool? You’re making the worst mistake of your life.”

Her words were sharp but her conviction lacked, hysterical in their execution. Wobbuffet watched on, the phrasing she chose resonating somewhere inside him. She’d said those words to him once, too, and relayed to him many times after saying them that the moment she uttered them was synonymous with the moment when she knew she would keep surviving despite what life threw at her. To see her able to say them to someone else warmed him beyond description, to know that she had met that kind of grateful joy not once, but twice.
Maybe, Arbok said to Jessie. *But nothing’s gonna stop me from making it.*

“What about your egg?” Jessie said, the thought hitting her suddenly. “What about all the pokémon here who need you?”

“It’s taken care of,” Meowth said for them, and Arbok and Weezing turned to the crowds to beckon a particular arbok forward.

The patternless arbok swallowed nervously, tail shaking in its slither as he crawled upwards to where they were. He had been told this was what was going to happen, but living through it was another concept. Reluctantly, he brought his head up to meet the pokémon who had previously been his elders, waiting for them to address him.

“You gonna be okay?” Weezing said to him, and he looked to the side, unsure how to answer.

“Think so, but…” he muttered, the eyes of everyone he’d ever known hard on him, heart pounding into his throat.

“Why worry?” Weezing asked.

“What if…” the arbok said. “What if can’t do it? Why me? Others never liked me.”

Jessie’s arbok shook its head. “You kin wrong when they left you alone all those years ago just because you different. You colonymates wrong when they resent you for becoming hard and loud because of it. You know why I take you in?”

The other arbok raised himself, meeting its eyes. “Pity?”

His former mentor shook its head.

“You remind me of Master,” it said, lovingly. “And Master is a hero.”

From behind them, only privy to half the conversation, Jessie’s eyes filled back up with tears.

“Do you think…” the arbok said, picking his words. “Do you think some day, others respect me like they respect you?”

“Look around.” Weezing chimed in, focusing its twin gaze on the pious crowds surrounding them. The blank arbok turned around to see them, sobs bubbling up in his throat when he watched them begin to bow in his presence, one by one.

“They already do,” Arbok said.

There was not a trace of fear in the pair as they left their duties to this arbok. He had always had a kind heart despite his brash exterior, always been a leader by nature, despite everything. They had always had their heart set on leaving the colony to him, always trusted him to take care of their everything with his life. In their eyes, and in the eyes of the hundreds upon hundreds of pokémon prostrate before him, he felt something confident within him slowly begin to stir. Unsure, but there.

It was a long trudge back to the den to part ways with the egg, one that neither of them wanted to make. It *had* become theirs in the short time they’d known it, a thing the two of them so badly wanted to cultivate and grow together, no matter what kind of flower bloomed from its bud. There was something so right about leaving this place to be beside their friends once more, but such an inherent wrongness in this goodbye.
Arbok and Weezing had their faces regretfully pressed against the egg—as if they were trying to apologize through osmosis—when James finally cleared his throat and spoke up.

“You two, ah...” he said, a little timidly. “If I might be so bold, what’s stopping you from bringing your egg with us?”

Almost immediately, they shot up from the floor to stare at him.

“Charbokkuh?!”

“Weez?!”

“Of course it’s an option!” Jessie said, putting James’ underlying worries about the suggestion to bed. “Our life isn’t nearly as tumultuous as it was before, you know! I think we can handle caring for an egg.”

“’N’ I got lots of fur!” Meowth boasted, cutely. “Poihfect for warmin’ all kindsa eggies!”

The poison pair’s gazes sparkled—half from gratitude, half from tears—and they tackled their friends to the floor, peppering them in affection, cheering their names in thanks. They didn’t have to say goodbye. They didn’t have to say goodbye.

With business taken care of, the family all began their trek onward, Arbok and Weezing shooting tearful goodbyes and hugs and well wishes to everyone, one by one, individually. Giving personalized love—take care of yourself, tell the kids I’ll miss them, battle hard so you can beat her, okay?—they took their time as they moved through the masses. Pride shimmered in their trainers’ eyes, colours of the ocean aswirl with stars.

They were off the ground by sunset, sharp ears and whiskers cutting a jovial shape into the melting orange of the route’s smoky dusk. Meowth rested his paws tenderly on the egg as he held it, stroking it with a gentleness that so rarely emerged from him. Carefully, the cat rested his head on it. There was something so comfortable about it, warm on his fur.

James pulled the lever once more and sent a blast of fire upward, ascending them closer to the stars as they flickered on. The eight of them said nothing, electing instead to dissolve wordlessly into the feeling. It was too picturesque, too beautiful, too romantic. There was just no way this was something beyond some kind of altruistic dream. Their luck did not work in these ways.

They realized, slowly at first, that Luck no longer ruled their lives. She had laid down her wings, let them onto the ground, where Karma had illuminated winding roads diverged and guided them to where and who they were right now.

This was it, then. There was no catch because their paid dues were starting to spill over. They had put enough kindness into the world that it was starting to return to them, an old friend's embrace both figuratively and literally.

Jessie let out a sigh, otherworldly in its tone, toeing the line between dreamlike and so, so heavy with reality. She was going to wake up tomorrow morning with Arbok’s pokeball in her pocket, with it back in her life, filling a hole she hadn’t even noticed the cruel presence of.

The sun dipped, and the group huddled closer together—not out of necessity, but because they tangibly could. With the wind at their backs, they let their feelings spill over into genuine smiles as the ascension peaked, spirits extending their reach to the stars above.

"Man," Meowth said, breaking the momentous silence. "Dis balloon sure is gettin crowded."
That was okay, the former Rockets decided without words between them. When you spend enough time mostly alone, you learn to love the feeling of people on every side of you.

Jessie exhaled again, leaning over the basket, Wobbuffet and Arbok at her side as though they were an extension of all she was. James stole a quiet glance at her, and the serenity on her face in that moment sent his heart further skyward, wading through the starlight as it drizzled down all around them.

A quiet breeze blew Jessie’s wild hair forward, and she shut her eyes, smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I WAS SLEEPING ON THIS ONE FOR SO LONG, Y’ALL. This was one of the first chapters of DTE that EVER fucking came to me, I wrote down the idea for it literally almost 2 years ago. I'm so happy. I'm so happy I got to share it with you finally, I hope you can forgive how tight-lipped I was about it!

We have two new characters! We have an egg now! So many things are happening!! We have SO many plans!!!

So anyways, pokemon dialogue. Arbok and Weezing have a very particular manner of speaking (shown in EP017) that is basic and lacking in grammatical structure. I take that less as an individual thing and more of a species-based thing, so I let blank Ekans/Arbok adopt it too. But then when they "talk" to their trainers, their words are eloquent and with meaning. Why?

The way pokemon talk to each other is different from the way pokemon and people talk. When pokemon talk, their meanings are 100% clear and without obscurity. When pokemon talk to people they have bonded with, the dialogue is based more on feeling, on vibe, on body language. It's more of an intuitive thing, like a clearer way of reading someone's mood by their expression. The stronger the bond, the more clarity in the dialogue, but even then, there's gonna be some differences. So that's why Arbok and Weezing sound a little more grammatically sound to their trainers—they're getting the more flowery version of the pokemon's words, whereas someone like Meowth is getting the literal, exact thing they're saying. I hope I've made that clear enough.

Also, 'Master' says less about the relationship and is more a thing of respect. Pokemon and trainer stand on equal ground, but pokemon refer to their trainers as their masters to show their utmost love and devotion. If most trainers knew this, they would probably be Kind of Weirded Out by it. Ash's pokemon tend to stray from this because he's a magic protag, Wobbuffet also does because he's weird and loves his Mom.

The song Meowth sings is from the sub! It's called Nyasu no Ballad/Meowth's Ballad (not to be confused with Nyasu no Uta/Meowth's Song from OS) and it is my absolute fave. The lyrics are translated from their original meaning and given a lil flair/wiggle room, I def recommend listening to it if you haven't. It's very sweet and so is the ending that goes with it.

Looks like month-to-month updates are becoming the norm, sorry about that, hope it's
alright. Work still really loves me. Next one might take even LONGER, because I'm gonna be real, Ven and I only have the looooooosest of ideas for what we wanna do with it. But hopefully not too long, because there are places I cannot wait for this story to go.

That's it, I think? Hope this one was okay, hope y'all enjoyed it. I really, really loved writing it, and I was so happy to finally make Jessie happy!! Holding off on letting her be Okay was so painful, I'm so glad I got to give her this after everything. Also hope her childhood flashback wasn't too similar to the one in the Cacturne chapter, in all honesty I just really think Jessie got in a lot of Fights as a kid lmao.

Thanks as always for your guys' support, esp my friends for putting up with how workaholic-y I am about this fic esp!! ilu all and will continue to do my best!!
She's More Like a Cactus

Chapter Notes

aahhahhHAHAHAAAAA HEY GUYS??? HOWS IT GOING??? LONG TIME NO SEEEEE???

hey ssso.... this took a while and i talk a little bit about... why in the closing notes. if you dont care about spoilers, particularly about what characters are in this chapter, then go read those. long story short, this one REALLY got away from us. one character in particular took the fucking helm of mine and ven's lives, and now i am pretty sure we're possessed by said character and all our thoughts are in their voice.

all the episodes mentioned in this chapter are brief. i will list the brief ones later. there is a lot of alluding to the past between these characters, but i dont think you entirely need it.

this chapter is long. im not going to tell you how long it is, because i am scared if i do, you will stop reading the story that i worked very hard on. its long. its the longest chapter yet. oh god please dont leave me.

i have been awake for 22 hours.

the music that needs to be played over the second contest appeal in this chapter is "the lordling" from the homestuck ost. queue it up. you'll thank me later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The quartet took another deep inhale as the wind sent a gentle breeze tumbling around them, a chaste and quiet embrace. The rays of the Hoenn sun that so easily lent themselves to sweltering days and muggy nights were different in Verdanturf Town, accompanied by gentle gales that sung across flower-dappled fields and assuaged the tropical heat.

A constant background sonata of grass blades and poppies, evergreen and palm trees—and every bit of greenery in-between—rustled against these winds. Nature stirred at a soothing, rhythmic frequency, one that never seemed to let up as the day passed. Over the course of their time there, the former Rockets had said little to each other—the only words on their lips dreamy, relaxed sighs, the only observation coming to their normally chatty hearts being “what a pleasant feeling!”

Jessie adored this place, and she was confident that love far exceeded her companions’ chipper attitudes toward it. She almost wanted to turn the corner and follow the beaten path off the main road, to see what became of the only foster home she’d ever loved. To run into the arms of the caretaker who had so dutifully walked her nervous heart down to the contest hall, urging her forward to ask for a pass. A part of her wanted to go back, and another part of her recoiled in disgust at the idea of navigating that conversation with her friends.

A soft gust was sent through Jessie’s hair, carrying her out of her nervous worries. Another whimsical sigh ran off her, droplets down an umbrella. She tried to retain her senses in the pull of nostalgia and calm—thank goodness the railroad they were about to cross put its gates down before the train came barreling through, adding its deafening pattern to the whoosh of the trees.
Normally lacking in patience, the woman found herself zoning out as it passed, for the first time in a long time taking a more passive role in her life. It was only when the absence of sound hit and the rails slowly raised again that she remembered she had to move her limbs, keeping with the small group of traffic that had gathered to cross the tracks. The rest of her crew seemed to lag in a similar fashion while the other patrons of the holdup moved onward, only…

They’d gained a member.

From beside her, closer to the ground, two curious—almost astounded—green eyes peered up at her. They belonged to a boy she definitely recognized, but took a moment to register. The look of curiosity wasn’t something that seemed typical of his features, and he must’ve realized this when Jessie caught note of him staring, averting his gaze quickly and sharply.

“Drew!”

He jolted a little at the sound of his name, a feeling on his back alerting him that something was about to begin. Though the joyous voice that said it set his heart at ease, there was a creeping hesitation that came with it, if his suspicions were right.

May came barreling over the tracks—or at least, she intended to, but stopped right before she hit them. Her arms angled awkwardly as they hung there in the momentum of her halt, she tilted her head at the spectacle.

Okay, that was definitely Team Rocket. Drew was definitely just standing next to them. Did he bring them here? Why would he do that. They didn’t talk about that when they made their plans. Were they holding him hostage? Maybe they took his pokémon? What was going on here?

May didn’t really know what the proper etiquette to a situation like this was. So she shouted.

“Team Rocket!” she yelled, finger pointed squarely at them, expression agape. “Why are you here? Did you kidnap Drew?! You better not be stealing his pokémon! If you think we’ve gotten rusty after all these years, you—”

“May,” Drew tried to breach the moment.

Not even the verdant vibes of the paradise around the team was enough to entirely steady their tempers, especially not with the fiery little twerpette pointing and accusing them. Yes, apparently they had wound up in the same place at the same time as someone in cahoots with her, but that didn’t mean anything other than that their fateful streak of strange serendipity was continuing. Meowth raised his voice, a bit muffled from behind the large egg he had his paws wrapped firmly around.

“Hey, cool ya jets, bandana twoihpette! Can’t a group o’ ex-criminals relax fa one day?!”

“I’ve never seen you relax a day in your life! You’re always up to something!”

“May.”

“And why are we to be punished for your lack of observance?!” James added. “We are totally relaxed all the time!”

“You seem pretty defensive right now!”

“May. ”

“Because you’re pointing your twerpy little fingers at us!” Jessie shrieked, building the cacophony.
Before Wobbuffet could shoot some particularly scalding words in May’s direction, Greninja shimmered to life beside them, a glittering trail out of James’ handbag. Its stance was on high alert, and it leapt into the air, almost immediately silencing the noise around it. Katana in hand, it sliced right through one of the trees a good ten or so feet off, landing hard—yet gracefully—on the soft ground beside the tumbling vegetation. As the mighty evergreen cascaded downward, pine needles dusting off it, yet another familiar face came into view from behind it, and Greninja found itself almost inclined to press the ethereal blade to the human’s neck.

“Hey, watch the hair, you croaky creep!” Harley seethed.

To this, Greninja uttered its name, and Meowth translated, dazed.

“Greninja says it felt somet’in’ way too evil hidin’ behind dat tree,” he marveled, voice lacking any discernible sway.

A silence fell at the addition of another character to their tumultuous meeting—this one far more chaotic than the last. A quiet breeze shook the trees.

The shouting resumed.

“HARLEY?!” May near-wailed.

“We haven’t seen you since the Grand Festival!”

“Oh, don’t let me interrupt your little datey-watey, pumpkin!”

“Excuse me, what is she doing here?!”

May’s expression fell a little, and the former Rockets felt a sense of unease, as if they’d done something terribly wrong. The younger girl opened her mouth to awkwardly navigate whatever it was she wanted to tell them, but Harley quickly cut her off, hair a deep purple hurricane with a fluid head turn.

“I happen to be in the market for a reunion with my dear little family, here!” Harley informed them. “And excuse you, Miss Jessie, you mean ‘what is she doing here’!”

“Oh,” Jessie said, the statement registering, and she momentarily misplaced her fire to affirm that she understood. “Oh! Deepest apologies.”

“No bother, hon, we can’t all be this perfect,” Harley smiled saccharinely, waving her off.

Looking at her now, the slight jump in clothing made a little more sense. None of them would’ve put it past the Harley they knew to be decked out in a form-fitting dress, complete with arm and neck cuffs and an exposed window across the bust—but maybe that said more about the person she was underneath it all back then than they’d given much consideration to.

At the quickness of the resolved discrepancy in pronouns, James noticed both May and Drew let off a tenseness that they’d been bunched up against—barely detectable, but definitely present. He wasn’t sure how, but he was struck with the immediate realization that they had watched Harley have this conversation countless times before, and that it did not always go so smoothly. The idea of it cut him somewhere deep inside, buried.
“Oh, look at you two!” Harley said, one hand on May and another on Drew, pushing them closer to each other but ever present betwixt their profiles. “Sneaking around in secret without me! It sure is a good thing I just happened to be in town!”

“You were literally stalking us,” Drew deadpanned.

“Stalking?! I’m offended, Drew!” she retorted. “All I did was refresh May’s Turtwitter account a couple thousand times until she posted about a dive that only has one Hoenn location! Does that really deserve such a harsh word like ‘stalking’?”

“Yes,” he told her. “Yes it does.”

“I just missed my little Coordinator fam so much!” Harley diverted, crushing the two of them in an unpleasant hug. “Let me guess. You two were going to see Solidad, weren’t you?”

“Fine, you read us like you always do,” May sighed. “Of course we are! I feel like I haven’t spoken to her in forever…”

Jessie stood on the fringes of their conversation, scarlet lips awry in amused curiosity. Even in casual conversation, Harley made everything around herself erratic and embellished.

“What is Solidad doing in Verdanturf of all places?” Jessie inquired loudly, piling onto the hurricane.

Harley turned to her, body hanging at an angle that was slightly unnatural.

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” she grinned, almost wickedly. “Miss Prestigious Top Coordinator is guest judging the upcoming contest!”

Jessie’s eyes widened, then filled to the brim with fireworks. She was holding some wild, passionate impulse back, her team realized as their eyes fell upon her. The telltale tremble of her frame, the high pitched whine that was building behind her teeth—all present, all as lacking in subtlety as usual. It was one of her more endearing traits, James found himself thinking.

The dam broke, and she roared to life, the flames of her conviction crackling against the sunny countryside.

“Oh, the romanticism! The kismet! I can’t take this!”

She smothered the conversation, power in the lilt of her voice, fists balled, intense. May and Drew puzzled at her—Harley less so, her eyes narrowed, listening for once.

“Whaddya mean?” May asked.

“This!” Jessie responded, as if it were obvious. “Us! All here! Together! Don’t you see? This is destiny!”

“Yeah, but, for what, exactly?” May said. “We’re not really friends, Team Rocket.”

“What are the ODDS that four wonderful Coordinators with deep, rich history would wind up at the same intersection in the same small little town after all these years?” Jessie embellished, eyes gazing off somewhere past everyone. “It’s obvious! We have to compete!”

The three opposite to her shared a reluctant, suspicious look. To Jessie’s surprise, Drew was the one who spoke.

“...rich history?”
“Don’t get fresh with me, rose twerp!” the woman’s blaze turned to a scald. “We’ve competed in countless contests together! All four of us!”

May tilted her head. “We have? ‘Cause, I don’t remember—”

“Ugh,” Jessie rolled her eyes. “I’m growing so tired of having this conversation with twerpettes. Jesslana, Jessafina, Jessibella, countless more! They were all me, twerps! Did you not find it curious that all these fabulous ladies shared pokémon with me?!”

“Don’t lump me in with the twerp herd!” Harley crossed her arms. “I let you get your nasty little fingerprints all over my darling cacturne’s pokéball for one of those performances!”

“I’m still pulling needles out of my hair, thanks for reminding me!” Jessie shot right back.

“Not my fault you don’t needle-proof your clothes,” she spat under her breath.

James tore to the front of the pack, eyes dead on Harley. “Can you do that?!”

Harley regarded him with pitiful expression, mouth halfway open and eyes squinted in some form of light disgust. She didn’t respond. Jessie steamrolled the chit-chat.

“Don’t sit there and act like you don’t feel it too!” Jessie’s emotions swirled inside her and turned to a rare moment of calculated competence, and she grabbed Harley’s hands in her own, staring intensely into her. “Harley, you’re a woman of fortune, I can tell! Surely, you must know there’s a reason we’re all here!”

It repulsed Jessie to have to soften to someone like Harley in lieu of their quest to be better—out of everyone they’d met, they were certain she deserved every bad thing that happened to her, every unpleasant interaction in her life. There was an extra pokéball burning in Jessie’s pocket, however, and she couldn’t help but be taken back to screaming crowds around her and ribbons in her hair and a heart that ached nigh endlessly and whispered oh, Arbok, I wish you could have known these feelings, too.

The flattery seemed to resonate with Harley, her expression gaining a more neutral tone, but it quickly dissipated, and she snatched herself away from Jessie’s grip, equally uninterested in any kind of destiny bond with the group.

“Please,” Harley huffed. “It’s a cute coincidence, but that’s all it is, honey. The three of us are way out of your league, anyways.”

Jessie seemed to shatter a little at this, so sure her words would have charmed the woman. To her further dismay, May and Drew seemed to back her up.

“She’s got a point…” May said. “I mean, it’s not super weird that we’d all end up here. A Top Coordinator and old friend of ours is in town.”

“Not to mention the opportunity to see all the new talent at the contest,” Drew added.

May nodded, an edge of suspicion creeping into her normally forgiving voice. “What do you want, Team Rocket?”

“Yes, but—!” Jessie stammered a little, the narrative she’d grown so used to unravelling around her. “All of us—the same intersection—?!”

Meowth, who had been almost chillingly quiet, silently passed the egg to James. As Jessie tried to
regain her footing, he stomped forward, addressing Harley directly.

“I see what’s goin’ on, here,” the cat said, eyes narrowed, voice imposing.

The group of Coordinators looked down at him. Four eyes curious, two condescending.

“Yous is scared .”

Harley burst out laughing at this, unrestrained as violet locks bounced wildly around her. Meowth expected it, and kept his position steady, paws balled firmly. When Harley had gained her composure back, she humoured him.

“Scared of her? ” she said, hands on her hips. “As if! Has little Jessie-Wessie here ever even won a contest?”

“Dat’s funny, I didn’t take ya for an idiot!” Meowth shot at her. “Jessie’s one o’ da best Coordinators around! She came in top four at da Sinnoh Grand Festival! She’s competed all across da woihld!”

Meowth watched Harley’s haughtiness slowly disappear as the words left him, and he pressed on.

“Heck, she was a semifinalist for Kalos Queen!” He boasted. “You oughta know how uptight dem folks is! How hard ya gotta work ta play ta dey’s ‘refined’ sensibilities! And she was a semifinalist! Eit’er yous so behind on contest news dat ya haven’t heard, or ya didn’t recognize ‘er in disguise!”

“And what if I didn’t , furball?” Harley challenged.

The cat laughed a single, amused laugh. “Ha! Den eit’er ya proved my point dat she’s an incredible performah, or yer as dumb as a twoihp!”

Harley seethed, and before she could retort, Meowth reiterated his original point, mixing flattery with an appeal to the woman’s competitive side, the perfect recipe for manipulation on the tastebuds of a priceless ally.

“But between you ‘n’ me, yer a pretty smart gal, an’ I t’ink ya knew it was her,” the cat grinned wickedly. “An’ dat’s why you’s so scared.”

There were, admittedly, a few ways the conversation could’ve gone. Harley herself was a master manipulator, and she could’ve very well seen through the game Meowth was playing. His confidence hinged on the idea that her emotions would get the better of her, as they so often did. In the red of her face and the tremble of her frame, he saw his victory.

“Come on!” she roared, words dripping malice, and she turned her gaze from Meowth to Jessie. “As if I’d ever lose to some six-piece torchic McNobody like you!”

Got ‘er, Meowth beamed.

Jessie’s fire rekindled itself at the words, at Harley’s presence imposing upon her, bitter breath against against her face. Her heart raced—the woman opposite to her had no concept of personal space, and she intended to push back. She shoved her face closer to Harley, their noses practically pressed up against each other’s.

“Bring it on, you gaudily-dressed eggplant .”

Everyone outside the conversation could almost hear the flames crackling around the two of them, and James found himself with jaw uncomfortably askew at the lowness of Jessie’s voice and the pink
creeping its way onto her cheeks. Entirely predictable, knowing her type, but Harley?

Their gazes were searing holes into each other, ocean on sky. Harley finally broke out of the roaring reverie, circling back around at an unparalleled velocity to face May and Drew.

“Let’s go, you two. We have contest passes to update.”

“You’re not serious?” Drew said, immediately. “My face has been on magazines. Not really sure I want to snipe a ribbon from some poor, unsuspecting—”

May put a hand on his shoulder, halting him, and he turned to look at it, then at her.

“Drew, look at her. Her mind’s already made up,” May shook her head. “She’s dragging us to this contest if we have to go kicking and screaming.”

“Oh, that’s my little May!” Harley said, cheery voice betraying the chill of the agreement. “Now come along! And Drew, I am begging you to let me take you shopping for less terrible clothes.”

Drew said nothing, eyes narrowed as they fell upon her. It was a tried and true routine, and May chuckled a little to herself.

The former Rockets watched the strange trio as they all made their way in the direction the group had come from, their expressions vastly contrasted against each other.

“You’re gonna have to tell me how you know Team Rocket, Harley,” May’s voice faded out as they all got further away, and Harley shot one last glance at them over her shoulder—

“Don’t fall behind, darlings!”

Her laughter punctuated it and cut into the pleasant atmosphere hanging all around her, an aura of impenetrable darkness poised against the gentle glow of the countryside.

“...did that just happen?” James marveled.

“C’mon, Jess,” Meowth diverted. “We gahtta pompous prick ta pulverize.”

Jessie’s heart swelled a little, remembering how quick he was to stand up for her. She moved her gaze from him to James and Wobbuffet, equally fired up now. At the end of the day, she was lucky to have her three biggest fans.

“Right behind you.”

To the surprise of basically everyone, the group had managed not only to stay together on the walk across town, but actually had engaged in decently pleasant conversation all the way. There was no changing Harley, but there was no changing Jessie, either—and somehow, both women were far too excited about the heat of a good showdown to channel their resentment towards one another into anything else.

They’d found out that Solidad wasn’t the only flair the competition had to offer—as it turned out, this contest was being run Kanto style, with multiple pokémon between the appeal and battle rounds. When this news broke, the former Rockets watched as the expressions on the opposite Coordinators’ faces morph, gears in their head shifting. It was obvious that they’d been planning their appeals and battle strategies in the brief walk to their destination, and it was only then when Jessie realized
precisely how serious her competition was. The thought of a good fight sent her heart pounding, and she let its manic energy carry her.

May had warmed up, just a little, to the idea of the former Rockets existing in the same space as her. They were able to tell her a sizeable chunk of stories about Max, which definitely had to count for something. She exhaled, a breath she hadn’t noticed she’d been holding. They were… quieter. Still themselves beneath it all, but it seemed as if they’d gained some semblance of peace that wasn’t present in the chaos before.

Verdanturf was rich with well-kept campgrounds, a popular spot in Hoenn for the avid lover of nature. May had mentioned that now was the perfect time to take advantage of them—all the contest-goers would likely be rooming at the pokémon center across the street from the contest hall, staying close and absorbing the culture. Her predictions were right—the campground was almost entirely empty, and they were able to snag a nice spot by a beautiful, still lake.

Wind brushed across its surface, sending the surskit atop it spinning out at all angles. They didn’t seem to mind—eyes closed in playful smiles. As if it were an afterthought, May got on one knee and unzipped her bag, pulling out a tiny tripod and placing her upgraded PokéNav upon it. She hit the record button on its screen and elected to let nature run its course around her.

Drew’s eyes stayed on her, and a warm smile completely overtook him at the joy radiating off of her when a good shot would materialize out of the aether. Like always, she was the most beautiful when she was caught up entirely in her passions, so in love with the world around her that she didn’t care what anyone on the fringes of it thought. It carried his heart aloft, in a way that made him feel as though he was meeting her for the first time all over again.

“What’s she even filming?” James crossed his arms, keeping his voice quiet.

“Oh, well,” Harley said in her typical tone. “Little miss May here thinks she’s a travel vlogger.”

Drew was pulled out of his lovestruck dream. Harley excelled at that.

“Her ChuTube account has more followers than your Instacham, so if she’s not, what’s that make you?” The boy deadpanned.

Harley opened her mouth to protest, but May cut them off, finally tuning in to the conversation.

“You talk a lot of dirt for someone who watches it constantly, Harley.”

“Ugh, do not,” she countered.

“My view count always skyrockets on your off-seasons,” May said. “That sure is a wild coincidence!”

“I’ll end you, May,” Harley said, bite in her voice oddly playful.

“I’d be satisfied if MaysExpeditions had a good ten watchers,” May smiled, turning back to her footage. “So the fact that I’ve made it this far is fine enough by me.”

Harley rolled her eyes and, for once, left the girl to her devices.

Almost immediately after setting up camp, Harley grabbed her satchel and tore off to some undisclosed sector of the wilderness to practice her appeal, offering little more to her companions that
a drawn out goodbye and a casual wave.

“You don’t wanna catch up?” May had offered.

“Um, after I win?” Harley responded, as if the girl’s suggestion was horribly absurd.

Her absence left a silence that everyone in the group found themselves almost struggling to fill. May had probably changed the least out of everyone they’d met—here in her home region, doing exactly what she was doing before. Drew didn’t seem much different either, even wearing the same jacket he had adorned all those years ago.

One thing that was noticeably different was how close together the two of them were sitting, how much they seemed to have softened to each other over the years. Meowth had the best memory out of all of them, and even he seemed to recall the two twerps being more at each other’s throats, than anything. Now they looked like they couldn’t be any closer—the way Drew would say something ridiculously pretentious, and May would shove him, laughing playfully with a blush across her face.

“You lot certainly have warmed up to each other,” James said, swallowing a mouthful of noodles.

“Competition really does bring out the best between friends…” Jessie added, almost wistfully.

“Oh, we’re dating,” May said as if it were nothing, grabbing her bowl and going in for thirds.

At least two of the former Rockets choked a little on their food. All of them were unprepared for the bluntness of her statement, the unapologetic way she said it.

Drew gave her a look that was more amused than anything, his smile open-mouthed and slightly askew, eyebrows knitted together. He clearly wasn’t surprised by this, but marveled at it nonetheless.

“You two?!” James sputtered.

“I mean, yeah?” May said, tearing into a tough bit of meat. “A guy can only shove so many roses in your face before you take a hint.”

“You say, like you weren’t dense as a brick until the very end…” Drew teased.

Both Jessie and James were blushing profusely, though neither of them could put words to why. From over in the open field, their pokémon all gave them a collective side-eye that was far too in-sync to be natural.

“Can’t say I’m dat surprised,” Meowth said, acting as though wasn’t still coughing back his food. “What’s more passionate dan a rivalry? If ya t’ink about it, dere ain’t much stoppin’ somet’in’ like dat from toihnin’ into a full-fledged romance.”

There was something… almost hopeful in his voice, and his friends curiously considered if he was wishing for the future, or reminiscing on the past. The conversation topic left a bitter taste in Jessie’s mouth. She willed herself to focus less on ‘dating your rival’ and more on ‘dating.’

“Looking at you now, it’s painfully obvious,” she grinned, crossing her arms. “Though, you could’ve fooled me. I’m used to twerp couples hanging all over each other like lonely slakoth.”

“Yeah, I never really got that,” May said. “Drew’s cool, but I don’t really need to be hugging him twenty-four-seven.”

“I’m hurt, May,” he retorted, and ran a hand through emerald bangs. “Here I thought I was
“Shut up,” she smiled, clapping him on the back. He made an undignified noise and went for her food bowl in his recovery, both of them laughing through the brawl.

The fire sent embers up to the stars at they began to blink into sight. The rival lovers were startled out of their doting spat by the distant sound of an explosion, and a concerned yell that was distinctly Harley.

Mechanically turning their heads away from the thick evergreens, the group all brought their gazes back to the camp, trying to ignore whatever was going on in the woods.

They could not ignore whatever was going on in the woods.

“That Harley…” James muttered.

“She’s a real pill,” Meowth finished for him. “Why do yous put up wit’ her da way ya do?”

“Uh, I mean…” May said, a little unsurely. “Probably ‘cause she’s one of our best friends.”

“Her?” Jessie practically hacked out. “You actually like her? Did you have one pleasant interaction with her at all on the way here? Or ever?”

“What Jessie means is,” James tried. “You both seem so… above her. How is it that you’ve stayed friends for so long?”

May and Drew shared a look, both of them seeming not only hesitant, but unclear on where in their personal histories they’d even start. May seemed to nudge Drew in a way that told him he’d be better suited to it. Stories weren’t his strong suit, but he was inclined to agree.

“There’s… things they don’t tell you about the contest climate.”

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_Drew tore into his hotel room like a contained storm, darkened chartreuse waters circling around inside him. As he fell onto his perfectly made bed and buried his face into the pillow, he had to resist the urge to come undone and scream into it._

_Keeping his composure through flashing cameras and question upon question was hard enough with the sweat on his palms and the chill running through him. A loss was a loss, and he’d learned long ago to accept them gracefully. This one, however, was taking a toll on him._

_May’s season in Johto had gone less smoothly than either of them could have hoped—with her losing streak more brutal than it had ever been before, it was a shock she had made it to the Grand Festival to begin with. Much as he reveled in winning against her, Drew realized one day that he almost couldn’t bear the idea of a season without his dearest rival and—somehow, now—closest friend._

_When May finally made it to the Festival, it was as though all her hardships the last few months hadn’t even existed. She dazzled on stage, she charmed everyone, she was shining brighter than she ever had after hitting rock bottom. It lifted Drew’s heart, the idea that maybe, just maybe, they’d be able to face off one-on-one again, both of them at their brightest and most brilliant._

_Which was why when he watched the last of her battle points deplete and saw Harley laughing_
uproariously from behind his wigglytuff, it felt not only like he had lost his grip on the cliff’s edge, but fallen into the crashing waves and sharp rocks below. Which was why when he saw his portrait against Harley’s in the next round, two paintings of purple and green with fire in their eyes, he felt as though the universe had given him something—some final, sturdy vine to grapple onto before he hit the hungry waters.

May didn’t deserve that loss. It should have been her. It should have been the two of them on that stage together, down to the final moment. All that was left was the chance Drew was given to avenge her loss, to put Harley in his place, where he belonged.

Things were looking up for most of the battle. Harley was tough, and wicked, and not afraid to play dirty—but Drew knew his game by now, confident that he could fight, confident that he could win for himself and for May. Now here he was, sulking like a child, isolated in his hotel room, frustrated at the universe for making him feel as though the both of them had gone through all that hardship only for it to be worth nothing. Only to lose it to a petty, unkind, wreck of a human being who Drew was certain had never known hardship a day in his life.

There was a knock at the door, and he sluggishly pulled his face out of the downy sheets. He really, really didn’t want to socialize with anyone, right now. The knock persisted, and he heard a voice from the other side—


Solidad was too persuasive sometimes. She knew every single hack to pull him out of a rare slump. It was comforting and a little bit irritating, but Drew certainly didn’t mind.

The boy checked himself in the hotel mirror, willing himself to look less like garbage than he did. He smoothed out his hair and opened the door, staring up at her.

“I’m coming in,” Solidad announced.

“Thank you for asking,” Drew uttered sarcastically. “Why yes, Solidad, you may enter my room—”

“You still remember my order?” Drew softened, then immediately hardened again. “That’s almost too saccharine. C’mon.”

He motioned her in, and she passed him his coffee. The thought of having a serious conversation when Drew had hardly any time to process what was tearing him up was… not preferable. But he supposed if it had to be with anyone, Solidad would be his first pick. He sat down on the bed, leaning back, and let out a deep sigh. Solidad waited patiently on him to speak first, knowing her friend and not wanting to impose when he wasn’t ready.

“...why didn’t you stay to watch the rest of the Festival?” he asked her.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said. “I was worried about you.”

“Yes, but why now?” he said. “I lose all the time, Solidad. This isn’t a big deal.”

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“You still remember my order?” she smiled. “I know when something’s bothering you. The sooner you let me in the quicker this will be over.”

Drew let out another sigh, this one more indignant than the last. Solidad was laid-back, for someone of her status and elegance—it was surprisingly easy to loosen himself up around her. He tried for a
more peaceful exhale, collecting his thoughts as he tried to exorcise the worries and anxieties out of him. It was frustrating, being either a wordsmith or a bumbling fool with absolutely no in between.

“It should’ve been May on that stage with me,” he finally said, voice low.

Solidad considered his word choice for a moment, letting the tone of it sink into her head, absorbing his point of view.

“And why do you think that?”

“She’s been through so much this season,” he said, his words unhinging themselves only a little. “Her luck has been atrocious, even though her skills have only gotten better. And then she tore into the Grand Festival despite everything, and she even took down you. She took down a Top Coordinator without even breaking a sweat!

It looked as though things were finally looking up for her. It’s unfair that she had to end her Johto run losing to Harley. He’s manipulative, and unpleasant, and has been nothing but awful to her since the day they met. She deserved to pummel him and take that win.”

“Hm,” Solidad considered. “So… you’re upset because you lost to him too, and you wanted to avenge May?”

Drew blushed a little, unprepared for it to be said so bluntly. “It’s the least I could do for her. A loss for me is fine. A loss for a… for a friend is different.”

“You feel like you let her down,” she added.

“Guess so,” Drew said, shoving his face to his cup.

A silence fell over them, and Solidad strung her words together carefully before she let Drew hear them.

“I understand why you feel the way you do,” she told the boy. “And you have every right to feel that way, for sure. But… May didn’t look upset, did she? If you ask me, she looked… almost relieved.”

“Yeah, that’s May,” he said, half-endearingly, half-annoyed. “When I met her, a loss like this would have devastated her. Now she can lose to the worst person in the contest circuit and shrug it off like it’s nothing.”

Solidad tilted her head a little, peering into Drew.

“What makes you say I’m better? In what regard?”

“You really, really dislike Harley that much?” she inquired. “He does amazing work, you have to admit.”

“You know, I really thought that too, at first,” Drew scoffed. “But it’s gotten to the point where that awful personality bleeds into everything he does. I can’t even look at him objectively anymore.”

“I see,” Solidad said, not sure what to add. To her surprise, Drew followed up his statement with a question—

“You and Harley are close,” he said, confusion edging into his words. “You guys are polar opposites, I just… don’t understand why you’re so fond of him. You’re so much better.”

She paused before Speaking again. “What makes you say I’m better? In what regard?”

“All of them!” Drew raised his voice. “You’re a better Coordinator, more talented, more
hardworking! You’re a nicer person! Things roll off you like water off a psyduck’s back, you’d never hold a grudge. And when you saw me, new and inexperienced and not taking things seriously, you reached out to me instead of rubbing your superiority in my face.”

“You see a lot of yourself in May, don’t you?” she asked him.

“I think so, yeah,” he said. “The truth is, if I had known someone like Harley back then, I might have given up. I don’t know why I’m so protective of her. The thought of anyone beating her down when she’s got so much potential to be better than all of us makes me ill.”

Solidad had a quip for his inquiry, but she elected to save it for a less heartfelt moment. She knew where she wanted this conversation to go, she just had to angle toward it.

“You’re protective of May because as more experienced Coordinators, it’s our job to look out for the newbies and the inexperienced,” Solidad explained. “Even though May’s been at this for a while, you ran into her when she had just started, right? You’ve watched her progress. It’s the reason you’re torn up about her loss now, and it’s the reason I’m here with you. Because even though you could decimate me in a contest any day, I still feel as though I need to watch over and guide you.”

Drew understood what she was saying, he only wished he didn’t have to deal with the blush on his face in the wake of her being so open about her care and respect for him.

“It makes sense, I suppose,” he said, noncommittally.

“You’re important to me, and you’re someone I want to see succeed, and grow,” Solidad added. “But, you’re not the first person I’ve felt that way about.”

Drew’s eyes widened. “You can’t mean…”

Solidad practically cut him off, her tone sharp.

“Drew,” she said, more serious than she’d been. “Do you know about contest purists?”

“I’ve… heard of them,” he said, a bit unsure. “But they don’t actually have a say in anything, do they? I try and stay off social media, so I don’t know much about their deal.”

“It’s true, in the end, the judges have the final say,” Solidad explained. “But contest purists… the people who believe there is only one way to appeal—with elegant and cute and traditionally beautiful aesthetics—they are relentless in their beliefs. I’ve watched unconventional Coordinators become broken down to nothing in the wake of them.”

Drew peered into her, nervous at what she was getting at. She spun a tale of a little boy with aubergine curls swallowing up his tear-stained face, clutching his cacnea as he sobbed beneath a tree. Whispering through clenched teeth that if the shrouded voices on the other side of his monitor were going to call him a monster for the ferocity of his appeals, there was no point in being anything else.

It was hard for Drew to put a picture to it. No, it was practically impossible for him to imagine a world where Harley ever struggled, ever felt anything besides boisterously irritating over-confidence. He was certain that Harley had just burst onto the scene same as ever, and the idea that he was wrong was… unnerving, in some sense.

Outside, crowds started exiting the contest hall. Solidad had missed the closing ceremonies to comfort him.
“You see, I’m fond of Harley for the same reasons you’re fond of May,” she told him. “Because I was there when he was floundering about, sure of what he wanted to do, but unsure of how to do it and stay true to himself. What’s more, he had purists down his throat at every second, screaming at him to just give up.”

“Alright, so his appeals are different, and he was an easy target because of it, I get it,” Drew repeated her sentiment. “But that’s no excuse for the way he carries himself, treating everyone else like they’re below him.”

“Try to understand things from his perspective, Drew,” Solidad persisted. “You go your entire life with other Coordinators ten steps ahead of you just because their style is more well-received. And then they act as though you haven’t had to work twice as hard to get where you’re at. You said I was more hard-working than Harley… you’re wrong. I’m always going to have an advantage over Harley. I’ll never have to deal with the kind of discouragement he has.”

Drew shut his eyes, opening them shortly after to look off to some vacant part of the room.

“I guess I just don’t get why he’s so mean to May,” he muttered.

“I don’t think he understood May for a long time,” Solidad said. “To be honest, I’m not sure he does, yet.”

“What’s there to understand?” Drew said. “Is May really that complex of a person?”

“You’d know better than me,” she smiled. “But Harley is. When he met May, he saw someone who sounded unsure but was bursting with competence. I think he was infuriated by this idea that she wasn’t taking it seriously, wasting her potential. Sound familiar?”

Drew made a noise in indignance, not facing her.

“The difference is, you never took it too far in pushing her,” Solidad continued. “But Harley doesn’t have the composure you do. Especially not in the wake of a traditional Coordinator with cute appeals, who seemingly bests him time and time again without even trying. Knowing Harley, I’m surprised how much self-control he shows around her.”

“Even if that is where he’s coming from,” Drew said. “Even if he has all the reason in the world… that doesn’t make his treatment of her justified.”

“You’re absolutely right,” she affirmed. “I’m not saying you have to sympathize with him, or even like him. I only want to explain to you why he does the things he does.”

Fireworks began to sound outside, muffled vibrations hitting the walls of the room. Rainbow flashes illuminated Solidad’s face as she spoke.

“As veteran Coordinators, it’s our job to make sure this art form doesn’t stagnate,” she said, a contradictory gradient of serene passion. “It’s our job to look out for anyone and everyone who needs it.”

Solidad stood up, offering him a hand. He looked to her, expression mixed.

“Let’s go meet up with our friends,” she smiled, brightly. “You lost today. If you really feel the need to make it up to May, I think she’ll find serenity at the price of a single red rose.”

Drew chuckled quietly, smile askew. Much as he might have disagreed with her opinions on someone like Harley, he did feel a lot better despite everything. He clasped her palm in his and let
himself be brought to his feet.

May had gone through a pretty consistent dry-spell in the ways of shedding tears after losses. Even the hardest of competitions that wore on her the most, she was able to spin into something more optimistic. Now, though, she was curled up in a bathroom stall in some far deserted corner of the contest hall, trying to stifle her sobs so that no unsuspecting soul would walk in and see her in such a pathetic state.

Losing was one thing. Your opponent prodding and poking at all your insecurities and defeating you in the most humiliating way possible was another.

This was supposed to be a fresh start, her racing thoughts ached. Things were supposed to be better this time around…

The girl retreated inward even more, tears spilling down onto her knees and making her feel even colder. She was certain she could come back from a bad season. A bad year, on the other hand, was far more daunting.

Drew was doing all he could to keep his composure as he power-walked down the halls of the stadium, but anyone who knew him could see the telltale signs of unchecked bitterness in his clenched jaw and stiff shoulders. Once upon a time, he was better at keeping his temper in check. It was only when he saw May shake hands with her opponent and forego her post-contest banter with him to bolt off in tears that it resurfaced, boiling beneath his skin.

That girl was something straight out of hell, with sharpened nails and flawless, fiery drill-curls that bounced around her head alongside her wicked laughter. Half her routines relied entirely on shock factor, which wasn’t terrible, but the ugly way she carried herself sullied any opinion Drew could feasibly have on her.

He didn’t care if it ruined his reputation, he didn’t care if the tabloids ate it up—they were going to find some fuel for their mile-long columns on why him and May were secretly in love even if he didn’t, so what was the point in holding back? He was going to march right up to her and give him a piece of his mind, really let her know what was what—

Drew turned the corner. The Sinnohian Coordinator was there, her back bunched up against the wall, the expression on her face fearful. There was an ominous air to the room—Drew noticed it was completely empty, strange, even for the end of a contest—only one other person residing in it. There, with his face shoved imposingly up against the girl, was Harley.

“Repeat it back to me, you little brat!”

“Y—you’re the only one—”

“I can’t hear you,” Harley said, voice eerily calm.

“You’re the only one who’s allowed to make May cry!” she spat out, holding his gaze despite the obvious fear in her eyes. Drew ducked back into the corner, peeping out over the lip of it to watch the spectacle unfold, in awe of what he was seeing.

“That’s right,” Harley said, moving out of her bubble, hands on his hips. “May’s mine, and the only reason you’re trying so hard to bring her down is because you know you’re below her!”
Drew couldn’t help but think Yeah, takes one to know one, but what Harley was saying wasn’t wrong. The boy just certainly didn’t expect him to be the one to say it.

The girl looked off to the side somewhere, unsure of what to say. There was no winning here, and no one had ever called her out so thoroughly before. She’d seen this guy’s atrociously unpretty appeals—if they said anything about his personality, she didn’t want to cross him.

“Out of my sights,” Harley ordered, and the girl stomped off, teeth clenched and fists balled, utterly humiliated. She didn’t acknowledge Drew as she went.

A moment of silence passed, with Harley staring at the wall where his prey previously lingered. For what felt like far too long, he said nothing. Drew was about to dive back out into the hall when the quiet was finally broken.

“Drew,” Harley said, acknowledging him without looking.

He stepped out of the darkness, spotted. “Harley.”

“I’ve handled pest control,” Harley informed him. “You go find May.”

Drew said nothing, pawing for the Coordinator’s true intentions.

“Let her know that roach won’t be bothering her anymore.”

With the last few words, Harley turned over his shoulder to meet Drew’s eyes. There was an intensity burning in them that somehow, the boy understood. He gave Harley a curt nod and took off to look for her.

It lingered in his mind, the fact that both of them had almost immediately bolted to the same location to do the same exact thing in the wake of their rival’s loss. It had never once occurred to Drew—before meeting Harley and watching how he acted around May—that hate was not the opposite of love.

Weeks later, Drew would confide in May the way Harley’s voice almost trembled in the wake of a person who had ruined May. May simply beamed at him as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, smile in her voice when she changed his whole world—

“Again, huh?”

Harley was simultaneously on every street corner and present on none of them.

Every Coordinator magazine on the block across the region adorned her face—some dolled up to perfection with proper lighting and airbrush, some shaky paparazzi photos that did nothing for her complexion. Tastefully put glamour shots that announced to the world an identity hidden far too long, contrasted against consentless, bitter trite that referred to her with the wrong set of words.

Harley herself was a queen not lacking in confidence, but she’d holed herself up in a hotel until the buzz passed, bored of flashes in her face after the first week of it. Unfortunately, she was growing painfully bored of that, too—and it seemed no matter where she turned, she couldn’t escape it.

She’d turn on her PokéNav and scroll through her feed, but it never did much more than enrage her. Photography was a side passion she’d adored exploring with the use of new apps, and for a while, it was going okay—the purists mostly left her alone. When they did bother her and insult her work,
retorting was something she found great joy in, knowing she was above them, having fun formulating witty responses laden with kissy faces and hearts. Recently, though, they’d become far more sinister. She’d roll her eyes, shrug it off, but deep down, it lingered. Not that these people refused to respect her—she’d known that about them from the start—but that they’d never once had the guts to say it to her face.

On the streets, no one picked a fight with Harley, because she had a reputation. She found her discontent in the way their eyes stayed off her, the way their laughter would echo when she’d pass, the way voices would mute themselves to a whisper when she walked into a room. At least before, when it’d happen, she knew there was a foundation for her to null any condescension. Now, though, she wasn’t so sure where she’d land after a fall.

It was infuriating. These people probably had friends and family who didn’t know the ugliness of their heart. As someone who prided herself in wearing her own menace quite literally on her sleeve, nothing annoyed her more than a fool who thought they were hiding it.

When she’d finally crawled out of her rock and jumped back to contests, she noticed the cheers of the crowds weren’t nearly as loud. Her scores remained impeccable, her talent only grew—but it was as though she was right back to square one all the same. Curiously, the tabloids suddenly seemed to only focus on the negative, even though she was making all kinds of new strides, barely ever losing. Every week was about some scandal they thought was happening with her, or about some comment she made being pried apart to mean something ludicrous.

God, what’s their problem? she seethed, throwing her garbage mag on the floor. The only thing that’s changed about me is that I’ve gotten better!

It was a wild contradiction, to simultaneously feel relief at who you are to the world, and resent how they perceive you. More than anything, she loathed how the columns would call her ‘she,’ but continue to post rumours, refusing to highlight the victories she attained. Who did they think they were fooling?

Harley woke up one morning and realized she felt alone. Utterly, miserably, completely alone. Back to fighting an uphill battle all by herself with nothing but bare fists and raw tenacity, back to the roots that made her who she was. It had been so long, she had forgotten the all-encompassing pain of it.

It infuriated her. She’d paid her dues long ago.

Which was why when she flicked on her television after a long day of feeling pissed off at the world, she was about ready to turn it right back off when she saw Drew, wearing sunglasses and deflecting questions, dressed as dreadful as ever. Cameras flashed at him, paparazzi shouted, and he kept his award-winning poker face.

Until Harley heard her name.

Some nobody with a camera had asked Drew about her—“where she was,” namely. Harley halted her position, fingertips hovering on top of the button. Drew practically threw off his glasses, shouting over the crowd.

“Where do you think she is?” he said, voice that of an angry parent scolding a group of toddlers. “If I had to deal with half the garbage she does on a daily basis, I’d disappear too.”

He turned his back to them, offering one last sentiment as cameras shakily zoomed in on him.
“The contest world is on thin ice, if you want the opinion of a Top Coordinator.”

Drew disappeared into the building, and a hush fell across the crowd when their shutters finally stopped. Harley felt something awaken within her.

Not a week later, she stumbled onto May’s vlog channel, only to see that the girl had made a rare video with her face front and center. Usually, May was behind the camera—never doing much more than offering light narration about her travels and the people and Pokémon she’d met up with. The video was titled, simply, ‘We need to talk.’

Harley rolled her eyes at the cliche of it all—the hard punctuation, the authoritative tone. As if May could intimidate anyone into listening to her. She was surprised to find it was a video about her.

“I’m not gonna lie, Harley kinda sucks,” May had said, matter-of-factly. “She’s super intense at her best and downright awful at her worst.”

“Thanks for the flattery, May,” Harley said aloud, but knew the roast was true.

“...but it’s because she’s petty, and vengeful, and ruthless in her pursuits. Not because she’s trans.”

The woman scoffed. Please. I don’t need your protection, shrimp toast.

Her heart betrayed her thoughts.

Shortly after the video was posted, Solidad, Drew, and May called a press conference—announcing to the world that until they could open a a magazine without seeing some baseless slander against their friend, they were tentatively putting their careers as Coordinators on hold.

Stories came out a few days later about how Solidad had become unhinged beyond measure, screaming at the people running the contest circuit to speak out and use their voices for good. What resistance they had crumbled quickly—the contest landscape had quickly become a far less vibrant place with four of its best Coordinators gone.

The purists never quieted down completely. But people like Solidad, like Drew, like May—those were the kind of Coordinators they favoured most. Elegant, adorable, pleasant to the eye. Breaking boundaries in a way that stayed comfortable. The three of them knew this, and denounced the vocal minority with every breath they had.

When they saw Harley for the first time again in ages, it was after she’d just won her first ribbon after a long, soul-sucking drought. There wasn’t a single crack in her armour—her confidence radiated off her, her nasty attitude was present as ever, and she didn’t have any shortage of words for the losers. Just as they’d hoped things would be.

Solidad couldn’t help but notice, when they parted ways, how Harley hung onto her for an extra few moments before darting off to her next competition.

The four of them weren’t conventional friends—but if there was anything they’d learned since meeting each other, it was that convention was most beautiful when being shattered to glittering pieces.

The former Rockets sat there in awe of May and Drew’s recounting of all that had happened in the contest climate while they had been out-of-region, not tuned in. They were at a loss for words, in the
wake of it—these kids were so young, yet they’d been wizened beyond their years. James cleared his throat, blinking soft tears away as he addressed them.

“You twerps…” his voice wavered. “It’s nothing short of incredible, what you did for her.”

May almost immediately shut him down, shaking her head. She refused to let herself or anyone else take credit for what Harley had overcome—

“Harley’s a million times more fearless than we’ll ever be,” she said, firmly. “We did what everyone else should have done. She was the one out there fighting.”

James wiped the tears from his cheeks, more gingerly than the exaggerated gesture his team was used to. Chimecho had since floated beside him, curling its tail warmly around the back of his neck. He cried a lot, but there was something more to the way his breath shuddered, this time.

Footsteps echoed on the ground beside them, and a handbag was thrown clumsily towards a tent. Harley raised her voice, more flowers stuck in her hair than there were when she’d left.

“Oh, I KNOW you ugly bunch of rattata didn’t eat dinner without me!”

Fearless.

May was up with the sun and her PokéNav out, stealing shots of the sudden rainstorm before it passed. It had rolled in pretty quickly, hammering down across the plains, and the group had thanked their lucky stars that they’d come prepared with waterproof tents. Thunder stirred almost shyly, its lightning happening somewhere far away. Jessie and Harley both tapped their feet impatiently—they had appeals to practice, other places to be.

“Was you always inta yer little nature documentaries?” Meowth asked May, trying to find a way to keep himself entertained.

“Not in practice, I don’t think. But I’ve always wanted to travel,” she said, not taking her eyes off the shot. “Before I really knew it, I was going to all these fantastical places with my friends, without much to show for it besides a ribbon here or there. So I started filming. Just little things, at first… but after a while, I guess contest fans found me, and people started telling me they were really looking forward to my videos.”

Drew was off to the side, looking at May like she was the only thing that existed.

“Oddly enough, I just seemed to keep running into Drew wherever I went,” she continued.

His name pulled him away from his daze, and he flashed a trademark smile. “Yeah, our circuits always seemed to cross at the strangest times.”

“Always surprised me how Harley never seemed far behind, either,” May added. “It’s kinda poetic, huh?”

“Hardly,” Drew laughed. “She just excels at stalking us.”

Harley directed her attention to a vacant trash bag that had been tossed haphazardly at the stone ground beneath the gazebo they were residing under. She picked it up, scolding Drew.

“Drew, I’m ashamed of you!” Harley said. “You can’t just be leaving your clothes around like this!”
May choked a little, stifling laughter. Drew just sighed, disappointed in himself for not anticipating it.

The rain passed fairly quickly, and as soon as it had, the Coordinators were out of camp like zubat out of hell. James and Wobbuffet had gone stumbling after Jessie, carrying her belongings and elated to settle back into the role of ‘cheerleader.’ Meowth had elected to stay at camp, this time. His friends were nice, but he valued the time to himself, too—and he could think of nothing more pleasant than a catnap, curled up in the sun and snuggling the egg he’d sworn to protect.

Greninja was hovering irritatingly to his side, eyes sitting slits as the pokémon meditated. The cat couldn’t help but feel as though it had emerged because it didn’t trust him to take care of such a vulnerable little thing, and the thought bugged him more than a tad. Around them, the trees rustled with the sound of companions off in the forest, perfecting their routines.

May was back after a few hours to stake her massive appetite, unsatisfied with the single breakfast she’d had. She sat down at the picnic table, looking warmly upon Meowth as he polished the egg with a handkerchief.

“Dunno if I woulda pegged you as the motherly type,” she told him through a mouthful of lava cookie. “You’re really putting a lot of work into caring for that egg, huh?”

“Someone’s gahtta make sure dis little guy stays warm,” he said, almost lovingly.

“Seems like only yesterday my glaceon was just an egg, too,” May smiled. “Watch out, they grow up before you know it.”

“Such is da ways of parenthood,” he said dramatically. “Ya know, I never woulda considered myself da caretaker type eit’er. Not until I saw one very special egg once upon a time, and somet’in’ deep in my heart told me I had to protect it.”

May leaned back, tranquil eyes on the clouds above. “I kinda feel like I was born to care for others. I don’t really… remember a part of my childhood where I wasn’t looking after Max.”

“Ya got lousy parents?” Meowth said, side-eyeing her. She tensed a little at the question.

“Oh, no, nothing like that…” May paised, thinking. “…at least I don’t think. Dad was always closer to my brother, and he wasn’t home very often, but I don’t think it was his fault.”

Meowth took to words to heart, but found himself searching her tone for other leavings. “And ya mom?”

“She’s the best,” May said, smiling earnestly. “But with my dad busy at work all the time, she really had her work cut out for her. So I tried to help where I can. An egg is nothing, after you practically raised someone like Max.”

“Dat twoihp is a handful at dis age,” Meowth agreed. “Can’t imagine what he was like as a toddler.”

“A crybaby, mostly,” May rolled her eyes. “He figured out pretty quick he could get outta anything with tears.”

“Clever kid,” Meowth said, almost wisely, and Greninja piped up from beside him, its eyes unfolding into circles.

“Oh, dat’s right!” the cat told her. “We didn’t tell ya did, but Greninja here got t’ battle Max, for a
while. Can’t tell ya how excited ‘e was.”

“Um, I bet!?” May said, almost equally excited. “This is Ash’s Greninja, then?!”

“Da one ‘n’ only,” Meowth boasted.

“Wow,” May said, looking at the larger pokémon. “Man, I’d never seen Max so riled up after a league. I had to catch it on tape, but he called me up just raving about it the second the closing ceremonies ended. He probably flipped his little lid seeing you in the flesh, Greninja.”

“Nin,” the pokémon uttered, turning away a little sheepishly.

“Greninja says…” Meowth leaned back, closing his eyes. “‘It was one of the most exciting battles I’d had in ages.’”

May gave them both a sunny smile, knowing it was true.

Late into the night, when the kids and pokémon had gone to bed, the former Rockets found themselves stuck against the fire with Harley. She was oddly serene, strangely quiet, and it felt almost voyeuristic to the group to see her in that state. Noticing their discomfort at this, she shot them a poison-tipped look, cheek balanced lackadaisical on her palm.

“Can’t a girl enjoy some silence, for once?!” she fought, and they felt it best not to question her.

From beside them, their pokémon laid asleep in a pile, breathing softly. Over them, the moon hung half-formed in the clear skies.

“I didn’t place you as the type to enjoy much of anything,” Jessie narrowed her eyes. “That’s all.”

“Joke’s on you, darling, I’m hedonistic to a fault,” Harley grinned, then pivoted. “Relax. We’re creatures of the night, this is the only time we get to wind down.”

Before any of them could who ‘we’ was, Harley casually tossed a pokéball to her side, not looking at the flash of light as she did so.

“Cacturne, sweetie, go play,” she said, and only flinched a little when it let out a near-purr and tackled Jessie to the ground.

She yelped with a ferocity that made Harley almost grateful that May and Drew were such heavy sleepers. The pokémon, on the other hand, were immediately awake, and Wobbuffet and Arbok tore over almost instantly, poised for a battle.

Harley rolled her eyes, pulling the grass-type off of Jessie. “We’ve been over this, love. You’re out of her league.”

“Cac~turne!” it argued, and Harley gave it a doting head-rub.

“Before the sun rises,” she added for emphasis, and the pokémon nodded at its trainer, stomping off slowly off to enjoy the night.

“James, snap out of it and help me!”

The man shook the longing stare off his face and jumped to his knees, helping her off the grassy
floor alongside her pokémon. She winced as she pulled a few spines out of her shoulder, teeth gritted.

“Sorry, my little darling can be pretty clingy at times, I’ll admit,” Harley said, the apology in her voice sounding ingenuine.

“I’ve seen clingier,” Meowth said, and James’ eyes went vacant again.

“I resent your casual attitude toward the desecration of my beautiful complexion,” Jessie huffed. “...but admire your devotion to the terrifying and prickly.”

She seemed to be extending some kind of olive branch, to the surprise of her team. Meowth was almost certain Jessie was going to murder Harley in some manner the second she’d gotten to her feet. This was… certainly unexpected.

Something untapped in Harley’s eyes flared to life, and she willed her walls not to crumble as she sized up Jessie’s words.

“Ooh, that’s right,” Harley mused. “You’re all about boundary-breaking appeals, too, aren’t you?”

Jessie grinned, happy to have found their connecting thread, a solitary cacturne’s needle in a stack of bland mareep wool.

“It’s tragic, how blind some people are to the genius of a nonconventional appeal, no?”

“Ugh, right?” Harley agreed. “You would not believe how hard it is to wow the crowds sometimes with my beautiful little beasties. Like showing up to a potluck with store brand poffins.”

“My poffins are just as good, Helen!” Jessie said passionately, adding to the metaphor. “They sure as hell taste better than your gritty, nasty pokéblock!”

“My friend’s skitty could bake better on an off-contest day than that pathetic excuse for a poképuff assortment you brought over, Diane!”

The two of them shared a look, devious smiles painted on their face. At once, they both dissolved into wicked, triumphant laughter.

Meowth realized, suddenly, that he could think of nothing more terrifying than an unholy alliance between these two, of all the people in the world. There was a very real chance he was witnessing the birth of a black hole about to devour everything around it.

“It was the worst in Kalos,” Jessie said once she caught her breath. “Those snobs. Entirely audience-based. If you so much as breathed near a pokémon that wasn’t cutesy-wootsy they’d eviscerate you.”

Harley rolled her eyes. “Ugh, Kalos. City of Love my foot. The love they have in their heart could cover a penny, on a lucky day.”

“I had to work my ass off to play into their sensibilities,” Jessie scoffed. “High-maintenance stains.”

“Awful aesthetics and gender-restricted performances?” Harley said, sounding almost tired. “I don’t even wanna know how they’d handle me marching in there. That’d be a riot.”

She punctuated it with a sharp laugh, smothering the bitterness in her voice. Jessie looked away from her and to the fire, her team quiet beside her.

“I’ll admit, being back there was nice, before I remembered that the beauty and class of the city was
all a facade,” the redhead said. “Glad we didn’t have that many people to apologize to, there.”

Harley squinted a little, parsing her. “You were serious, then? About this whole karma quest, or whatever?”

“As a heart attack,” Jessie affirmed, laughing a little incredulously. “It’s nearly done with, now.”

“Ew,” Harley said, transparent as ever. “Why? Isn’t that like… the worst? You’re just constantly on your knees begging for forgiveness?”

“Something like that, yes,” James piped up. “It’s give and take.”

“What’s there to take?” Harley stayed recoiling. “Isn’t the whole point of saying sorry that, like, it sucks and you feel like garbage and you don’t get anything out of it?”

“Can’t fault ya for t’inkin’ dat way,” Meowth said. “We’s did too.”

“…so what changed?” Harley said.

She seemed genuinely curious, as if the cogs within her own heart were turning. They briefly wondered if she was always like this once the sun had set and her friends had fallen asleep—softer, more inclined to notice people existing outside the bubble where she reigned a malevolent queen. That, or if she was playing them for information to use much later. Their better instincts told them it was the latter—karma’s loving voice told them to try anyways.

“A snot-nosed brat with a voice like sunshine, namely,” James said. “We’d found him at his lowest many a time, and pried the life out of his hands. He found us at our lowest and pulled us out of the muck.”

“Poetic,” Harley said, eyes narrowed and voice mock-sweet. “So you cleaned up your whole shop because one kid told you to? Sounds like you’re more weak-willed than altruistic, loves.”

“Perhaps,” James mused, and Jessie and Meowth shot him a dirty look for having the nerve to agree. “But he was right regardless. When we stopped being rotten, so did everything else.”

Harley crossed her arms, looking away from the group. She took a moment to register the meaning of his statement, reflecting upon it.

“Just like that?” she inquired. “Everything got better?”

“Nah, it sucked real bad,” Meowth said, bluntly. “It was hard, an’ we’s felt like trash, an’ I dunno about dese two, but I felt like goin’ back ta bein’ dirty pretty much constantly.”

“…but here you are.”

“But here we are,” Jessie said, looking up to the stars.

“There’s virtue in patience, I suppose,” James said, and Wobbuffet muttered a sleepy fragment of his name as he rolled over onto Arbok.

“And now everything’s just… fine?” Harley said, not entirely following.

“Not everything,” Jessie told her. “I mean, you can’t kill all your demons in a single fell swoop. But I feel lighter. And I mean, look at how clear my skin is now.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything!” Harley grinned. “I’ll give it to you, though—there is something a
bit more radiant about you, Jessie darling.”

She blushed, but seemed to lean into it rather than recoil, angling her face closer to Harley’s with a smile to mirror. “Surprise, surprise. The real glow-up was kindness.”

“Well, I’d try it myself, but as you can see, I’m already flawless,” Harley said, eyes burning into her.

“Frustratingly so,” Jessie purred. “You’ll have to tell me your secrets, later.”

James cleared his throat, running a lightning rod through the electricity snapping between the two of them. Meowth sighed in a way that somehow sounded like a thank you, and Jessie retreated back inward. There was a definite twinge of frustration to the look in her eye, but it was replaced by wicked curiosity at the red painted across James’ face and the sheepishness of how he was holding himself. Harley simply leaned back—the absolute demon —expression just as cocky, just as it was.

“Well!” Jessie said, standing up very suddenly and digging a pair of pokéballs out of her jean pocket. “This has certainly been a day, and I’m due for beauty sleep.”

As she returned Arbok and Wobbuffet from their cuddle-pile on the floor, Meowth rose to his feet and set the egg down, stretching his legs.

“Yeah, I’m beat,” he added. “You comin’ ta bed, Jimmy?”

“Go on without me,” he said gingerly. “I’d like to enjoy a little more of the night, if that’s alright.”

“Suit yaself,” Meowth said, retrieving the egg and crawling into their shared tent. Jessie cast a lingering glance at him before she followed after.

With the noisier bunch of his troupe gone, the hush of the night was finally able to set in. Harley peered into James, eyes straining. He was a hard one to read—she was never really sure that she had gotten what it was he was about, if anything, and the thought intimidated her a little. Where his partner was all fire and glamour, he was far quieter—features an attractive mixture of soft and hard, lavender falling across forest-green eyes like lofty treetops. Harley felt there had to be more to him—a boy so saccharine doesn’t find himself a hardened criminal on accident. What that was, exactly, was anyone’s guess.

James caught Harley staring, and let a deep exhale run off him. He was holding something on his shoulders, she could see that much. With his words backed up against his throat, James tried to let the small talk flow—unnaturally, not his best, but words nonetheless.

“Your cacturne,” he said, lost in the stars. “You’ve raised it quite well. Even in the dark of the night, the green of its skin practically glows.”

The Coordinator kept staring intently at him, a quiet memory traveling to her. That was right—didn’t he have a cacnea, back in the day?

“I should hope so!” Harley finally said. “We’ve been together since we were both just little things. Cacturne will always be my dearest darling.”

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“You’ve had it since it was a cacnea, then?” James said, voice lilting.

Harley closed her eyes and smiled, resting her chin in her hands as she spoke. Maybe the way to crack Mr. Rosewater-and-Soda-Pop open was to crack herself open, first.

“My journey as a Coordinator started out pretty sporadically,” she told him. “I’d run away from
home with no pokémon, no plan. I just tore over Cycling Road and hitched a ride from a Mauville bus with a couple pokéballs in my bag, hoping the world would do the rest of the work for me.”

James blinked a little. Harley was confiding a personal tale to him. Harley.

“I was a little shrimp, back then, and I wound up lost in the heat of the desert with no food or water,” she continued. “When night came, I was certain I would freeze to death right there. When I woke up surrounded by a pack of hungry-looking cacturne, I certainly wished I would freeze before they could do to me whatever it was they were planning.”

“A cacturne for the worse, would you say?” James grinned, far too proud of himself.

“Cute,” Harley responded, voice all but dripping malice. “Anyways, I’m pretty sure they were gonna eat me, or something. But there was this one little fledgling cacnea with them who was just too soft, and I guess it stood up for me and convinced the others to spare my life.”

James felt stirrings tapping at his ribcage. Did there exist a cacnea that wasn’t soft, he wondered?

“They carried me out of the desert, but the little one didn’t have it in its heart to say goodbye to me,” she continued. “And since then we’ve always been together.”

She pulled her face away from her hands, angling her neck back to stretch with an inhale before speaking once more.

“It just goes to show that even the prickliest of pokémon have hearts that love endlessly, too,” she turned to face James, looking almost devious. “But you already know that, don’t you?”

He found himself strangely taken by her, the wild purple curls framing her profile, strong-jawed and picturesque. James wasn’t certain why or when he’d grown so nervous as he cleared his throat again and replied.

“I saw my own cacturne again, recently,” he said, meekly. “It looked good. I, um… couldn’t help but be reminded of it, in yours.”

“That little sprout grew up, huh?” Harley asked. “Bet you had fun with that, all the changes, how restless they get at night after they evolve…”

“I couldn’t tell you,” he said, solemnly. “I traded it away long before I was ever able to experience those simple annoyances.”

Harley tilted her head a little, unprepared for that, and unsure of how to proceed. James seemed to sense that he’d brought down the mood, and stuck a smile back on, cheery voice over-attoning for the dip.

“Oh, pardon me!” he said, hands up. “I suppose I shouldn’t dwell on the gloomier side of things. My friend is happy. And I am, too, I think.”

Harley shifted in her seat a little, moving her gaze back away from him. “Your kid was a hugger too, huh?”

“Understatement of the century,” James said, adoringly. “Were you serious about modifying your clothes?”

“One of course!” Harley said, as if she weren’t a questionable individual. “I’m a woman of many talents! Remind me in the morning and I can teach you all about how to de-needle threads.”
She gave him a wink, and he couldn’t help but focus on the way the fire illuminated the hazy outline of her up against the dark of the night. A quiet breeze sang across the camp, and James stayed transfixed on the pink flowers in her hair, their petals being pulled along with it. His heart pounded when he caught the crystal blue of her eyes, and he turned away from her, inward on himself.

He let out another exhale—this one more fragmented, shuddering. Whatever he was holding within himself, Harley noticed, he still hadn’t gotten it off his chest. He looked pretty pathetic, sitting there, and it almost infuriated her that she was still so enthralled by this guy after all these years. She’d been trying to ignore it since she met him, but James was constantly exuding a vibe that made her feel safe, as though she had met a kindred spirit. It was annoying, to say the least—she didn’t even know she was kindred.

She was about to open her mouth—to make a comment, to tell him to spit it out, to do anything to fill the silence. Before she could, however, he choked out a question, vague and anxious-sounding—

“Harley, how do you do this?”

She raised an eyebrow, not knowing where to being unpacking that one. “I excel in many areas. You’re gonna have to be more specific than that, hon.”

“You…” he buried his face in his knees, voice small. “This. All of it. I, you know…”

She didn’t. So she waited, eyes on him, hoping to every god she knew he’d get on with it.

James took another deep breath, finally turning to meet her more directly, eyes shining on her.

“How do you confidently become the person you are on the inside?”

She loosened, a little. Oh. Oh .

That explained some things. That explained things far more than she had the need to know. She didn’t want to put him off, but she couldn’t help but laugh. Not her normal laugh—quieter, more amused, far less cutting.

James’ expression faltered a little. He wasn’t sure what he expected, or if he could expect much, from her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping tears from her eyes. “It’s just, my life is hilarious. Back in the day I was always hovering around you more than I would’ve liked because I was so sure you were like, the only other gay guy within a ten mile radius.”

He let out a dry laugh, and she kept on.

“And now we’re sitting here—bonding, I guess?—and it turns out I’m not even a guy, and you might not be either? I mean… you had to have felt it too, right?”

James nodded, a little meekly. “I… did, yes. Jessie’s the only other person I knew for a long time who wasn’t… typical.”

“Oh yeah, major sapphic vibes coming off that one,” Harley laughed. “Can’t say I blame her! Took me a while, but I’m also of the opinion that women are pretty ethereal, nowadays.”

“I’m with you, there,” James said, a loving warmth radiating from his voice. Harley circled back around to face him, eyes searing.
“Ethereal enough that maybe you fancy yourself one?” Harley probed.

James shook his head. “Not quite. It’s nothing so concrete, I don’t think. I just know that… some days, I wake up, and this—”

He gestured at himself, as wholly as he could.

“—this doesn’t do it for me.”

“But some days it’s fine?”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “One day I’ll be on top of the world in pink and frills, the next Jessie will need me in a nurse’s outfit and I’ll tremble at the idea.”

“Okay, kinky, but—”

“Mind yourself!” James stammered, face burning. “Disguises were an important part of our former life as thieves, I’ll have you know!”

“Cool with me implying that you and she are fornicating, but roleplay? Perish the thought!” Harley grinned wickedly.

James sighed, knowing it was a battle he couldn’t win. At his dismay, Harley seemed to sheath herself, bringing the conversation back.

“Listen, sugar, I’m not going to lie,” Harley said. “I did it all at once, the second I realized I could. I don’t have the patience to sit around and pretend to be someone else. My frustration outweighs any fear and uncertainty I might’ve had.”

He sighed. “I was worried you’d say that.”

“But!” Harley said, moving in close, their faces nearly touching. “I’m an outlier, from what I can tell. Most people, they don’t just waltz into the gender store and find exactly what they’re looking for in their size and in their price range on day one.”

She’d said it so matter-of-factly, James actually had to register that he was having this conversation. Was she implying there was a word for whatever he was?

“You mean… this isn’t… strange?”


The question was sudden, and James was unsure what it meant. “Pardon?”

“Myths, religions, whatever,” Harley elaborated. “From anywhere, not just Hoenn. You read any of it?”

“Certainly,” he nodded. “As a child, I could tear through a book like that in days.”

“Okay, that works splendidly!” she cheered. “What’s the first legendary pokémon that comes to mind?”

Lost in her icy blues, he answered. “Kyurem, I suppose.”

“Genderless,” Harley said, smiling.
“What?”

“Kyurem exists outside our feeble human binary,” she reiterated. “Second to come to mind.”

He remembered his days in Eterna, and his encounter at the lakeside.

“Uxie,” he said.

“Genderless,” Harley repeated. “You wanna try for a third?”

James swallowed, feeling an indescribably radiant warmth not only in the enthusiasm that laced her voice, but in the confidence with which she said it. His heart raced, and he spoke the blaze to existence.

“Moltres,” he said.

“Well, what do you think?” Harley smirked.

He kept his eyes locked on hers, despite the usual aversion willing them to look anywhere else. James had known these facts, at some point—he’d just never stayed fixated on them as a comfort. People and pokémon were different, of course. The more he thought about it, the more he began to realize that the words human beings had come up with to keep order had turned more akin to prison cells as centuries passed.

He hated hard truths. He hated being held down more.

“Every single one?” James said.

“Rare exceptions,” Harley corrected. “But for the most part? More like you than anyone who ever tried to tell you that you were broken in any way.”

What she’d said was so specific, so rooted in experience that it made James feel sick. She continued.

“So! Take it at your own pace, but remember…”

She leaned in close again, this time with a hand placed across the area where his shoulder met his chest. Fire blazed through his veins at her skin on him, and he melted into the touch as though he were starving for it. The firelight cast her near-immaculate bone structure aglow, smoke billowing out beside her.

“You’re legendary, James,” she whispered through candy-pink lips.

With a satisfied smile, Harley pulled herself away from him, standing up with an agile stretch. As if on cue, her cacturne returned to camp, greeting her with a pleasant utterance of its name and a gentle shoulder nuzzle. She returned the affection in kind, before the flash of it returning to rest lit the campground up in red.

“Well, it’s about time I turned in, too!” she said, simply. “Sweet dreams, buttercup.”

James shook the pink from his cheeks, losing himself in the hiss of the campfire as he doused it. An ease settled over his heart as his hands worked, and he envisioned himself smothering his worries as he put them to bed.
Jessie’s head spun as she brought herself to her feet, and she shut her eyes tight, blinking stars from them. When she swayed on her heels a second time, Arbok slithered to her side, dissipating the remnants of the move around them. It chattered a worried ‘ charbo? ’ her way, and she shook her head fiercely, brushing it off.

“No, we can do one more,” she said, voice faltering. “I’m fine!”

It didn’t seem to buy it, and neither did James, who’d just gotten back to the clearing with coffee in hand. He could tell even from a ways away that the woman was reaching her limit, and he quickly darted over to her, choosing his words carefully.


“We don’t have much longer, James,” she pleaded. “The contest is tomorrow!”

“I hear you, dear,” he reassured. “But you’ll be in no condition to perform if you run yourself ragged the day before. Five minutes, all I’m asking?”

She sighed, really not wanting to comply, knowing he was right. “Fine.”

His face lit up almost immediately at how easily she went, and he eagerly passed her drink to her. The cold of it was something she didn’t realize she needed as she sat down, relishing in the feeling of her joints snapping properly into place.

"Arbok, darling, you rest too,” she ordered, and her pokemon nodded obediently, slithering to her side and coiling itself.

Jessie leaned back with another sigh, one palm on the cool grass and another gripping softly onto her mask as she pulled it from her face. She rubbed a few firm circles to her eyes in an effort to assuage the tension. It wasn't until her body had stopped moving that she'd realized just how worn down she was.

James was at her back almost instantly, his ludicrously soft hands working themselves in a soothing rhythm across her aching muscles. She melted into the touch, a quiet hum escaping her, so enthralled at the sensation that she didn't even have it in her to scold him for what he said next.

"You really ought to take better care of yourself, you know," he said, same as ever.

"Quiet, you," she muttered noncommittally, and he chuckled a little.

"Winning isn't everything, Jess," James said, against her wishes.

"Of course it isn't," she agreed. "It's simply all I care about."

James closed his eyes with a smile, electing to let her have this one.

“Well, then I suppose I’ll just have to take care of you myself,” he said.

The statement wasn’t out of character, it was a perfectly normal thing for him to say to her—yet, for whatever reason, she couldn’t help but lose herself in every letter of every word of it, heat rising to her face. The sensation of his hands on her bare back amplified at his tone, sending some sort of electricity to her veins, ineffable.

She huffed crisply, and in anyone else it would send fear through James’ damaged heart. On her, however, it was swannasong, the blush on her face contradicting her bite.
“What’s keeping you up?” he asked her. “If you ask me, your appeal is phenomenal as is.”

She blinked herself out of her reverie, stringing her words.

“It feels… plain,” Jessie told him. “This is my comeback, James. I have to wow them! My performance needs to be so good it makes Sukizo learn a new adjective.”

“That’s a tall order,” James smiled.

“And normally, I’d be perfect to fill it!” she boasted. “It’s frustrating, that I can’t seem to tap into what, precisely, it is that we’re lacking…”

James thought for a hard minute, idling his thumbs at her shoulders.

“Well, if you don’t mind my saying, I think your worries might be misplaced,” he said, trying not to sound argumentative. “In the end, I think what makes a good Coordinator is someone who effectively shows off the love they have for their pokémon, no?”

“I suppose,” she said.

“Then you’ll be fine,” he said, utterly confident. “You love more endlessly than anyone I’ve known.”

Jessie found herself flustered again, but smiling genuinely despite it. She didn’t turn to meet his eyes, taken with the gentleness of everything James was. Traits she’d been beaten down and shunned for were his favourite things about her, and she was sure some of it had to be an act—the universe playing some kind of cruel joke.

She shook off her racing heartbeat and tried to consider the statement from an objective standpoint. When she’d barely waded into the waters of the thoughts, James felt her tense up under his grip, silent. Slowly, Jessie’s eyes began to fill with stars.

“Jessie?” he called.

“Oh, James!” she sprung to her feet, and he yelped a little in surprise. “You have a brain after all!”

She finally faced him, her expression aglow with passion, and she offered nothing more than a thankful smile before she called to Arbok that break time was over, and that she knew exactly what they were going to add to the appeal.

As Jessie darted back off, leaving only an empty plastic cup in her wake, James sighed, utterly endeared.

“Well, I suppose that’s the most we’re getting her to take it easy, today, he pondered to himself.

There in the parting of the trees with the wind blowing through vicious scarlet hair, she put shame to every last inch of resplendent greenery around her.

“Welcome one and all to Verdanturf’s fiftieth annual Pokémon Contest!”

Vivian’s voice radiated from the loudspeakers of the stadium, and May found her heart set at ease. She’d run back through the Hoenn circuit before, just barely falling short of the title of Top Coordinator—but the feeling of seeing that familiar face as the MC never fully left her. There was a
comforting sort of nostalgia in remembering her younger years—unsure and stumbling and waiting for something glorious to begin. It was hard to believe she’d since found whatever that something was.

There was a large coagulation of starry-eyed kids hovering in her peripheral, in complete awe that not only was Drew breathing the same air as them—so was she, and so was Harley. They hadn’t exactly announced that they’d be doing this, and Drew hoped that it would inspire all the younger Coordinators attending to do better rather than call it quits right then and there.

Vivian proceeded through the panel of judges, ending on Solidad. She looked perfectly like herself—relaxed eyes, little makeup, signature strawberry blonde hair falling perfectly straight at her shoulders. May and Drew hadn’t said a word to her, but Harley very well might have squealed—they’d have to find their answer in her expression once they walked out.

The talent there was pretty stunning as the group watched Coordinator after Coordinator appeal—it was clear that Solidad’s mere presence had brought out some of the best people and pokémon around. Drew was the first of their group to go on, and the way the woman’s face had lit up when Vivian announced his name alongside his title told them that against all odds, she hadn’t known. He was all smiles and waves at the deafening crowds, his most genuine grin of all saved for her. It had been so long since they’d seen each other, she almost couldn’t contain how full his appearance made her heart feel.

From backstage, Jessie and her newfound rivals watched him with a fire burning somewhere within. Of all the people to go on first, it had to be Drew—this was going to be a tough act to follow.

“Xatu, let’s go!”

May made a small, excitable noise, and Jessie tilted her head curiously at the screen. She didn’t recall him having the pokémon before—but she also didn’t recall what she’d eaten for breakfast that morning.

Xatu near burst from its capsule, entering the stage with a strong and sturdy pose. It stayed there almost motionless with the full length of its wingspan displayed, wide and wizened eyes completely enrapturing the audience that released around it a chorus of anticipated awe.

Drew inhaled.

“Future Sight!”

Risky move, Solidad pondered, watching her pupil as he performed. It was an attack that involved a hell of a lot of waiting around. Not ideal for a contest—but the boy was always full of surprises.

The pokémon levitated into the sky of the hall, its eyes glowing a searing, eerie blue. When it had nearly reached the apex, it shot its wings wide open once more, shockwaves pulsating throughout the crowds as hair turned and clothes ruffled in its wake. While it moved, the pokémon made almost no sound, its beak seemingly glued shut.

“This certainly is something else!” Vivian commentated, her voice more tranquil so as not to upset the calm of the routine. “Drew’s gone ahead and put a ticking clock on his performance right off the bat! What could he be planning?”

Drew stayed put below his pokémon, his expression a mirror of Xatu’s own zen. At once, he broke his calm, his voice ringing out over the hush that had completely overtaken the arena.

“Teleport, Xatu!”
Xatu then cast itself aglow, the same otherworldly blue as before enveloping it. Its silhouette shone brilliant even in the blinding spotlights of the stadium. Soon as the image of it had began to render in the eyes and minds of the captive audience, it was gone.

The pokémon blinked out of existence, then back in at the far right end of the stadium. Drew looked in its direction before it even materialized, and the second it came back to their plane of existence, called out to it once more.

“Future Sight!”

It shot another ethereal blue gaze upward from where it was, and the trainers all around them let out another chorus of curious sounds. In no time at all, Drew had called another Teleport, then another Future Sight—repeating the pattern over and over again as Xatu darted from corner to corner, in and out of human sight.

“What a thrill, esteemed guests!” Vivian said as the two of them kept rhythm. “Drew’s really getting down to the wire here—a Future Sight can hit at any time!”

Drew called out one final Teleport, his voice far louder this time than it had been to signal that it was, in fact, final. With it, Xatu was in the very middle of the stadium once more, its unmistakable silhouette eclipsing the judges panel, shrouding them ominously in the shadow of its wings.

Drew waited.

Trainers in the stands started making obvious noises of distress—too overwhelmed with the secondhand anxiety of the situation to properly contain themselves. He stayed waiting, eyes shut in confidence, with his pokémon hovering there above him like a cruel omen.

There.

Drew ran a hand through his hair, snapping his eyes open as he called his final card.

“Lucky Chant!”

Soon as the words left him, an uncanny frequency of sound tore through the contest hall, chilling everyone within it straight down to their bones. Otherworldly apertures opened up on all sides of Xatu, where blinding, spectral balls of azure fired out of every single one of them, directly at the pokémon. As the Future Sight took its aim on its own user, Xatu finally opened its beak—crying out a throaty, transcendental vibration that reverberated around the whole stadium.

The attacks collided with it, showering Xatu in a field of vibrant, glistening sparks of light. For a moment, it wasn’t visible in the incredible shower of divinity—its fate uncertain, seemingly defeated by its own awesome display of power.

Then, from within its center, the luster began to disperse itself, and Xatu came back into view, completely unharmed. With one final crow, it descended back downward next to Drew. At once, they both shot an arm out in perfect symmetry, signalling the end of their routine.

The crowd had already begun cheering before its end, the moment they saw Xatu emerge with arms outstretched amongst the cascading fountain of sparks. As the performance found its close, their volume only increased.

Solidad couldn’t help but smile to herself, numbers and scorecards turning over in her more logical mind.
You're transparent as ever, Drew, she thought. May’s performance style was all over that song-and-dance.

He must’ve known she was teasing him deep within the confines of her subconscious, because as soon as the words popped into her head, he shot her a look that said Yeah. Got a problem?

I should dock you points for being such a brat, the next thought followed, and she keyed in a near perfect score.

Harley darted onto the floor of the stadium, blowing kisses every which way, hair bouncing behind her as she turned. If there was one thing that could be said about her fans, it’s that they were loud. How many of them existed was inapparent in the deafening roar of their applause, and she was a blooming desert flower, their praise like sunlight upon her.

“Maractus, sweetie, that’s you!”

She tossed her pokéball enthusiastically into the air, brandishing a pokémon that neither Jessie nor James had ever seen in person. It was one that James had always had a fondness in his heart for when he’d seen it in books, though—the flowers in this pigtail-like stalks, the way it always seemed to have something to dance about—but typical of Harley’s crew, every cute element of it was overshadowed by the wicked grin it wore across its face.

As she stood beside her pokémon, James and Jessie were hit with the realization at the same exact time that her new outfit was modeled after its look. Jessie drug a finely-manicured hand across her face in secondhand embarrassment—this demon was never going to change, was she? She’d simply jumped from one spined terror to the next.

The sight of them next to each other sent the audience back into cheers—one point Harley had always had going for her was her astounding grace in outfit Coordination.

Maractus shook its arms a little in a confident brandish, and on any other of its species, it was sure to look absolutely joyful and adorable. On Harley’s maractus it was an almost foreboding rhythm, two quiet gyrations and a pivot to the side. Rinse, repeat.

“Alright, my darling,” Harley said, dotingly. “Let’s show ‘em a Synthesis!”

The pokémon nodded, and began a measured prance in an intentionally messy spin around her. The house lights within the stadium intensified, bleeding heat waves into the pit below, and Maractus began to gesture with its arms as though it were tossing something upwards to the artificial sun. Verdant colour began to pool at its and Harley’s feet, and one by one, flowers cropped up from the still earth and bloomed. Where previously there had been nothing, the pokémon had grown a wealth of lush greenery across the floor of the performance stage.

“Oh, Maractus, it’s positively gorgeous!” Harley cheered it. “Perhaps we should give them a better look at all these beautiful flowers?”

Jessie narrowed her eyes, watching the Coordinator from a tiny screen backstage. All that talk about a nonconventional appeal, and here she was picking flowers alongside a dancing bit of shrubbery.

“Well, go on, then! Petal Blizzard!”

Maractus moved its needled arms again in an uncharacteristically fluid swooping motion, and hundreds upon hundreds of the vibrant petals adorning the flowers below were pulled from the ground. They flitted upwards in a chaotic tornado, enveloping it and Harley on all sides, a beautiful
palette of pinks and greens. The audience made varied noises of admiration, astounded by the pokémon within the storm, how easily it kept itself and its rhythm, how euphoric it looked to be at the eye of the hurricane. Surrounded in petals and dancing around rapturously, it was the picture of not only elegance, but delightful perkiness.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” Harley affirmed, marvelling at the abundance of nature as the two of them swirled in its cauldron. “What a beautiful storm we’ve created together!”

She seemed to be playing some kind of part, Jessie could tell. Parsing what exactly it was she was doing, however, was—

“Maractus,” Harley said, face darkening. “Poison Jab.”

Oh.

All at once, her pokémon lost any semblance of grace or cuteness it had previously worn. Its menacing smile was back, and with the blizzard still going, Harley angled out her arm for it to use as a springboard. Maractus rocketed off the floor, then off of her, jumping far, far above the beautiful calamity still churning down below.

A sharp spine on its arm began to glow a noxious purple, and it shot it forward to stab one of the thicker petals from its roost in the sky, skewering it. Toxins spread throughout the flower’s thin skin almost instantly upon impact, and it wilted to nothing, falling pathetically to the bottom of the stadium.

“Keep it up, Maractus!”

It extended another needle, then another, tearing into petal after petal at breakneck speed. From up in the stands, James marveled at how hard Harley must have worked to train it in this manner—from within his vast, tome-dense knowledge of grass types, he found himself remembering that a maractus typically had abysmal speed. Harley’s was moving so quickly they could barely comprehend it.

As more flowers died and plunged to the ground below, Harley cackled uproariously. Reveling in the destruction, she stood there with her arms outstretched as withered and blackened plant life tumbled down around her.

“Destroy it, darling!” she beamed. “Destroy it all!”

The audience was split pretty evenly—between fearful contest-goers who had never seen Harley in action before, and diehard fans who cheered alongside her. Needless to say, Solidad was sitting at the far end of the judges’ table with an almost smitten look on her face—a stark contrast to Joy, who was utterly gripped by terror.

“Finish those pretty little scraps off, Maractus!” Harley ordered. “Pin Missile!”

The pokémon let out a final cry, leaping above the wreckage one last time and sending a tirade of needles cascading downward. With it, the last of the errant petals were pinned helplessly to the ground from whence they came, lying there motionless alongside their fallen comrades. Maractus landed next to Harley, both of them with their arms above their heads in a confident finish.
The crowds erupted.

Solidad shut her eyes at the sound. After those long months of near-silence, it was something that never got old.

“That’s a Harley original, folks!” Vivian punctuated. “What an honour it is to be able to experience it up close!”

Harley was all smiles and kisses, eyes shut in gratitude. It was in these moments, Solidad realized, that she was the most herself. So overcome with joy that she didn’t have the time to put her walls up, to cower behind the needles she’d so carefully crafted to protect herself. Bursting with love for the scene that had made her, genuinely looking to the people who had stood by her when she had nothing with love radiating off her like sunbeams—this was her. This was Harley.

Jessie was a contradictory mess of rapture and anxiety as her heels clicked down the halls toward the stadium. There was no reason to be nervous about this. It had only been a good year or two since she performed. Nothing to worry about, there. Nothing at all.

At the same time, pre-contest jitters weren’t something she hadn’t experienced before—she’d just known far more effective methods for zipping their mouth shut back in the day. It’d been so long, she forgot her mantra—the one she’d tell herself, inching her forward and reminding her that she lit up every room she walked into, that she was far above the common folk.

She exhaled as the stage lights came into view. She was going to win. Even if she didn’t—perish the thought—she was at least going to get to compete alongside Arbok, and make up for all those years she took the stage without it.

“Please welcome to the stage—a mysterious new Coordinator who calls herself Jessica the Reborn!”

The sound of her name and the cheers of the crowd were her solace, the push she needed to snap herself into place.

That’s right, she mused, chiding herself as if she’d forgotten how to walk. I’m a performer! This is where I belong!

From up in the stands, James was angled over the egg in his bucket seat, screaming his head off, only a few bad decisions from falling over the railing and plummeting to the floors. Meowth was beside him with pom-poms in his paws, curled tail riding up his miniskirt, vibrant as ever while he cheered.
“Destroy them, Jessie!”

“Crush ’em inta dust!”

Jessie loosened her stance, becoming one with the stage around her. If anyone could make a comeback like this, it was her.

“Arbok, go!”

The snake leapt out of its ball, landing hard on the floor. It proudly boasted its name, and Jessie gave it a chaste pet on the head, nodding to it. Without words, it followed their practiced routine—slithering dutifully to the opposite end of the performance area, away from her. With the both of them at either end, they were ready to begin.

“Arbok!” Jessie called. “Haze attack!”

It swished its tail a little to build up the momentum of the attack, a powerful hiss rising in its throat. After a beat, Arbok bore its fangs, a thick white mist pouring from its mouth, enveloping the whole arena. The fog was so thick that one could barely see an inch in front of them, draped over the hall like an ominous blanket. From within it, Jessie was the only thing visible—the stage lights hitting the reflective material of her dress and keeping her from vanishing in the mist.

Oh, wow. Harley marveled, her eyes widening as she watched the woman from backstage. Not bad, Jessie darling.

Jessie closed her eyes, getting into the headspace she was going to need for this. When they opened again, they were not her own—lonely and ruined, those of a woman who was made soft in the wake of the heartless world around her. The fire gone, the will to fight lost. She took a few shaky steps forward, her voice wavering as she spoke.

“A-Arbok?” she called to the void of white.

Silence hung all around her, and the crowds murmured with varied engagement as they watched the scene unfold. Jessie’s pokémon did not respond. She called again, more dramatic this time—

“Oh, Arbok!” she near-wailed. “Where have you gone, my dear?”

She fell perilously to her knees, collapsing in a pathetic heap on the stage floor, the chill of the haze still surrounding her. Hands buried in her face, she wept—over the top and ridiculous and so perfectly Jessie. She was not merely a Coordinator showing off a pokémon—she was an actress in a play the two of them had carefully orchestrated.

As she lay there—the mantra repeating in her head that this is what she was born to do—a presence lingered behind her. She couldn’t help but break character for a moment from where her face was hidden behind her hands, cracking a confident grin.

A collection of shapes began to blur into focus at her back, and as the crowd around her gasped in surprise, so too did she. Leaping back to her knees at breakneck speed, she whipped her head around to face them, eyes wide. The image began to glow more intensely, with shocking clarity despite the smoky vapour around it—piercing eyes of melted saffron and scarlet, a wicked tar-black smile hanging beneath them. It seared right through as though the lingering mist were nothing—striking paralytic fear deep into the now captive audience. The most terrifying kind of monster that could crawl through the heavy fog—the kind one couldn’t see, nor comprehend.

“What dutiful synchronization!” Vivian marveled. “Arbok used its Glare attack without even being
instructed to by its trainer!”

Arbok let out another roaring hiss, and the toxic glow across its hood intensified before it dissipated the haze all at once, bringing the stadium back to where it had been at the start. With it, Jessie tore over to her pokémon with arms outstretched and grateful crocodile tears running from her eyes, embracing it. Arbok fell into the motion with ease, coiling itself around her the way it so often did when she let it, planting its trademark forked kisses across her cheeks.

The crowd shook off their fear as the monster embraced its prey, the two of them so woven together that it was near impossible to tell, in the purple sequin of Jessie’s dress up against shining scales, where one ended and the other began.

“Truly a wonderful subversion, folks,” Vivian noted. “A transformation of fear and solitude into love and companionship!”

Harley stood with her arms crossed as the performance drew to a close, a sense of strange pride swelling somewhere within her. Perhaps there was hope for the future of contests after all.

Here’s to the uglies, she smiled.

“Glaceon, take the stage!”

May threw her ball with her trademark twirl, a bright simper painted across her face. The crowds roared at the sight of her pokémon, which had long since become a fan-favourite on the scene. May’s in particular was near-radiant with the signs of being well-raised and cared for, with its pearly-blue coat glittering like freshly fallen snow as it gracefully shimmered to life.

There was little hesitation in her before she began, something that both Jessie and James took almost instant note of as observers. Looking at her there, May hardly resembled the girl they’d known all those years ago—unsure and fumbling and scared for the future, trying to find her footing.

“Let’s do this, Glaceon!” she cheered. “Make it hail!”

With a deft swish of its head, Glaceon let out an almost celestial howl, a haunting sort of lullaby that echoed across the auditorium. Dusty clouds began to form from nothing at the peak of the stadium, and nearly every head beneath them peered upward curiously. The artificial skies broke apart at once, unleashing an icy rhythm down to the stage floor below. It stayed concentrated in the center, and some of the audience-members on the inner rim of seatsmotioned their hands out over the rails, wanting to experience the cold for themselves.

“Perfect!” May affirmed. “Okay! Aurora Veil!”

Some contest-goers murmured to themselves, having not ever heard of the move before. The sound of their confusion was something that, many years ago, might have made May recede into herself. Having experienced more contests than she could ever count, it was music to her ears, now.

Max had dragged her into a Technical Machine shop in some far corner of one of Alola’s islands, suddenly taken with the idea of seeing all it had to offer. After making him follow her from food truck to food truck all week, she saw no point in complaining—especially not when she saw the cyan diskette on the shelf in its jewel case, beckoning her forward.

Back in the present, Glaceon leapt forward, the picture of grace. It wore a vulpine smile as it sung its
name once more, a sweeping, fluid motion calling to the pouring heavens above. Not too far below the clouds, directly in the center of their cover, an otherworldly rainbow slowly unfolded, rippling through the tumbling precipitation like a flag cast aloft.

“Truly wondrous, folks!” Vivian said. “May and Glaceon have set up a wonderful contrast of drab grey and clear skies all at once!”

“We’re not done yet!” May kept on. “Glaceon, Ice Shard!”

The pokémon tore upwards into the shifting and phantasmal sky, carried aloft by none other than the sheer power of its jump. One by one, thick fragments of frost materialized around it, and it shot them above its head. Over, and over, and over—gravity pulling them back downwards to the floor.

“Iron Tail!”

Before the first of them could hit the floor, Glaceon was on it with sharpened tail lit alabaster. It crashed the appendage into the ice, shattering it on impact, where it glittered down over May.

“Keep it up!”

With the momentum of the hit, the pokémon spun through the air, bringing its tail down hard on each and every chunk of ice that it had previously created. They broke down into grounded stars as they filled the stage floor, mixing with the hail. Around and above them, the shifting and moving blanket of rainbows hit the facets of their splintered forms and illuminated them iridescent.

“This is stunning!” Vivian announced as the crowd oohed and aahed around her, eyes shining. “It’s as though we’re beneath a thousand glittering diamonds!”

With one final Ice Shard up into the air, and a subsequent Iron Tail, Glaceon landed next to May as the icy jewels rained down around them, and the clouds finally dissipated. The second they struck their finishing pose, excitable squeals overtook any sound around them.

May stuck her tongue out and shot the crowds a peace sign, a trademark she’d come to ease comfortably into over the years. Flattery still wasn’t something she really knew how to handle even after her confidence had grown, but she tried the best she could to combat the ever-present urge to make herself smaller in the wake of that attention.

Solidad kept her poker face as she was watching the girl, but on the inside, she was broken down into adoring laughter. May’s unorthodox style all over Drew’s performance, Drew’s elegance all over May’s. She was a tropical Lilycove flower up against windy seas, and he was a sturdy and ornate rose, and beneath the soil, their roots were irrefutably entwined.

When the screen flashed on announcing Jessie’s second opponent in the battle rounds, she let out a long, resounding groan. Almost instantly, said opponent was at her back with an arm around her neck, practically beaming in sharp contrast.

“Oh, look at that, Jessie dear!” Harley cheered, and her voice lowered an octave. “Looks like I get to pumpel you early.”

“As if!” Jessie shouted, swivelling around out of the Coordinator’s grip. “You really think you stand a chance against my precious Arbok? Please!”

“Ooh, Jessie, Jessie!” Harley grinned wickedly. “You really have gotten rusty, huh? Telling me which pokémon you’re going to fight me with? You had fifty-fifty chance of getting type advantage
and you blew it!”

The woman tried not to lose her cool, but her gritted teeth and balled fists and bared gums probably did that on their own.

The gears in her head turned, then, and she loosened a little. Wait. Wait. There was no rule that said she had to use Arbok. In the end, in a special contest like this, it was right down to the last minute.

But, if I do that, then…

Her thoughts raced around on their own, and she put them to the back of her mind. There was a wench to deal with.

“I am going,” she said. “To destroy you, Harlot.”

“Bring it on, then,” Harley said, pressing their foreheads together. “Old bat.”

Harley’s violet eyelashes were practically up against Jessie’s cheeks, her exhale muggy and present on the woman’s face. At this rate, someone was going to get pushed against a wall and kissed until they were black and blue, and Jessie really didn’t feel like traumatizing a room full of kids just yet.

A buzzer sounded, saving the situation, signalling the both of them toward the stage. Harley pulled back and smirked confidently, giving Jessie a swift wave before she sashayed off in her typical manner.

“Don’t choke, hon!”

When she was out of sight, Jessie went in the opposite direction, trying to keep a sanguine smile off her blood-red lips as she clutched a pokéball in her hand.

Stage lights beat down on the two of them, and when Vivian started the clock, Jessie was the first to throw her ball. In lieu of a name, or of a command, or of something elegant and charming, she merely coated her voice in a thick and permeating poison, shouting one single word.

“Surprise!”

Wobbuffet hit the ground with a proud and eager salute, greeting the passionate crowds he hadn’t realized he missed. Among them, James and Meowth angled themselves over the railing nervously, the latter of the two dropping a single pom pom to his back paws.

“What’s she doin’?!?” Meowth panicked. “Has da goihl finally lost’er head?!”

“Wait,” James said, oddly composed. “Wait. Let’s see what she has planned.”

Jessie cast her gaze to Harley, keen on getting to witness the woman’s shocked response. Knowing Harley, if there was any chance she had a pokémon that knew psychic or ground moves, she would go for them. But Wobbuffet could easily tank a ground move, and a psychic one might as well be nothing to him. She didn’t always pride herself on strategy, she’d be the first to admit—but today was one of her better days, and she was going to bring Harley to utter ruination in front of all of Verdanturf if it killed her.

When she caught the opposite Coordinator’s expression, her head was dipped, eyes obscured from view under long, wavy bangs. Jessie revelled in the idea of Harley sulking, caught off guard,
Harley began to laugh.

It started quiet, dark, a subtle shake in her shoulders—and quickly built to a fever pitch, the kind of obnoxious and unrestrained cackling that everyone who knew her had come to accept. She threw her own pokéball into the air, punctuating her laughter with an equally uninhibited utterance—

“Surprise yourself!”

With an ominous glittering, her ariados hissed across the field, its narrowed and striking eyes piercing right into Jessie and Wobbuffet.

“You wretch!” Jessie shouted. “You were supposed to anticipate Arbok!”

“You really think I’d fall for something like that?” Harley said. “Please, you might be a trainwreck, but you’re not that stupid.”

Jessie was about to scream, eyes shut tight in anger and a high-pitched growl reverberating in her throat. She couldn’t object to it without compromising her own image as calculating and brilliant, but Harley had completely read her. Here they were, now, facing each other down.

“Just like last time, isn’t that just kismet?” Harley cooed. “Let me guess. Your bumbling blob still hasn’t learned how to attack, huh?”

“No matter,” she retorted. “We’ll eviscerate you lot without laying a hand on either of you!”

Harley laughed again, then put her hands on her hips. She said nothing. The clock counted down. Crowds began to whisper amongst themselves, unsure of what was happening.

“Oh, this is a nightmare,” James said, covering his eyes. “I can’t watch! Not again!”

“Coordinators,” Vivian addressed them. “One of you is going to have to move!”

Jessie was on her like bark on a growlithe almost instantly, spewing a rage-induced speech that James and Meowth knew she’d been rehearsing in a fantasy in her head for years.

“He’s physically incapable, you cretin!” she howled. “It’s a wobbuffet! If you’re going to earn your career in a pokémon-based craft, at least learn some basic biology first!”

Vivian said nothing, simply reached for the yellow card hanging at her waste, the motion itself threatening Jessie back to silence. She let out another primal scream, ready to tear her hair out, and Harley rolled her eyes.

“Oh, fine,” she said. “Ariados, let’s not waste time. We know what to do, right?”

Jessie snapped out of her wrath instantly, hardening her battle stance.

“Wobbuffet, this is our chance for revenge,” she told him. “Ready yourself.”

“Wobba!” he affirmed. He wasn’t really a creature of revenge as much as one of karmic retribution—but this was important to Jessie.

“Ariados, wrap that little punching bag up with String Shot!”

“Now, Wobbuffet!”
Ariados lunged at Wobbuffet, a stream of thick and viscous web shooting out of its fanged mouth. There was no angle to it—which he’d easily anticipated—and without much trouble, the patient pokémon managed to leap out of the way. He landed a safe distance off, exhaling sharply and with brow knitted. As the impact of the dodge set in, the corner of Wobbuffet’s mouth upturned into an uncharacteristic grin, and he held out a single arm and motioned forward—as if to say come at me.

Harley’s eyes widened as her points depleted. This was going to be interesting.

“You’re incredible, Wobbuffet!” Jessie cheered.

“Don’t let your guard down!” Harley taunted. “Keep it up, Ariados!”

It hefted another barrage of shots at Wobbuffet, who was back on his feet practically pirouetting out of the way of every last one. The idea of it was comical, unorthodox—a wobbuffet’s whole purpose was to sit right there and take attacks, unmoving and unflinching. A wobbuffet was also typically quiet, introverted, and obedient, however—so perhaps Jessie’s was the single outlier across hundreds upon hundreds of soft-spoken, tolerant creatures.

Harley’s battle points were plummeting quickly with every dodge, and she gritted her teeth, knowing it would soon add up.

“Ariados, come on!” she shouted. “You know you’re faster than this little blue stain! Shoot where he’s going to be, not where he is!”

Ariados leapt into the air at its trainers command, firing a false shot down at Wobbuffet, who jumped out of the way. Its second shot was closer, more precise—just barely grazing the patient pokémon, who wavered a little in his landing. The third shot came at close quarters, and with as quick thinking as he could muster, Wobbuffet tried for a dodge not to the side, but backwards toward Jessie. He fell into a messy swivel and lunged in his trainer’s direction, and in the extra few seconds it took him to do this, Ariados was finally able to land a hit.

Wobbuffet found himself pulled backwards, his momentum halted, his movements ceased. It hadn’t managed to wrap its web around his body, or even his arm—all Ariados had gotten a hold of was his tail.

“Wobbuffet, you have to—!”

Jessie cut off her sentence herself, the realization slowly coming to her.

They’d won.

She cleared her throat, voice high and dramatic, playing up her tone so that Harley could hear every syllable loud and clear.

“Oh, heavens no!” Jessie said, hands clasped on her cheeks. “Wobbuffet, you have to break free! If you can’t, it’s going to be just like last time!”

Wobbuffet struggled toward her, ebony tail caught in a battle of tug-o-war between his enemy and his body, quietly straining out his name in pain. Ariados didn’t recede an inch, heaving its head upward in an attempt to get a stronger hold of Wobbuffet. The blue pokémon had fallen to the floor, arms dug into the dirt in a last-ditch effort to keep himself steady.

“Ariados, he can’t hold on forever!” Harley called, utterly oblivious for once in her life.

“Wobbuffet, yes you can!” Jessie countered. “This is what you were made for!”
Wobbuffet knew what she was doing, but he wished she’d do it a little quieter. There were whisperings of espers in his brain like quiet gales, swirling around inside. With every tug on his tail, they intensified, increasing their volume until it was absolutely ear-splitting, tearing into his subconscious like winds on the stormy ocean. He didn’t know how much more he could take, willing the pain at the front of his arms to lessen, willing the excruciating pull at his back to stop. He was going to split in two before the night ended, he was going to lose and disappoint his best friend, he—

Ariados jerked backward once more, and Wobbuffet’s high whine morphed into an unshackled scream, far unlike any Jessie had ever heard from him before. She was utterly lost in the sound of it. Caught there halfway between concerned maternal love and the thrill of knowing she had this, she felt as if she were being tugged clean apart, as well.

The spider halted suddenly and loosed the string, an intense shudder running clean through its body. On the other side of the arena, Wobbuffet had risen to his feet again, his whole body glowing a haunting indigo.

Harley pulled back, a little, following her pokémon. Wobbuffet turned his head backward to meet their eyes, and in the subtleties of his mostly-unchanged expression, their blood ran cold with fear.

The webbing was slack in the center of the arena, running between them like a wicked thread of fate. Ariados was suddenly struck with the notion that Wobbuffet was no longer the one shackled by the binding webs.

Illusory wisps of blackened firelight ran off the patient pokémon, and the arena was utterly plunged into darkness, with nothing but the chilling glow left to light it. Wobbuffet began to follow the string between him and Ariados, stuttering forward step by step as it slowly burned to nothing in his ominous march. Harley snapped back to the present, trying to regain her grit.

“Ariados, do something!” she commanded. “Bind him before he can get to you!”

The pokémon sputtered out a nervous hiss, nodding to its trainer and shooting another String Shot toward its opponent. Wobbuffet did not flinch, nor did he move—the ribbons of web disintegrated instantly as they hit the ghastly flames crackling off of him.

Ariados and Harley realized they could do nothing, as the enemy pokémon was nearing their space. Both of them stood frozen to the spot, eyes wide in terror, unsure of what it was this seemingly docile thing was going to do to them. Words flashed through Harley’s head, then, about how the most terrifying thing in the world was the anger of a kind creature.

Wobbuffet was on Ariados before either of them could think of anything, his grip tight on the spider’s front two legs. Ariados felt the unmistakable dread of something staring at it, boring their gaze into it as if it were prey. Nervously searching its opponent for signs of it, the pokémon noticed the eyes adorning Wobbuffet’s tail were glowing blood red.

The spider brought its shining gaze back to Wobbuffet’s main pair, and the blue pokémon tugged it closer, so close he might as well have been stealing the breath from its lungs. All at once, Wobbuffet roared his name in defiance, taking Ariados into his flames and dragging the both of them downward.

The crowd was silent fear all around them, petrified in the darkness alongside the two trainers as they battled in the pit. Jessie, even, was frozen to her spot watching her kindest friend defeat one of her most wicked enemies. She recalled a time long ago when she’d accidentally stepped on Wobbuffet’s tail and he’d headbutted her into a tree, ruining her dress and her mood. She’d scolded him for
overreacting, all claws and fire and wrath. Realizing what could have been, she was now inclined to buy her pokémon dinner as thanks for sparing her life.

Their faces pressed against each other in a move of intimidation on the patient pokémon’s part, they turned phantasmal in the wake of the blaze and sunk eerily into the floor. Looking at how Ariados struggled and cried, Jessie couldn’t help but be hit with the thought that it almost looked as though Wobbuffet was dragging it straight to hell.

With the light source gone, the contest hall fell to darkness. Fearful sounds echoed out all around it, mixed in with eager ones of contest-goers who wanted to see the outcome of what had happened. Spotlights popped back on, one by one. In the center of the pit, both Ariados and Wobbuffet were laying there, knocked-out on their backs.

All at once, both Harley’s and Jessie’s points depleted to zero, and Vivian threw her free arm out to call Battle Off.

The two women on either side of the field were stunned to silence, sharing the same amount of frantic back-and-forth looks from the judges back to each other. Harley definitely hadn’t expected a one-hit-KO, Jessie hadn’t expected that Wobbuffet would go down with it.

“Dis can’t be happenin’,” Meowth said, up in the seats. “Dey tied?! What’s dat mean?!"

James was leaning over the egg, messily flipping through a contest rulebook. He lowered it from his eyes, grip shaky. “I haven’t the faintest idea!”

The judges were whispering to each other, their words muffled by the sound of audience chatter. Contesta pulled away from his companions and motioned Vivian over with a wave, and her expression changed instantly at whatever it was he said.

“Esteemed guests!” she addressed. “It seems as though we have a ruling!”

Jessie and Harley swiveled their heads around, their hair a collective hurricane as they looked to her for answers.

“A powerful use of String Shot gave Harley quite the advantage,” she elaborated. “...or so it seemed! Wobbuffet was able to spin that web into an attack of its own, pulling Ariados down with Destiny Bond!”

People in the audience continued to whisper. Vivian kept on.

“Given that they took an enemy attack and turned it into an advantage for themselves, the judges have found this battle in favour of Coordinator Jessica and Wobbuffet!”

Jessie’s portrait flashed onto the screen, the bold text under it declaring her the winner. In the wake of the crowds cheering, she looked around in stunned confusion. She’d won a contest battle on Hoenn soil.

Harley tugged on her hair, yelling to the heavens that it was unbelievable she lost to such an amateur. She angled her pokéball out to return Ariados, gritting her teeth. The reality of the situation suddenly hit Jessie at the sound of the spider phasing back to data, and she was in the center of the pit, at Wobbuffet’s side.

Her pokémon shifted a little, coming back to the waking world. Her voice was soft with him there in her arms.
“You know Destiny Bond?!”

“Wob-buffet,” he groaned.

_I’m a wobbuffet_, he’d said, half-conscious.

Jessie laughed a little at the dryness of his tone, expanding her own ball to allow him his rest.

“I’m sorry for pushing you like that, dear,” she told him before returning him. “Get some beauty sleep.”

She rose to her feet and met Harley in the center of the field. Surprisingly, the loser was the one to extend her hand first. Jessie returned the handshake, meeting Harley’s absolutely stifling grip with her own. The redhead was yanked forward by her opponent, her singing words right on her face.

“Your manicure is atrocious,” Harley said, smiling.

“Your hair looks dreadful,” Jessie returned it in kind.

Cheers echoed around them as they turned to the audience with bright smiles across their face.

May stood proud-stanced at the other end of the battlefield, trying not to laugh to herself at the prospect of beating the tar out of her boyfriend for what must’ve been the thirtieth time. They’d never grown tired of this song and dance, but it was awfully curious how the computer always seemed to pair them up at contest after contest and festival after festival—as if it were making up for the devastating times when they’d just fallen short of each other.

“Absol, go!”

“Blaziken, take the stage!”

Drew smiled with eyes shut as the clock chimed on, his heart at a quickening rhythm at the romanticism of it all. It wasn’t something they’d discussed, but true as ever, they’d picked the two pokémon of theirs that had grown undeniably close over the years. Absol and Blaziken were hardened rivals in a way that almost transcended May and Drew’s own rivalry, never disappointing when they stood on stage together. In the space between where they stood, red and blue collided in a fiery ocean of passionate competition.

May wasted no time in making the first move.

“Fire Spin, Blaziken!”

It was an old favourite and a fitting start. Blaziken darted forward, arms straight back, toward its opponent. Flames spiraled out of the pokémon’s powerful beak and toward Absol, lighting both pokémon up, their well-kept coats shining against the blaze.

“Razor Wind!”

Absol’s horn began to glow an ethereal alabaster, and it jerked its head upward to release the sharpened gales. The resulting tornado was enroute back toward Blaziken, this time glittering with white-hot energy, ten times as beautiful. May heard the telltale sign of her points trickling down, and steadied herself.

She called for Blaziken to jump, and it scaled the flames without breaking a sweat.
“Brave Bird!”

Still in the air, the blaze pokémon enveloped itself in a striking azure aura, then tore directly into the swirling cauldron of flames. The force of its flight dissipated them entirely, shimmering embers vanishing across its resplendent, illusory wings. Faster than anyone in the arena could blink, it was on Drew’s absol, ready to land.

“Psycho Cut, quick!”

Right as Blaziken rammed into its opponent, the disaster pokémon’s horn lit back up, this time a powerful purple. It wasn’t able to launch the projectile before Blaziken made contact, and the resulting indigo explosion sent both pokémon to their respective corners, reeling as their points went down.

Absol was quicker to its feet, and Drew sensed this immediately.

“Water Pulse!”

Blaziken wasn’t fast enough to dodge the move, and the pressurized water made a clean, hard hit. May’s points plummeted, and she balled her fists.

“Absol, hit it with another Psycho Cut!”

“Blaziken, dodge it and go for Sky Uppercut!”

Against all odds, Blaziken was able to jump back to its feet as Absol readied the blast. It sidestepped around the razor-sharp projectiles, a blur of red and white at Absol’s flank. Within moments, the disaster pokémon was in the air, powerful talons sending it flying upward while its points dropped opposite.

“You can recover from this, Absol!” Drew told it. “Water Pulse!”

With the momentum from the attack landed on it, it was able to angle itself to a backwards spin in the air, and it launched the attack at Blaziken’s descent.

“Don’t let it hit again, Blaziken! Fire Spin!”

The blaze pokémon responded instantly, firing off a stream of balletic flames to combat the torrent. One elemental spiral hit the other, glistening blue on lustrous red, fighting for control as steam rolled off their embrace. With a roar, Absol annealed itself harder into the attack, and the final push of its strength sent the deluge through Blaziken’s spiral and into its defenses.

May’s points were reaching an all time low, and she desperately tried to shake off the nervousness that always made its home in her heart when a contest didn’t go her way. She had type advantage, but Drew had practically bred his absol to fight her blaziken as years passed. Water Pulse and Psycho Cut were his ultimate trump cards, and she’d always bemoaned how unnecessary they were, given that Blaziken knew only a single fighting-type move, that wasn’t even very suited to contests to begin with. Drew would just flip his hair and smile.

Despite the heavy hits it had taken, Blaziken was back up fairly quickly, turning over its shoulder to meet its trainer’s eyes. She shook her panic, letting its flame warm her drive back to the blaze she knew it to be.

“Blaze Kick!”
Her pokémon charged forward once more, simmering spurs leaving singed claw-marks across the battle floor. Drew called out a third Psycho Cut, and Absol guarded the kick with equal intensity. Another double-hit sent the two of them up in purple flames as the audience marveled, and when they hit the ground with less points than before, they were right back on each other.

“Don’t let it recover, Blaziken! Sky Uppercut!”

Absol didn’t anticipate the attack from below, and Drew was no quicker to command it. The pokémon was sent flying once more, and May didn’t relent for an instant, eager to command the battle back in her favour.

“Good work!” she beamed. “Show them another Blaze Kick!”

When Absol reached its apex in the sky, Blaziken pulled back from it, somersaulting gracefully in mid-air and landing its lit talon directly on Absol, sending it cascading back down to the ground.

Drew’s points were looking closer to May’s now, and he nervously peered over his pokémon as it lay struggling on the floor. Shakily, it got to its feet, barking out its name to signal to its trainer—and its opponent—that it wasn’t done yet.

“We’re still in the lead, Absol!” he reminded it. “Razor Wind!”

Reinvigorated, Absol cast its horn aglow once more, sending gusts smattered with stinging blades at the enemy pokémon. May called another Brave Bird, quick on her feet, and Blaziken turned from red to blue and unmoving to breakneck. Without flinching, the blaze pokémon ripped through the winds, taking their sting in stride, and they vanished to nothing in a sonic boom around it. It made contact with Absol, and the disaster pokémon was sent tumbling back to the floor.

Blaziken flipped off the impact and landed back toward May, collapsing to its knees from the recoil and the sudden lack of adrenaline, the Razor Wind’s lingering presence hitting it in the stillness. Absol let out a low growl, barely making it to its feet. The two of them were at equally low points, now—less than a third of them left with the clock displaying an ominous minute-and-a-half.

May looked to Drew with a knowing smile, and he returned it in kind with a warmth in his heart. He pulled a rose-shaped pin from his overshirt, the iridescent-crystal blooming within the petals sparkling as the stage lights hit it.

“The red rose whispers of passion, and the white rose breathes of love,” Drew exposed as he slowly raised the pin above his head. “Respond to my heart, white rose! Surpass evolution! Mega Evolve!”

On the other side of the battlefield, May held her bangle up against her face, fingertips hard on the rainbow of its gem, equally exuberant, far less dramatic.

“Show them your real power, Blaziken!” she beamed. “Mega Evolve!”

Prismatic ripples of light poured off the four of them in waves, and the pokémon in the center of pit began to glow with every colour perceivable to the human eye. As they changed shape, the crowd could not contain itself, absolutely erupting in cheers, the majority in utter disbelief that they were getting to watch these two battle at their fullest potential.

Backstage, Harley had the collar of her dress shoved hard between her teeth, pulling so hard on the fabric in frustration that the Coordinators hovering around her wondered how it stayed in tact.

“I can’t stand those little show-offs!” she said, only kind of lying. “Always rubbing it in my face that they can Mega Evolve!”
Absol unfurled its wings, sparkles running off its perfectly-maintained coat that somehow transitioned flawlessly from fur to feathers. As if to respond to the sight of it, Blaziken let flames run off its upper talons, a proud curved horn protruding from its head. Rivals to the end, they’d always found it beautiful how at their strongest, they only wanted to be like each other.

A beaked smile was met with a knowing growl. In a second, they were on each other, the sharp horns on their head colliding, gales against flames and flames against telekinesis.

May and Drew were there beside them, but in the back of their minds, the two young Coordinators were envisioning the same image: two apparitions claw-on-claw in the center, a fledgling combusken and an unsure absol, learning each other through the thrill of the fight.

Their points were neck in neck while the clock hit thirty. Drew balled his fists and let the words finally leave him.

“Absol, let’s end this!” he called. “Perish Song!”

The audience gasped, and in contrast, May smiled. She was wondering what was taking him so long. Above the clock that was already ticking slowly downward, Drew had upped its pressure, making his own and choosing to control his own fate.

Absol raised its head and let out an eerie, bone-chilling howl that sank to the cores of all that witnessed it. Red ran off the pokémon’s snow-white coat, a haunting contrast. Blaziken was lit equally crimson, cringing in uncontrollable fear at the sound. May steeled her resolve, calling out to it.

“We have to beat them to the punch, Blaziken!” she said. “Blaze Kick!”

It threw its arms back once more as it ran, and the ribbon-like flames grounded at its wrists grew brilliant as they rippled in the wind. When its back talons landed hard, Absol was able to dodge out of the way with a flourish of its wingspan. Heat rippled across its face, the fur hanging over it flowing in its waves.

“Psycho Cut!”

The move grazed Blaziken just barely, not enough to deplete its points entirely. May called for it to leap up in the wake of it, and it was just barely able to while a stinging scarlet pain surged through its body, a reminder of the impending end. They had to finish this quick.

“Fire Spin, Blaziken!”

From its position in the air, it spun the flames out like a binding thread, surrounding Absol on all sides. The disaster pokémon flapped its wings in an effort to dissipate the flames, but the heat of them was far too searing, all-encompassing. Another painful hit wracked both pokémon with agonizing fatigue, and Blaziken had to steady its blurring vision and pounding heart and shaking arms. This was it. This was all they had.

“Brave Bird!”

It let the flames blazing within it grow from a warm hearth to a burning wildfire. Blaziken thundered its name for all to hear, growing ethereal wings across its arms that put even Absol’s to shame. In a swift motion, with mere seconds on the clock, it tore downwards into the fiery eye of the scorching maelstrom that it had created. Sapphire on ruby, the juxtaposed colours intermixed in a devastating spectacular of light.
Blaziken backflipped away from the explosion, breathing hard, feathers unkempt. In the wreckage, Absol lay unconscious, and May’s picture pushed Drew’s far off the screen.

“Absol is unable to battle, making this a Battle Off!” Vivian declared. “And what a battle it was!”

Drew was at Absol’s side as its wings disappeared and its coat lost volume, brushing tufts of fur out of its face. His voice was quiet, grateful.

“Well,” he murmured with a smile. “Are you satisfied?”

Without speaking, Absol nodded to him, growling quietly.

“Me too,” Drew told it, and pressed the pokéball to its forehead. “Thank you.”

On the other side of the arena, May had her arms wrapped tightly around Blaziken’s torso, unable to stop herself from burying her face in the down of its coat.

“Oh, Blaziken, you’re so amazing!” she cheered. “I love you! I love you! Thank you!”

It gave a low utterance of its name and nipped at her hair, infusing adoration into the soft preen. She blushed happily as she took its ball from her pocket, pointing it towards her friend.

“Take a rest,” she whispered. “You deserve it.”

Drew rose to his feet to meet May in the center, offering out his arm to shake on her win. She grabbed it with a gloved hand, and where he went with tradition, she zigzagged—yanking him forward and pulling him into a hug.

Crowds squealed around them, making their opinions painfully known. Drew panicked a little, internally—always annoyed by the tabloids making it way too hard for him and May to just have their damn relationship. It wasn’t that they were keeping it a secret, they just didn’t want people constantly inferring what every little thing they did meant. They were friends first, rivals second, kids with crushes third.

Still… it was hard for him to stay annoyed with her arms across his shoulders, with his nervous hands at her waist.

“That was amazing,” she said, soft enough so that only he could hear it, loud enough that the crowd did not overpower her. “Thank you.”

She pulled away from him, and he smiled his trademark smile, the one that could grow flowers from dead soil. From his inner jacket pocket, he handed her a single red rose.

“For Blaziken?” she stuck her tongue out.

“For Blaziken,” he affirmed, and made his exit with a final wave.

Backstage, when all other competition had been dashed, Drew passed Jessie on her way onto the stage. The boy ran a hand through his hair before addressing her, even-toned—

“You’ve got your work cut out for you out there,” he said, opening one eye to look at her. “Dazzle ‘em.”

The boy was almost glowing, unable to shake the joy from his expression. His stance was relaxed,
hands resting in his jean pockets, and in his voice Jessie heard no reservations about his time at the contest being done with.

“You don’t seem very upset that you lost out there,” she noted.

Drew grinned, peering back at the woman before he walked off.

“...did I?”

A twerp was a twerp, typically. This was a truth of the universe. Formal definition: twerp; a person who is small, insignificant, weak, and contemptible. Colloquial definition: any grade-school aged child who dared to stand in Jessie’s way.

She’d been shot into the stratosphere enough times to know that the formal definition, no matter how resonant it was to her and her comrades, did not entirely apply. These children were far from weak, far from insignificant—if they were nothing, then what was she, always at their mercy despite her best efforts?

Jessie tried not to become lost in the thoughts, staring May down. Her confidence and optimism persisted, but every once in a while, she got stuck on the idea that perhaps, just perhaps, she was faking it.

The woman shook the negative musings from her head.

Challenges don’t exist to discourage the likes of me, she steadied herself. They exist for me to overcome and shine brighter than every simpleton around me.

Still, May had turned from an indecisive shrimp into an absolute force of nature, and Jessie knew she would have to make quick work of the kid before she was thrashed in front of half of Hoenn.

“Blastoise, take the stage!”

She swallowed. Bulky. Absolutely wonderful.

“Arbok, go!”

Blastoise crashed down to the floor with a roar, and Arbok lunged at the air with a proud hiss. There was no clear type disadvantage, but the odds were still stacked against Jessie. From up in the stands, James fought the urge to bite at his nails.

“Arbok, this’ll be a piece of cake,” she boasted. “Acid!”

Arbok took in a breath, building up its attack before spewing purple from its fanged maw. May was on it quicker than Jessie could blink—

“Withdraw, Blastoise!” she called. “Shake it off!”

Blastoise was immediately in his shell, the attack doing little to him. He spun in quick succession from within, sending waves of acid off himself, a wicked purple tornado that simmered and steamed upward as it was thrown to the contest floor.

Jessie’s points dipped. She grit her teeth.

“Taking the defense, are you?” she said. “Fine! Arbok, Crunch!”
It slithered in at close quarters, tail swivelling back and forth to keep the momentum present. Over the years, Arbok had become far more adept and confident in its ability to battle—moons upon moons defending its second family, it could topple even a zangoose without breaking a sweat.

It bit hard into Blastoise’s shell, intent on cracking it wide open if it had to. May smiled at this, calling out her next move.

“Aqua Tail, Blastoise!”

He was out of his protective home, then, tail lit up blue and swirling with mighty torrents. Jerking himself sideways, he was able to easily land a hit on Arbok, sending the snake reeling backwards. The point counter ticked again, and Jessie looked from it to the arena, frustration building.

“Dis is bad,” Meowth said, observing. “She’s losin’!”

James swallowed, arms wrapped around the egg in his lap for comfort. “We can’t give up yet.”

“Hit it with an ice beam while it’s down, Blastoise!”

Breaking her defensive style, May called out a second attack.

*Bingo,* Jessie thought.

“Arbok, Haze!”

Jumping back to its senses at the sound of her voice, the pokémon spewed out the same heavy fog from its appeal, blanketing it with a fearsome hiss. The beam did nothing to lift the mist hanging around them, obscuring Arbok from view. Blastoise stood in the center of the haze, trying to tune his senses to the sounds echoing around him. There were stirrings, somewhere, but it was hard to tell their frequency with chatter in the crowd overcoming them, with—

“Now, Arbok! Subdue that oversized squirt!”

The snake grabbed Blastoise tight in its scales, coiling around him and squeezing with intent to maim. Losing the breath in his lungs, he began to fall slack in Arbok’s grip. May’s points took their own dip as Arbok boomed its name, and the fog began to disappear around them.

“Blastoise, Withdraw again!”

He struggled to move in response to her, completely at the mercy of his opponent. Jessie refused to relent.

“Crunch, Arbok!”

With another fierce cry, Arbok let its razor-sharp teeth shine in the stage lights, and it clamped down savagely onto the shellfish pokémon’s neck.

Blastoise cried out in pain as May’s points skyrocketed, thrashing around wildly in a desperate attempt to gain freedom from the snake’s grip. He managed to shake it off, sending it flying back closer to Jessie, but its recovery was quick, and its trainer did not hesitate—

“Arbok, Acid!”

It sent off a steady spurt of liquid fire once more, and Blastoise didn’t have the speed or reflex to dodge it in any fashion. May watched nervously as he took another direct hit, dropping her points down to half.
“Guess we have no choice,” she said, resigned. “Rain Dance!”

Blastoise seemed to have anticipated it long before she ever gave him the command. He raised his arms to the sky and thundered out his name, obscuring the shine of the stage lights with blackened and rumbling clouds. Jessie and Arbok stared up, mesmerized, as they cracked open at once and sent a deluge down on the arena below.

Jessie shrieked a little at the chill of the water as it completely unspooled her hair, drops of rain hanging off her outfit. Inconvenient for the pokémon, twice as inconvenient for the dutiful seamstress, all hair and makeup. She shed her grievances, confident smile replacing the crestfallen one that she’d worn mere seconds ago.

“That’s it?! That’s your trump card?!” Jessie taunted. “Please! As though a little rain is going to hinder my arbok!”

May leaned into the banter, far too pleased with herself. In front of her, Blastoise’s stance strengthened itself, scrapes and bruises vanishing from it. Jessie heard her points decrease, and she looked around rapidly in confusion, sputtering for anyone who would give her an answer.

“My blastoise is special, didn’t you know?” May winked. “His Rain Dish ability fixes his battle wounds right up!”

Both Jessie and her pokémon were staring open-mouthed at the two of them, utterly unprepared to hear that. There was a whine in the woman’s throat building to a fever-pitch, and she let half of it come before she transformed it to a command, fuelling her spite into drive.

“Arbok, we’ll just have to overpower it!” she said. “Crunch, again!”

Gathering itself, Arbok tore forward and managed to clamp onto one of Blastoise’s arms. The hit obviously did something to him, but in the long-run, it didn’t seem to make much of a dent—the points it took were minuscule, and Jessie lost her own, as well.

“Blastoise, Aqua Tail!”

The attack made direct contact, and Arbok was sent backwards, scales sullied by the mud that was now thick beneath their feet. A larger hit tanked her point counter, her movements becoming desperate.

“Arbok, get up!” she cried. “You can still win!”

The snake chattered its name weakly, rising to its periscope with great effort.

Jessie called out another Acid, and Arbok mustered what strength it had left to attempt to singe the enemy pokémon. The toxins ran off Blastoise along the rain, their burn healing almost instantly, both their points decreasing at once. She called a Crunch, and no bite that Arbok could land on Blastoise left any lasting mark. Any power they showed it left no trace, if they were doing any work at all, it was invisible.

“Ice Beam!”

Blastoise fired crystal rivulets toward Arbok, and though it tried not to resign itself, it was exhausted, its fate sealed. The hit chilled Arbok to its very core, its cold-blooded heart doing nothing to spare it the agony. Mud and ice caked the indents between its scales, obscuring their shine. Its slither halted, it remained there, unable to advance.
“Arbok, this isn’t over!” Jessie shouted above its resigned heart. “You can still move your head! You have to keep going!”

It blinked back its tears, so dutifully wishing not to disappoint the person it loved above all else. It tried to envision itself a mirror image of her—strong, resilient, tenacious. In its mind’s eye she was not a person, but a roaring fire—one who could’ve easily seared away the ice at its metaphorical feet.

Arbok had to do this. For the both of them. For her.

It pulled all its strength together, gathering the little heat it had left in its belly, infusing it into the attack as it sat there, shackled. Blinking its eyes closed, Arbok heaved poison from its mouth, willing it to make contact, willing anything to turn the odds in their favour. Knowing in its heart that if this was the end, it would fight until it was nothing.

Several sounds sent its eyes back open. One, Blastoise crying out in pain. Two, gasps littering the crowd around it. Three, Jessie’s own gasp, louder on top of them all.

It looked around to witness the spectacle, unsure of what it was that could have possibly happened to send everyone around them into stunned silence. Instinctively, Arbok turned to Jessie, searching her for answers.

“I… I don’t know?!” she said, sensing its confusion. “That wasn’t like your normal attack!”

Vivian, sensing the disorientation hanging around the arena, elected to make a rare mid-battle commentary—

“What a surprise!” she said. “It looks as though the desperation of this thrilling battle was the push Arbok needed to learn Gunk Shot, the most powerful poison type move there is!”

Jessie and Arbok shot their eyes back to each other, jaws hanging wide open in shock. Arbok watched as his trainer’s expression changed from anxious confusion, to utter and complete awe, to unbridled, absolute ecstasy.

“Can you do that again?!” she asked.

“Cha… charbok?” it responded— I think?

Feeling reinvigorated, Arbok turned to face its opponent, slit eyes shining. The corrosion of the poison had melted the ice binding it, and though both pokémon were still covered in mud that the rain did little to wash away, it was no longer frozen to the spot.

The snake focused itself, finding its center once more. Lighting its insides back aflame, it pulled deep from within itself, hurling the filth that materialized behind its tongue at Blastoise.

“Blastoise, freeze it!” May called.

The shellfish pokémon went to summon the tundra, but before the frost could turn to a beam, the poison attack sent him back. The hit of it was what drove him to falter, the second wave of its effects were what brought him to his knees.

“Blastoise?” May peered over his shell.

The purple hue hanging across his face was enough indication of what had happened, and May hardened herself as rain poured down around them. Rain Dish was useless, now—the poison coursing through his veins was not something the weeping skies could fix.
After the battle I should ask her what deity she paid to get this kinda luck, May laughed to herself, only a little hysterical.

“Blastoise, can you keep going?” May asked, and he nodded.

“Alright, then, Aqua Tail!”

Blastoise shot forward, not letting the toxins hinder him. He took a sharp pivot when he got to Arbok, but not before Jessie could counter—

“Take a bite out of that wimpy little tail, Arbok!”

The snake complied, chomping right into it, making its next move before its trainer could even voice it.

“Now tell it ‘So long!'”

Arbok held on with everything it had, swirling the offending pokémon around in its teeth with such force that it dug deep into the mud, that its brain rattled around in its head, that its teeth felt as though they would shatter. When it had built enough momentum, it let the shellfish pokémon go, sending it flying across the battlefield toward its trainer. It landed deep in the mud beside her as the thunderous clouds above them parted, stars swimming in its eyes.

A chime sounded. Cheers erupted. The lights of the stage permeated once more, shining on Jessie’s face like the kindest miniature sun. She looked around the arena in disbelief, wondering what everyone was making so much fuss about, wondering why everything seemed so far away, yet so stifling.

Jessie rotated herself around in one swift motion, arms hanging out, throat tightening in confusion at the screen behind her, where her eyes met themselves.

“I…” she said, in a voice that almost wasn’t hers.

“...I won?”

Vivian called it in her favour, and May was on the ground, her knees muddied as she smiled and thanked Blastoise for his work. She heard no voices, she heard only the crowd. Deafening, ear-splitting, permeating.

Jessie retraced her steps, lost in the shouts of victory around her. For a moment, she was in a different place, a greasy diner with seats that stuck to her back and stolen meals that lingered on her tongue. On the TV, her boss was in handcuffs. Around her, people cheered as her life fell to pieces.

She blinked back to now, where their applause celebrated her triumph, rather than her undoing. How many months had passed since she was lost and without a sure future? In how short a time had everything changed completely, again, and again, and again?

May had run up to her, noticing that she was seemingly frozen where she stood. The girl smiled up at the victor, waving a hand in front of her face playfully.

“Earth to Jessie?”

Jessie found herself once more, letting the sound of her name pull her out of it all. She brought her gaze down to May, who offered her a hand. Still processing, she shakily grabbed it, and they shook on the victory.
Up in the stands, James was standing on his seat, his throat raw as she shouted her name. Him and Meowth took turns trading the egg to each other so the other could scream until they went lightheaded.

Arbok tore across the battlefield, covered in mud off the ground and grime from its attacks. Without bothering to hesitate, it wrapped around Jessie and squeezed, ruining the dress she’d carefully crafted and making an even bigger mess of the both of them. Her disgust was brief, a mere flash in her eyes before she laughed, and laughed, and laughed until she cried.

Harley watched them through a screen in back, her blue eyes aglow. They were two absolute monstrosities, gaudily-dressed and flourished with trash and dirt. And they won.

Something bloomed inside her, tenacious cacti in her heart’s barren desert, and she closed her eyes warmly to the sound of Jessie being handed her ribbon.

“Esteemed guests!” Vivian announced for all to hear. “This brings a close to Verdanturf’s very special Contest Spectacular! We hope you’ve enjoyed watching these talented Coordinators as much as they’ve enjoyed performing for you!”

Fireworks boomed against the setting sun. Jessie stared at her reflection in the golden center of her single Hoennian ribbon.

Backstage, May leaned into a sit, exhaling a hard day’s work off her shoulders, friends flanking either side of her.

“Gotta say, I never woulda expected to lose to Team Rocket!”

Harley shifted a little from her lean against the wall, words she’d said to Jessie years ago lingering on her tongue.

“You didn’t.”

It was far into the night when Solidad burst into the backroom, and May and Drew were falling asleep all over each other after Harley had queasily shoved the girl off her arm. Usually the picture of feminine beauty and grace, Solidad entered an outing with her friends like a hurricane, loud enough that it startled both of the heavy-sleepers out of their dreams.

“Oh my god!” she screamed at them, dragging out the final word, smile nigh unending.

“Hi to you, too,” Drew said, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“I’ll kill you three!” Solidad said, actions betraying her words as she pulled them all into a hug.

“I’d like to see you try, skank,” Harley crossed her arms beneath the embrace.

“Harley,” she scolded. “Children.”

“Sorry,” she rolled her eyes. “Hustler. Tramp. Laady of the eveni—”

“Did you buy that thesaurus to overcompensate for your garbage taste in men?” Solidad countered, still grinning.

“That’s rich!” Harley laughed. “Most of ‘em were your dates at the start of the night!”
“Rare self-burn,” May noted, and Drew nodded.

“You’ve got to let her win, sometimes.”

“I can’t believe you all came out to see me!” Solidad said. “And that you competed? Haha, what?”

“Well, coming out to see you was planned…” May said, looking to Harley. “…on two accounts, at least.”

Harley huffed. “I’m a part of this precious family too, little miss May-be.”

May ignored the nickname in the hopes that it would not make a return to Harley’s vocab. “…but competing was… kind of a weird surprise.”

“No kidding!” Solidad said. “And in the end, some rando beat you? Like, she was amazing, but who the heck was she?”

May laughed, nervously, eyes closed in secondhand embarrassment. Solidad recognized the motion and let herself notice what she’d failed to when she’d gotten swept up in the thrill of seeing her best friends again. She turned her head to the side, where James was combing mud out of Jessie’s hair.

“Amazing, you said?” Jessie beamed.

“Well… yeah,” Solidad tried to recover. “You realize you stood on stage with Top Coordinators, and beat them all?”

“I… suppose I did…” she responded, still having trouble understanding it, herself.

“Jessica, who are you?” Solidad said, peering into her as if she were searching for something hidden. “Have you ever stood on stage before?”

Jessie felt uncharacteristically sheepish with a bright-eyed vixen of a Top Coordinator staring her down, probing her for answers. Interrogation was something she’d wanted to leave in a past life. Thankfully, Harley was there to answer for her.

“She’s been at this for longer than half the prodigy in this room,” she said. “Girl’s a fossil.”

“Excuse you!”

“I’ve known Jessie for long enough to know she always had it in her,” Harley said then, softening. “She just needed to kick her awful day job to the side and focus.”

Blush dancing across her cheeks, Jessie wondered if Harley could charm anyone’s feelings without insulting them, first.

“So glad you decided to listen to me, Jesse-darling!” Harley said, wrapping an unwanted arm around the woman. “I can’t describe to you how elated I am!”

Turning on a dime, not wanting to deal with her, Jessie decided to play her game. She joined in the theatrics almost immediately, taken with the drama of it all, heart fluttering as she leaned into Harley.

“Oh, Harley, my love!” she wept. “Thank you for always believing in me!”

“…what was dat lady’s exact woIhds, again?” Meowth asked James, voice flat.

“I believe she repeatedly called Jessie a loser and then commanded her cacturne to shoot seeds at us
until we blasted off.”

“Wobbuffet.”

Jessie didn’t hear them. Her joyous laughter was all there was.

Her friends silently elected that things were better that way.

When the former Rockets had finished packing the balloon the following day, their parting clichés were promptly cut short at the scene of Harley, down on one knee, holding reverently onto May’s hands. Drew coughed a little at the sight, utterly unprepared for it. James averted his eyes, shifting nervously.

“May, sweetie,” Harley said, eyes sugar-topped, mournful.

“No!” May shouted. “Whatever you’re gonna say, no!”

“God, what’s got you, drama queen?” Harley’s tone immediately went back to normal, and she stood. “Okay, whatever, at least let me have these.”

‘These’ were May’s hands, which she took hold of once more when she was back on her feet, her grip strangely gentle. May squinted at her.

“May—”

“No!”

“Let me finish, brat!” Harley growled, and May rolled her eyes.

She cleared her throat, and persisted.

“May, once upon a time, we got off on the wrong foot,” Harley declared, tone debatably genuine. “Much as I feel justified in doing a lot of what I did, a part of me can’t help but feel some guilt over how mean I was to you, especially when you were just starting out!”

May blinked. She didn’t know what was going on.

“And so I... well, I was laying here prostrate before you to ask for your forgiveness,” the woman continued, tone small before it picked back up. “I truly am sorry, May! For all the cruelty I unleashed upon you back when I was a more callous creature!”

The stare May gave Harley was dead-eyed and silent. She took her hands back and raised one to the Coordinator’s forehead.

“Are you sick?”

Harley jerked backward away from her, indignant in her response.

“You’re really testing me, May!”

The girl tilted her head. “You’re serious?”

“Have you ever known me to be deceptive?”
“...isn’t that what you’re apologizing for?”

“May, I will turn this apology around,” Harley threatened.

“...why?”

“What?!”

“Why are you suddenly apologizing to me for all the stuff you did when I was ten?” May said, eyebrow quirked.

“Because...!” the woman sputtered, face red, and she inhaled deep, looking off to the side. “...because those nasty Rockets have been doing it point-for-point with everyone they’ve ever met for, like, ever, now, and look at them. Have you ever seen them look less like losers?”

May looked to the former Rockets, then back to Harley, then back to them, then to Harley once more.

“...so you’re serious?”

“Yes!”

She stared Harley down again, arms slack at her sides. Her face contorted a little, expression finally taking. Within minutes, May was laughing at the top of her lungs, holding onto her sides to keep from splitting in two.

“I’m gonna throttle you, shrimp toast!” Harley raged. “I humble myself before you and this is what I get?! Do you know how degrading this is?!?”

“I’m sorry!” she near-whined, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “Harley, you idiot, was it not obvious enough that I forgave you a long time ago?”

“You what?!” Harley said, half-angry, half-relieved.

“We’re friends,” May said, taking her hand once more. “I wouldn’t have ever put up with you this long if I didn’t love you.”

“... love me?!”

“Well, yeah, duh!” she continued. “Verdict is still out on whether I like you, but...”

“Real touching, May,” Harley rolled her eyes. “Good speech.”

“You said it yourself, way back in Kanto, before me, or Drew, or anyone knew how true it was,” May kept on. “We’re a family. I know there’s a refreshing, squishy center beneath all those needles.”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Harley snatched her hands back, dragging one across her face. “This got too cute. I’m gonna be sick. I can’t do it. I’m tapping out. Do I still get my karma check if I leave?”

May giggled at the sight of her rival, flustered and gagging and trying her best to remember compassion despite all she knew and all she’d learned. Somewhere in Harley’s features, Solidad saw a soft and sensitive child of the past dry her tears and wish to the stars hanging above. First wish, to stop crying so much. Second wish, Top Coordinator. Third, for just one friend, the kindest the cosmos had.

Well, Solidad mused, I hope two out of three is alright, for now.
Hours later, they finally managed to break themselves apart, with the four Coordinators staring down the one. Unsurprisingly, the violet-haired hurricane had far more to say than anyone else in their farewells.

“You really oughta update your contest look,” Harley was in the middle of telling Jessie. “I do commissions, you know. Could make you a lovely-looking arbok dress.”

Jessie sized her up, trying to absorb her maractus getup without allowing it to burn into her retinas, where it would stay for far longer than it needed to.

“...I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

The lot of them exchanged their final goodbyes, parting hugs, and well wishes for the future. As the Coordinator family became silhouettes against the sun, Harley turned back, not having had enough. With a knowing grin, she called over her shoulder to Jessie and James—

“You two! Drop me a ring if you ever get bored of each other!”

Solidad pushed her into May and Drew, and the four of them all lost it laughing as they kept on, curiously drawing closer and closer together as they made their way farther out of sight.

Red-faced and flustered, Jessie cleared her throat, and Meowth shot both her and James a sharpened smile.

In the air, the woman hefted out a heavy sigh, voice blunt and tired and desperately seeking a second opinion.

“James,” she said. “...was Harley always that hot?”

He matched her sigh with his own. “I think so, yes.”

“Ugh,” she moaned.

“Ugh,” he mirrored.

“Yous two is hopeless,” Meowth said, polishing the surface of the egg in his hands.

The both of them swallowed the unpleasant feeling of butterfree flapping around in their stomachs and let the sun on their face and the taillow in the skies keep them steady. Jessie traced her fingertips across the top of her ribbon, letting its intricacies melt deep into her mind, begging the universe never to take this memory from her.

She closed her eyes, and the applause ringing around her head melted into the sound of waves across the Hoenn seas.

Chapter End Notes

ALRIGHT, SO, STORY.
Ven and I were like "uh, I guess we gotta do a May chapter?" and I was like "Okay, maybe a reunion with her and Drew AND Harley?" I then proceeded to realize that I didn't know anything about May, or Drew, and that I fucking hated Harley and wanted to strangle him. So Ven and I were like, okay! Research time! And we pulled FIFTEEN CONTEST EPISODES in order to get a grasp on these characters, at which point some bitch name Solidad came outta NOWHERE, and we were like SHIT ANOTHER?

It was also over the course of watching these episodes that I started to realize something: I like Harley. I like Harley a lot. I like Harley a LOT a lot. Ven was also feeling this. Both of us fell head over heels for this AWFUL FUCKING CACTUS. I have been listening to TBOM for ten days straight. I can recite scripture, I'm sure of it. Half of our creative writing process was us doing bad impressions of Harley in a dimly lit room until fanfiction happened.

Then, THEN. I fell in love with Contest Fam as a whole. All four of them. I don't know how this fucking happened. A month ago I didn't give a single shit. Now I'm crying over contestshipping A LOT. I want them all to live in a little apartment together in Lilycove. I want Harley and Solidad to go clubbing. I DON'T KNOW HOW THIS HAPPENED. THEY'RE LITERALLY RIGHT NEXT TO TEAM ROCKET ON MY FAVE CHARACTERS LIST. GET READY FOR DTE 2: CONTEST FAM BUY AN APARTMENT AND HUG A LOT.

Then we were geniuses who decided to do a WHOLE FUCKING CONTEST IN THE GODDAMN CHAPTER. THE WHOLE THING. A WHOLE CONTEST. I DON'T KNOW WHY WE DECIDED THIS.

So yeah, that's why it took so long. Because we had to watch roughly 5 and a half hours of pokemon, and because we bit off A LOT MORE THAN WE INTENDED ON CHEWING FOR THIS ONE. I HOPE IT DID NOT DISAPPOINT. I ADORED EVERY SECOND.

Thank you all for taking the time to read this garbage fire. I will be back hopefully sooner with a hopefully less long as shit chapter. Oh my god Hoenn's over. Oh my god Johto. We have like two ideas for Johto. Oh god.

AS ALWAYS I WILL DO MY BEST!!!
Sunlight fell onto the trio’s face, and they leaned gently into it, dreamlike feelings fluttering in their chests. Johto had been such a pleasantly mellowed out region in comparison to everything the former Rockets had experienced thus far—it seemed that their patience really was paying off. Where Kalos was shaky waters, where Unova was walking hot coals, where Sinnoh was open paths lined with poisonous greenery, where Hoenn was the kind of grateful tears that left you absolutely exhausted—Johto was a breath. If there was much of anything waiting for them here, it sure was taking its sweet time to kick in.

They’d been lazing around, mostly, picking up odd jobs here and there to keep their finances secure. Jessie had been marvelling at the various Contest structures that had popped up since she’d last set foot in the region, the ribbon in her pocket urging her forward. The only thing stopping her from barrelling into one was the strange new brand of impulse control she’d been gaining as of late—the one that insisted that if she was going to do something, she was going to do it better than anyone or she wasn’t going to bother at all. There was no time for a full-on Grand Festival run in the middle of her long quest to be better, and besides, she had to work out her new persona before she dazzled onto the scene.

Maybe when this was all done, though…

A few corsola shuffled across the sands, and the rays of the sun filtered down through palm trees and onto their backs. The seaside town was a nice change of pace—Johto was seemingly nothing but endless forests and mountains, its climate mild and a little too cold for everyone but Jessie’s tastes. The woman had caught the sign as they came off the route and entered the small bit of paradise.

_Palmpona_, she’d registered, thoughts darting off somewhere. _Strange. The name is oddly familiar, yet…_
Besides the beauty of the sparkling ocean and the trendy aesthetic of the boardwalk, there really wasn’t much here. No gym, a minuscule contest hall, a lot of dinky tourist shops here and there, but what on earth would they have even been selling? It did look like some kind of festival was being set up for, there were vendors scattered about with their trucks in various forms of disarray. As they turned a corner, there was some sort of stadium on the horizon—a proud banner hanging across it, announcing something that Jessie’s poor eyesight couldn’t entirely register.

Something crinkled beneath Meowth’s paw, and he quietly came to a halt. Shoving the egg he was carrying into the crook of his arm, he picked a curious flyer off the ground, reading it.

“Hey,” he alerted his teammates. “Says here dey’s lookin’ for people ta woihk.”

“What’s the occasion?” James inquired.

“Pokémon Swap Meet, I guess,” Meowth informed. “Da fancy flyer says it’s an annual tradition!”

“What do you think, Jess?” James turned to her.

She dug her wallet out of her purse, swallowing hard as she unclasped it. A few coins tumbled around inside in the wake of a recent shopping spree. Chill running through her, she took in her surroundings. There wasn’t much to do, but it definitely wasn’t bad to look at. She could kill a couple days here.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice in the matter,” she said with a quiet sigh, then corrected her tone to her more natural optimism. “Well, no point in wasting worries on it! Let’s get going.”

They nodded and followed, a bit bored by the moderate tones of their journey, lately. Chaos was something they’d bemoaned in the early days of it, but in its absence, they quickly realized it was more or less all they knew. It went unspoken, but there was a shared sentiment among them—please never allow us to become boring in our old age. They didn’t long for the days when they’d laugh uproariously atop a high-tech mechanical beast after robbing some kid, but they did long for the laughter itself. Manual labour didn’t make for much of it, or if it did, they found it hard to have that kind of fun and still keep their jobs.

Waves washed across the beach as they walked. Statistically speaking, there was no way they hadn’t walked through this little seaside town as they trailed the Twerp through the region. But something about it lingered in Jessie’s heart, frustratingly tenacious despite her best attempts to disregard it.

The boy they reported to couldn’t have been older than fifteen, gentle features lining his face betraying his tall stature. It was humbling, to know that he was the former Rockets’ boss, for the time being—though nothing they hadn’t experienced before. Shaggy raven hair just reaching past his neck and bright earthy eyes, he looked an awful lot like a certain brat they knew. As if to punctuate this thought, there was a definite passion to his words as they left him.

“You’re all here for a reason,” he began. “Maybe it’s to make a quick buck, or maybe it’s because you genuinely are as invested as I am in the experience of the Pokémon Swap Meet. In any case, you’re here, so whether ya like it or not, you get to listen to what I have to say about it!”

He smiled genuinely, and Jessie had to try not to roll her eyes. She couldn’t help it, he was practically leaking sunshine out every orifice he had, and not in a cute way. Adjectives rattled around in her head—boss twerp? Off-brand twerp? Palmpona twerp?

“Anyone who’s been a pokémon trainer long enough will tell you, people can be pretty reluctant to trade,” the boy said. “And why wouldn’t they? When you spend so much time raising a pokémon all
on your own, the idea of parting with them for a stranger… well, it can be hard to find upsides to.”

Polo twerp? Beach twerp?

“A good few years ago, at this very swap meet, I traded a pokémon I’d spent a long time raising. To make matters even more strange, I didn’t even know what pokémon I was getting in return!

“That pokémon ended up being my best friend in the world, though. We bonded more than I ever had with any partner, and I keep it by my side to this day. If I never gave trading a chance, I would have never met my best friend in the whole world. So, that’s why you’re here!”

Trade twerp.

“It’s our job to show trainers just how great trading pokémon can be,” he concluded. “And to let them know that a traded pokémon can be just as special as one you caught in the wild and raised yourself.”

Jessie tuned back in. What, he’s still talking? We get it. Smiles and kisses and trades.

“So whatever reason you wandered in here, that’s why you’re here now!” the boy said cheerfully. “Are we clear?”

The group of workers barked out a ‘yes, sir!’ and where James and Meowth were instant alongside it, Jessie lagged behind a little. As if Karma sensed her lack of interest, the pokéball resting in her jean pocket jerked itself forward, letting Wobbuffet out with a typical, boisterous salute.

She was used to this after years of traveling with him, but it still ended up making for a few rather embarrassing scenarios, and the workplace was definitely where most of them happened. It was her own fault, she cursed—she hadn’t let him roam that morning, now he was paying her back with screaming.

Except he wasn’t.

Mid-way into his name, he’d stopped suddenly, trailing off into silence when he spotted something in front of them. The pokémon dropped his arm from his head, loosening the gesture while he became lost in whatever had uneased him. Trade twerp stayed with his eyes on the patient pokémon, looking equally lost. In the confusion on his face, Jessie found the motivation to dig through her pocket, face red as she returned Wobbuffet to rest.

“My apologies,” she spat through grit teeth. “My darling doesn’t know his place, sometimes.”

Their boss kept staring at the empty space where the pokémon once was, something inexplicable still stuck on his features. With a single motion, he blinked the expression away and carried on training his recruits.

The work itself wasn’t anything terribly tedious, and the former Rockets thanked their aching muscles for that much. Mostly, it was setting up trade machines and making sure that they were in working order, something James and Meowth both were able to ease into with aplomb. Jessie mostly kept to more manual work, dealing with stands and fixtures and decorations. The hours passed quickly, and the environment was loose enough that the lot of them were able to make enough small talk without falling distracted.

So when the twerp in charge called break time, they certainly weren’t expecting him to bark a firm
“You three,” in their ears as they passed by him. They certainly weren’t expecting him to ask that they follow him back into the building they’d just spent the day hauling machines out of. Currently, the massive truck bay was feeling rather cramped, and the drafts running through it amplified their anxious shivers.

They shared a few looks, thoughts mingling in the quiet. Is this kid someone we know? Did we wrong him? Has he figured out who we are, who we were?

Meowth clung to the egg as though it were his only lifeline. He suddenly felt determined with all he was to make sure nothing dangerous, or strenuous, or difficult ever happened to them again. There was something very important to protect, now.

The boy was standing over them with his mouth pressed into a firm line, and they all reflexively wanted to get on their hands and knees and apologize to him for a sin they didn’t even personally know. He kept his arms crossed, glowering at them as much as a boy of his softness could. Then, almost instantly, his features seemed to morph out of their tenseness. He turned to Jessie, addressing her directly—

“Miss,” he said, oddly polite for someone in superiority over her. “Can I take a look at that wobbuffet you have?”

Jessie loosened a little, blinking in confusion. She couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to, but it seemed a reasonable enough request.

“Eh… sure?”

She noncommittally tossed her pokéball to the side, watching the sparkles settle from inside it. Wobbuffet didn’t cheer in the manner he usually did—when he hit the ground, it was with a lack of grace, as if he’d been deep in thought and pulled out of it suddenly to face the breathing world. Jessie realized, then, what it was that had him entranced—he was looking at the boy in front of them, and the boy, in turn, had his eyes locked on Wobbuffet.

A pang of motherly worry hit Jessie full on, and she placed a hand atop her pokémon’s head, leaning down to confer with him.

“Wobbuffet?” she said. “What’s wrong?”

For the first time since meeting her, he did not speak.

In front of them, Trade Twerp stumbled a little, then softly tumbled to his knees. With his arm outstretched and trembling in a hover, just short of touching the patient pokémon’s face, he addressed him.

“I can’t believe this…” he said, voice like a prayer. Wobbuffet brought a similarly shaky arm to his own, their limbs just barely brushing. Small tears stained the boy’s eyes, and he continued.

“You…” he smiled. “You remember me?”

Wobbuffet nodded intently, his name a soft whisper laced with gratitude.

Jessie was, optimistically, confused. Realistically, she was uneased—threatened. There was a stranger having a meaningful moment with her closest friend and confidante, and she had to bite her tongue to keep the instinct to anger at bay. Naturally, Wobbuffet sensed this, and broke the longing stare to turn to her, concerned. Trade Twerp seemed to understand this, standing up and wiping the tears from his eyes.
“I’m so sorry,” he uttered to her at once. “I got caught up in the moment, I didn’t even realize you probably don’t know who I am.”

He was right. Try as she might, Jessie couldn’t find his face in her personal index, poor as it was.

“Here, let me make this easier.”

He dug into his pocket and threw his own pokéball beside himself, and Jessie watched with brow knit, wondering what he was getting at. His pokémon emerged from it the typical celestial cyan, its colour fading to a muted pink as it gained itself—smooth skin, glittering rose coat, eyes shining and long tongue on proud display, and—

*Oh.*

Jessie’s breath caught, and she felt her leg muscles lose form. All at once, points started connecting in her head. Palmpona—right, where they’d pulled that fake trade machine scam at this exact swap meet, all those years ago. Where James and his idiot heart had almost fallen prey to that wicked conman—*again*—and ran into her at full speed, knocking her hard into an *authentic* trade machine. Where a pokéball had fallen from her pocket and into one of the machines, where she’d suddenly found a wobbuffet beside her when previously she’d traveled with—

She blinked herself forward, fearfully staring at her feet.

A lickitung. *Her* lickitung.

The boy kept speaking, and she willed the sound not to turn to static in her chest.

“My name’s Benny,” he introduced himself. “Years ago, I was at this swap meet trying to trade my wobbuffet. I really thought I wasn’t gonna find someone, but then at the last second, you came out of nowhere and traded me this lickitung.”

Jessie’s emotions were an ear-splitting clamour inside of her head and heart, and the fire that made its home within her wanted to crackle and spit an ‘*I know!*’ at him. She steeled herself. She couldn’t meet Lickitung’s eyes.

“Lickitung and I have been best friends ever since then, and I always regretted that I couldn’t find you and thank you, but…” he shook his head, and looked up at her. “Here you are. I almost didn’t believe it at first… Wobbuffet looks… *different,* somehow.”

This wasn’t happening.

The woman didn’t even notice that she’d started crying until her breath hitched and she was forced to bring a trembling fist to her mouth to steady it. For all she’d done praying to karmic retribution for the reunions her companions had, she cursed herself for not expecting this. For not considering that perhaps there were homecomings she was not prepared for.

Her team was growing agitated around her, unable to parse why she was feeling so turbulent but steeped long enough in empathy to feel the tremors at full force. They were silenced by the pokémon standing at her feet as it rolled its tongue over her face in a single, strong motion—cheering its name as it did away with her tears.

The sensation of it, strangely nostalgic, jolted Jessie out of heartbreak and straight into a warm kind of disgust. In her sudden lack of lucidity, her and her former pokémon finally met each other’s gaze. The emotion in its eyes was something she couldn’t pinpoint, but there was love stamped into every corner of it.
That might have been what shocked her into a strange place she couldn’t put words to—Lickitung was no longer the dead-eyed thing she’d known on her journey alongside it. Its eyes, though still beady as ever, were shining. Shining in a way she’d not seen before, complimenting the happy grin on the pokémon’s face. Within her, two forces of her heart battled for dominion inside its walls—a noble swordswoman who was overjoyed at the sight up against a white-hot demon made of pure, unchecked wrath.

The warrior stuck her blade deep into the demon’s shoulder, and the creature cried out in pain. Jessie sucked in a shaky breath, lowering herself downward to meet Lickitung’s eye level while her team watched pensively. Her voice sounded like it was someone else’s, at first, jaggedly melting into her own.

“Hello, Lickitung,” she said, swallowing tears. “It’s certainly been a while.”

The pokémon’s smile faltered a little, and it tilted its head at something in her cadence. There was an underlying feeling buried it could not begin to detect, and she cursed the transparency in her presentation. She used to be better at this.

“Still ruining my makeup after all these years, aren’t you, old friend?” a smile. “Perhaps I’ll allow it just this once.”

There was a part of her that wanted to reach out, to make physical contact, to do something to show the pokémon adoration and gratitude—but of all the emotions swirling around inside her, Jessie was unsure if gratitude was something she could pick out. They were not concrete as they spilled out of her heart’s cauldron, muddied by the demon as its blood trickled down into the pot.

Lickitung seemed, more than anything, happy to see her. Still, she found herself lacking the words to express herself, messily navigating a conversation she’d never rehearsed in her head. To be so unprepared was a rarity to the woman—she’d never say it out loud, but there were a multitude of demons wrapped around her ankles that she’d daydreamed about giving a piece of her mind over, and over, and over again.

James bit his lip, raking dead skin beneath his teeth. There was something subdued in her words, and her relative silence and muted emotional reaction was making him anxious. He could tell that Meowth felt it too, caught somewhere between nervous and confused. Neither of them knew why she was on the verge of becoming a collapsing supernova—only that they could see the cracks breaking across the starlight.

“Say, um, perhaps we should—” James stammered, his tact failing him.

“Great idea, Jimmy!” Meowth nervously spat, oblivious to the fact that nothing had been said. “You’re a genius!”

Jessie’s eyebrow twitched, a little, and she was back to her senses as their dutiful team leader. They were making absolute fools of themselves, trying to lighten the mood and direct the attention and pressure off of her. She loved them, but didn’t exactly take kindly to being reminded that they knew her inside and out and could see every twist of her insides.

“You know, only so many hours in a day to prepare for such an event—”

“I like breaks as much as da next guy, but we do gaht work ta do, huh?”

“Hear hear!”

Jessie cleared her throat, standing up sharply, and her teammates snapped into place, intimidated and
unsure what to expect. Their cacophony was silenced, and despite the stiffness of her movements, her voice sounded relatively gentle when it came out of her.

“Benjamin,” she said sweetly, meeting the confused boy’s eyes. “Talented as I am, I’m having trouble finding the words to properly justify this situation, especially with a time limit on our day—”

On cue, the clocktower down the road boomed, letting everyone in the vicinity know that they were a mere hour til the meet started. Its clamour was a comfort, an easy escape for all of them.

“...point, I suppose,” she said, amused. “Maybe... this is one reunion we should save until after the day is done?”

“Wait! I have a better idea!” he said, and Jessie had to bite back her fire at the insinuation. “What if we switched pokémon for the work day? We could catch up while we worked!”

She faltered, a little. Something about the idea unsettled her.

“It would be... sentimental, I guess,” Benny said, lovingly. “You know, all of us parted here all those years ago... what better place to catch up?”

Jessie swallowed. She was a fool for sentiment, she really was—but the boy’s presence still felt imposing, to her. It was ridiculous, really, he was just a twerp, same as any other. But…

There was love in the way Wobbuffet looked at him, love in the way he reached out to make contact with him, love in every interaction they had. A pokémon who has been in the care of a human for a long time learns how to emerge from their ball properly—at first there is stumbling, and falling, and a lack of form. As time goes on, the pokémon comes to expect it, learns how to angle themselves in the air as they turn from data to form. Her mind stayed transfixed on Wobbuffet’s emergence from his, moments ago—how the mere sight of Benny sent the patient pokémon so deep into thought that he’d forgotten entirely where and who he was, back to square one only for an instant.

They had history, that was it. Arbok and Weezing had left their second family for their history. Chimecho had left the lap of luxury for its history. There was a chance, however small, that—

Her cruel thoughts silenced themselves at the feeling of a stubby arm on her thigh, at the sound of her pokémon chattering its name up at her, worried. He knew exactly what she was agonizing over—as always—and it only took her one brief look into tightly shut eyes to turn. Her abandonment issues were deep-seated, unshakable, integral to who she was as a person. They were not without basis, either, and her friend knew this after witnessing enough starlit tears. She got back down on his eye level, composing herself best she could. There were few people Jessie could humble herself for. He was one of the few.

“Is this important to you?” she said, and he nodded. She bit her cheek, and Wobbuffet noticed.

“Wob~ba,” he whispered, and when the sentiment of his statement registered, she had to stop herself from gasping too loud.

*The Kalosian princess,* he’d said. *Remember?*

Jessie swallowed. She nodded firmly.

“Wob~buffet?”

*Did I leave?*
“You didn’t,” she said, looking off to the side.

*She was really pretty!*

His trainer stifled a laugh. It was ridiculous how easily he could put her worries to bed, sometimes.

“Wobba–wobuffet,” he concluded, placing his arm on her shoulder affectionately. From behind them, James and Meowth watched entranced at how easily he’d diffused her mood.

*I would like a reunion too!* the pokémon stated. *But I go where you go.*

“Wobuffet,” he punctuated.

*Forever.*

The conviction in the voice of such a passive and noncommittal person warmed her, and she fancied the thought of anyone, human or pokémon, loving her enough to change all that they were to shine beside her. There was still a deep, dark part of Jessie that believed a day with Benny might still be enough to uproot those convictions that Wobuffet held—after all, how many times had someone promised her they wouldn’t leave, only to be gone the next day?—but she took a shaky breath and snuffed them out. This was all a part of being better. To move past her shackles, she had to have some faith.

There was love in his expression when he looked at Benny. The mantra that she put on loop in her head reminded her that it was a mere shadow of the love she saw when he looked to her.

“Behave, then,” Jessie instructed her pokémon with a smile. “And don’t you dare have too much fun without me, you hear?”

Wobuffet saluted her proudly, an utterance of his name shining with gratitude. Benny sheepishly motioned Lickitung forward, offering it a quiet reassurance—

“Well?” he said gingerly. “Go ahead!”

Lickitung trudged forward, pudgy body awkwardly stomping toward Jessie. She could tell it was smiling, the corners of its mouth upturned, and it quelled her worries just a little. Words failed her, still—there were a lot of things she wanted to say, and she was unsure of how easily they would come, if at all.

“Hope you can still keep up with me, Lickitung,” she grinned, hiding her anxiety. “I’ve only gotten stronger!”

“Licki~!” it beamed at her, eager to try.

“Alright, back to work, I guess!” Benny said, not sounding authoritative at all. “Let’s make it an awesome week, yeah?”

“Roger!” the former Rockets all affirmed in unison, and Wobuffet involuntarily added his name to the interjection, looking a little embarrassed after. Benny gave him a doting head rub, smiling.

“I think this is gonna be the best pokémon swap meet ever, don’t you?”

Jessie watched their backs disappear out the door of the bay, trying to remind her incorrigible heart that not every exit meant an end.
Why Benny had positioned Jessie and her former pokémon at the outdoor buffet, the woman hadn’t the slightest idea. She was side-eyeing Lickitung with the dutiful ferocity of a braviary as she pulled food out of the mobile fridge and dumped it into the shade-sheltered bar. She expected, when she turned her head, to see the pokémon staring glossy-eyed and wet-mouthed at her hands as she worked. Instead, it was mimicking her movements with a fluidity she lacked, gleeful smile on its face as it worked, tongue sheathed.

She stopped to quirk an eyebrow. This was a welcome change, but it was jarring, nonetheless. In the awkward silence that had been hanging over them since they’d gone off on their own, Jessie was thankful for another conversation topic to fill the screaming void with sound.

“The extent of your self control is frightening,” she told it, trying for a compliment but falling a little flat.

“Licki?” it stopped itself to meet her eyes, curious.

“Don’t play that cutesy naivety with me!” she went for a smile. “You used to take a bite of everything in sight! That’s how we met, remember?”

It ran a stubby hand over the back of its head, cheeks bunched up against its eyes when it grinned. There was so much life in its expression when it uttered its name affectionately.

“You’ve been trained so well… that twerp of yours must have the patience of a saint,” she noted. “No wonder him and Wobbuffet didn’t work out. Bet they just sat around all evening watching paint dry.”

Lickitung laughed, high-pitched and genuinely, and Jessie found herself unable to resist cracking up alongside it. It was hard not to, beside a creature so jovial and pink. There was a lightness within her only for a brief moment while an old friend of hers became lost in her silly joke—the sun on their backs, the sea in their ears.

It vanished sooner than Jessie would have liked. Mid-laugh, the sun turned overcast, and she caught and halted herself.

This wasn’t right.

She shouldn’t have been laughing. She had no right to sit beside this creature and act as though everything between them was fine, as though there weren’t words lingering in the space betwixt. When she silenced herself abruptly, her former pokémon continued on for a while before letting its own cheer peter out. She prayed it wouldn’t notice, but of course it shot her another curious, concerned look. Trying to ignore the awkward feeling of eyes at her flank, she went back to work, blanketing her inner storms with a contrived smile.

From a distance, James carefully descended the ladder he was balanced atop, eyeing Jessie with worry. Meowth was at the bottom of it, slitted gaze equally knit with distress as it fell on her. Sitting serene against a wall, Greninja let its ear steadily fall upon them as it watched over the egg.

Jessie’s mood affected the whole team, inwardly and outwardly. Normally, she allowed herself to feel strongly, and the sheer force of those emotions reached far, into the hearts of everyone around her. When Jessie was optimistic, it was hard not to smile alongside her and move forward. When she was downtrodden, the feelings of helplessness that came alongside it managed to tinge her friends’ outlook, as well. Right now, it was apparent to anyone close to her that she felt nothing short of turbulent, and indeed her looks and her actions betrayed a small hint of the tempest in her heart.
It was discordant. Weeks ago, James had watched Jessie bolt through grass with such a ferocity that green tore itself out of the ground and spun around her. Meowth had watched her collapse to her knees and sob as though she’d only just been born. In that moment, the two of them understood as well as outsiders to her heart could—Jessie didn’t feel like a typical person. She felt as if feeling was all she was put on this earth to do.

Now, she was a direct contrast of that—her frame held together tightly, cracking from pressure with magma seeping from the breaking earth. She refused to allow herself to come undone in any capacity. Whatever problems she was having, they remained tightly on lock.

It wasn’t the first time they’d seen her like this. But it was one of the more puzzling concepts they’d seen the woman lock up over. She and Lickitung had been working alongside each other for a while, now, and they seemed no closer to breaking through the awkwardness of two friends reuniting after a long period apart. James was starting to worry she wasn’t going to for a long while.

“It’s strange, right?” James said, out of her earshot. “Or am I losing it?”

“Nah, yer right,” Meowth agreed as he observed. “Somet’inn’s definitely up wit’ her.”

“She… she should be happy, no?” the man puzzled. “Lickitung’s an old friend of hers. But this is nothing like how she was with Arbok.”

“Yeah,” Meowth said. “Pretty much da exact opposite.”

The cat seemed equally perplexed, save for the ever-present underlying wiseness that he seemed to carry in his voice. James tried with all he was to parse what, if anything, the difference between the two scenarios was, running through process of elimination to attempt to figure out which discrepancy had turned her into such an inarticulate mess.

“Do you think Jessie’s dealing with something deeper we’re not privy to?” he tried.

Meowth scrunched his face up, momentarily in thought.

“I t’ink more’d’n likely it has somet’in’ ta do wit’ Lickitung,” he said. “Rat’er dan Jess.”

“How do you figure?” James asked.

“I mean, she didn’t have Lickitung for long, in da grand scheme o’ t’ings,” Meowth said. “Maybe she’s strugglin’ ta find somet’in’ ta talk about?”

“How do you figure?” James asked.

“Hm,” James meditated on it. “Would something like that really twist Jessie up so much? Our Jessie?”

The pokémon shrugged. “Who knows? You know better dan me she’s got a lot goin’ on beneat’ da surface.”

James sighed. “I doubt I know better than you, Meowth. Don’t you and Wobbuffet gossip?”

“Ha! Not a woihd,” Meowth shook his head, sounding amazed. “Da blob’s lips are sealed. Guess dat’s why she tells ‘im so much.”

James was genuinely surprised to hear this. He was always certain that Meowth’s leg up in understanding both him and Jessie had something to do with the fact that they both tended to dump their problems on their pokémon. Perhaps the cat was just that intuitive…
He looked back to Jessie, working hard as ever, her eyes staying off the pokémon beside her. In his index of memories of her, he tried to find something, anything that could clue him in to why she was struggling so much harder than he had, than she herself had, in the wake of what should’ve been a happy reunion.

He wasn’t able to locate one before the meet began.

Jessie fidgeted with her cuticles while time passed slowly, her back pressed up against an invisible wall while the stadium towered beside her. Lickitung was directly across from her, wearing a staff badge around its neck that was, frankly, kind of adorable. The position made it nearly impossible to avoid eye contact, but damn it, she was going to try.

Of all the jobs they’d done in preparation for today’s events, this one felt the most like slow torture. Crowds were swimming around them, talking amongst themselves and breathing life into the sleepy seaside town. Trade machines lit up, and children whispered ‘thank you’s and ‘take care of them’s that only served to sour Jessie’s mood more. The deals these kids were making were so equal, so negotiated, so easy. They closed one door with such finesse, opened another with such bright eyes. She was lost in her thoughts, wondering why she was robbed of something in the same vein, instead given some chaotic and twisted iteration of it. Same as it ever was.

The ground around her began to shudder, and she looked over the hill on the horizon to see the telltale signs of break time finally emerging, eclipsing the burning sun. There was a stampede of tauros en route to her and Lickitung, their hooves like thunder on the blazing pavement below. Young kids intermingled with the herd and were subsequently thrown backward, and Jessie rolled her eyes, wondering how the paramedic teams hovering around the path put up with this week.

Her job was simple enough: make sure all the tauros were guided into the stadium, where they’d then reunite with their trainers and battle each other in an all-tauros tournament. The entrance was big enough that there wasn’t much room for failure, even if the quickly-approaching roar of hooves trampling the earth below was making her more nervous than she’d have liked to admit. Jessie’s eyes were off the herd only for a minute while she became lost in her racing heartbeat, and in that time—as was always her luck—a commotion had broken out mid-way up the hill. Tauros veered off course around it, compromising the straight shot to where she was.

Lickitung was already bolting off to observe what had happened, its stubby legs carrying it best as they could. Jessie cursed a little under her breath as it left her there—what was she supposed to do? The smart thing was to stay at her post and keep directing the tauros, but…

She grit her teeth. Jessie refused to let the pokémon handle this on its own. She’d been gone for long enough.

The woman bolted—far up the hill to where the herd parted around, lungs burning in the wake of the steep incline and the unforgiving sunlight. When she reached its apex, she saw what had caused the clamour—one of the pokémon had fallen, and it was struggling to get back to its feet while the world around it shook and shifted. It was crying out in pain and agitation, and it seemed as though no one on sight had been trained to handle such an event.

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Jessie dragged her eyes from the scene in front of her to the gates of the stadium. She was on a time limit so short it might as well have been over, unsure of where to even start to remedy the situation. If the pokémon was hurt there was a chance she could stabilize it with the foggy pokémedical knowledge she’d kept with her throughout the years, but as things were, getting close enough through the herd would provide a challenge on its own.
Beside her, Lickitung was desperate for her attention, and she met its eyes with dismay. It was tugging on the leg of her slacks, fearfully chattering its name at her, eyes shining with a combination of fright and resolve. The pokémon moved its short arms in a way that seemed authoritative, instructive—as though it sensed her lack of direction in the dire situation and was trying to provide her solace in its own knowledge.

Whatever it was saying, she couldn’t parse it. Its name stayed just that on its breath, never melting to meaning in her head.

“I can’t…!” she muttered, and trailed off, not wanting to say the sentence aloud.

It kept on gesturing, panicked words falling from it, adding to the cacophony of sound as the clock ticked down and the herd thundered around them. Jessie’s thoughts went dark, and she couldn’t allow herself to ignore them—

*If you understood your pokémon like a trainer should, this wouldn’t be happening.*

She blinked her eyes shut, a physical attempt to will the unkind words away. The voice in her head had gotten far too loud in the last twenty-four hours, and she was growing tired of its schtick. Above all odds, Jessie was an alchemist, metamorphosing rotten luck to optimism, and today would be no different.

The woman shook her head roughly, erasing the pessimistic etch-a-sketch that had made its home inside her head. Adrenaline coursing through her, she ran directly into the herd as it swam around, the danger paling in the wake of her fire.

She had the mind to rip her lanyard off half-way through, tossing it to Lickitung, who made a nervous and perplexed noise in shock. Frozen to its spot, the pokémon watched as Jessie practically climbed the wall of moving tauros and then vaulted directly off one of them, using the height of the jump to land in the eye of the storm. The fluidity of it was surprising, and the crowd of kids that had already gathered with hopes of touching one of the rambunctious creatures were now stopped in their tracks, marveling at her. She always did work best under pressure.

Jessie surveyed the toppled pokémon as it thrashed around at her foot, acutely aware of her surroundings with moving walls on either side of her. It didn’t appear to be outwardly injured—just disoriented—its hooves not meant for getting up off its side. Tauros began to near the gates of the stadium. She bit her lip, diving to the floor, bracing for the pain of potentially getting gored by sharp horns.

“You’re *supposed*—” she panted, then yelled. “—to be *running!*”

Forcing all the strength and fire she had into the single gesture, Jessie grabbed the tauros by its horns, grappling onto them like a makeshift steering wheel. She dug her sneakers firmly into the pavement, heaving it upward with all her strength. Cheers broke out around her as the pokémon scrambled to its feet, shooting her an intense look before barreling off with the others, unharmed. The roar of the small crowds turned to white noise around her while blood pumped in her ears, and she tore off back down the hill after the herd. Lickitung was at the gates, somehow, and not a single tauros was out of place. The stadium lights lit up. Jessie gripped at her sides, cramped and burning and constricting, and somehow still nothing compared to the turmoil she’d felt all morning.

When she reached the gates, and Lickitung handed her back her badge, she took it with a trembling hand, slowly sinking to her knees as she struggled to catch her breath. Things were okay. The situation had been remedied.
A darkness still hung over her, even when Lickitung trotted over to her to offer a feeble back rub. There was affection in its gesture. There was guilt in her accepting it.

Jessie laughed darkly to herself as she realized why everyone had cheered her on as she rescued the Taurus from off the ground. Was she the only one? Figures, someone who was only there on business…

A trophy, huh, her mind swam while air returned to her lungs. The sun beat down on her face while she leaned back on her palms, unyielding. Hilarious.

I don’t feel like a winner.

Benny let out a relaxed sigh as he fell back into his beach chair, lost in the sound of the waves and the scent of seawater that seemed to drench the world around him. He snapped his chopsticks apart, then stopped himself to lean over to Wobbuffet, motioning the bento at the Pokémon—

“Wanna share?”

Wobbuffet eyed the treasure trove of food, then went straight for a small cupcake that was pushed to the far corner of it. He devoured it with a ferocity typical of him but surprising to Benny, who simply blinked a few times before dissolving into giggles.

“Sweet tooth, much?”

The patient Pokémon looked embarrassed for a moment, pink lining his expression. All he could offer was a sheepish arm behind his head, a muttered out iteration of his name that sounded like a makeshift apology.

“I’m just teasin’, Wobbuffet,” the boy smiled. “It’s good to see you so eager.”

He didn’t know what to say to that, so he uttered an agreeable ‘wobba’ that melted into the rhythm of the sea. The wind sang. Yanma hovered around the ocean flowers that surrounded the boardwalk, humming their names to the dipping sun. It was a while before Benny spoke again.

“You’re really different now, huh?”

The Pokémon turned to eye him. Was he? He hadn’t really noticed. He felt the same as ever.

“Wobb~uffet?” he inquired, and though the exact meaning of his question was unclear, Benny felt a vibe coming off it he could somewhat read.

“You talk more,” the boy grinned. “And when you do, it’s with such enthusiasm. You seem so opposite to the shy kid I found in a cave all those years ago, y’know?”

Wobbuffet took the moment to gaze down at himself, suddenly feeling a little exposed. It was rare that anyone paid attention to him for this long, let alone analyzed whole facets of his personality. He was perfectly content being in the limelight—he reveled in it, even—but the biggest part of that was controlling when he got to be the star. Right now, he wasn’t sure how much he liked it.

Benny must have noticed this, so he smiled in kind and quickly changed the subject.

“Your trainer seems… interesting,” the boy said. “A little mercurial, maybe… but she’s nice, yeah?”
There was only a tinge of worry to his statement, as though mid-way through he lost confidence in his words, and wanted the pokémon to offer validation to them. To his delight, Wobbuffet absolutely lit up the second Jessie was mentioned, chattering his name excitedly and moving his arms about in every direction. Benny was certain he’d never seen the pokémon so happy in the short time they’d traveled side-by-side. His heart soared.

“You really like her,” he said, the question turning to a statement as he said it.

“Wobbuffet!” he affirmed, saluting excitedly.

“Tell me about her!” Benny said, simply. It was a bit of an odd statement—true, the two of them hadn’t bonded as well as they could, so Wobbuffet’s words had to be parsed through context, through tone, through the way he moved and spoke. That didn’t mean, however, that there was no point in hearing what the patient pokémon had to say. Pushing past that language barrier was what separated good trainers from great trainers.

Wobbuffet stared at him, a little overwhelmed at the request—where would he begin? Where would he even start to describe what Jessie was to him, what they were together? The question left him simultaneously bursting with stories and unable to speak. He wasn’t a pokémon of many words to begin with—most days, he tried not to say more than a few at a time. But when it came to Jessie, sentences tumbled from him easily, a mile a minute.

Where would he begin?

Maybe at the very beginning.

Wobbuffet skidded backward into the earth, stub-like feet messy with dirt as grass uprooted itself around him. The world breathed deeply as the sun melted into the horizon, and he watched his sparring partner struggle to her feet, painted lips crooking into a determined smile. It was a joyous sight, the signal that she was still ready for more, and when he saw the blue of her skin transform back, prismatic, he readied his own counterattack and ran toward her with all he was. They both went for the jump, colliding in mid-air, a perfect pirouette off of each other.

He landed on his back with a thud, eyes knit shut—more so than usual, at least. When he heard her cheer her name, he didn’t have to look toward her to see what would’ve been there—his friend with her arm resting dutifully atop her temple, beaming to the world that she’d won today.

Wobbuffet struggled to his feet, cringing through the pain as he made his way over to shake her hand. She grabbed it with fervor, the fight not even wearing her down an instant, and he couldn’t help but admire the power within the small gesture. His muscles burned, his body ached. He felt alive.

From the mouth of the cave, an older wobbuffet broke their reverie, calling out over the tender moment and scolding the young pokémon for being out before the sun had fully set. The both of them couldn’t help but lose a pair of relieved sighs—in all honesty, they’d been out far longer than that. They counted their blessings that he had not found them before.

“It’s dangerous out here, especially for two reckless children,” he chided. “Back inside. You can play-fight all you want when the moon is high.”

His partner would’ve rolled her eyes if she were capable. Play-fight, right. ‘Cause it’s not a real battle unless someone throws a punch?

She didn’t say the words out loud, but Wobbuffet somehow heard them loud and clear. It wasn’t that...
he particularly liked battling… but there was something thrilling about taking charge when so many people told you you’re incapable. He’d snuck out of the cave when his parents weren’t watching, seen the furret squabbling and the spinarak sparring. They looked so free, so happy to be able to experience that ability to choose. He’d only been born a few months ago, but he knew that he could, too.

“You can’t,” the others would say to him, as if it were a universal truth. “We can’t.”

“And why not?” Wobbuffet would shoot right back, hungry for answers.

“That’s just the way it is,” was the response he’d always get, the words like creed, rehearsed. No one in the wibble had the mind to say otherwise. Not until he met her—a girl his age with bright pink lips and shining eyes and a fire somewhere deep inside her that let her fight as much as a wobbuffet could.

Together, they pushed the boundaries of their capabilities, counter against counter against counter, making do with the tools they were given. It must’ve been the hundredth sunset by her side, now, and he was no closer to knowing why so many of his colonymates had given up. Didn’t they know they were destined for so much more? Didn’t they know there was more to life than this?

It came on suddenly, one night, creeping on his back like a cold wind. When he’d left the cave, felt the sun on his face he was so keen to—its gentle warmth felt searing, now. Inescapable. A chilling fear broke out across Wobbuffet’s form, and he swiveled his head around, desperate to find whatever it was that… had to have been watching him. There was nothing. Instead, he heard a whisper whip up in his head—sounding like nothing more than an errant thought at first, before the words materialized to something whole.

Turn back, the voice commanded.

There was no one in sight, but it sounded as though someone were standing right next to him, talking directly into his ear. His voice shook when he responded, internally—

W… what? His mind raced.

Turn back, the voice whispered, again. Back home.

I can’t right now, he told it. I promised my friend I’d meet her.

Dangerous, the voice warned. Dangerous out here. Make yourself smaller. Turn back.

It kept on repeating itself, whispers layering one on top of the other like an ekans’ hiss. The words ‘dangerous’ and ‘turn back’ over and over, no rhythm to them at all, discordant and maddening. Despite their base lack of volume, they quickly built to a cacophony in Wobbuffet’s head, and he gripped at it desperately, trying to silence them.

Who are you? He said, head pounding while he tried to carry onward. What do you want?

Turn back, it said, simply. Save yourself, and I will remain silent.

Why? He asked, and the answer it gave was like nails across glass—

That’s just the way it is.
Wobbuffet stood at the fringes of the cave entrance, squinting in the sunlight as it hit his face. There was a memory buried somewhere deep inside him, but it had to have been a contrivance, thinking in the logical sense. The sun was so bright, so imposing. The idea of him ever wanting to spend time in it, let alone... fighting? It made no sense. Who would do something so dangerous? He shook the fallacy from his head, heading back into the cave.

An impulse settled upon him, and just for the moment, he gave into it. Wobbuffet cast a glance over his shoulder, looking out of the aperture that connected his darkened home to the outside world. The sun continued its shine. Life breathed outside. Pokémon scurried from tree to tree, flitted through clouds. He watched, restrained rapture.

Turn back, he heard, used to the routine by now. Wobbuffet sighed, angling himself down to face his tail head on.

Why are you so creepy? He asked it in their shared headspace, dryly. He knew what the answer was going to be, but saying it aloud was cathartic, to some degree.

That’s just the way it is, his tail responded, and Wobbuffet decided that was enough questions for today.

Before he could heed the orders of the unfortunate soul he was sharing a body with, footsteps at the cave mouth stopped the pokémon in his tracks. He froze, wanting to turn around again, wondering if his tail would let him. From behind him, a human voice spoke.

“Woah,” it said. “What’s that?”

Wobbuffet heard the human shuffling through his jacket pockets, and it made the swirling voices within him reach a fever pitch. Despite the clamour, despite the agonizing sound of them whispering against each other, he felt no obligation to listen to them, to silence them. He’d never seen a human up close before. If this was going to be his end, why not make it interesting?

The patient pokémon whipped his body back around, staring the human down, and the boy startled a little at the sudden movement. There was a red contraption balanced shakily in his hand, reading data back to him in an artificial voice.

”—live in dark areas so they can keep their pitch-black tails concealed,” it concluded, and the boy seemed to marvel as he looked up from its screen, directly to Wobbuffet.

“You’re a wobbuffet, huh?” he said, and Wobbuffet sputtered out his name, an accidental confirmation.

Run, his tail was practically roaring, and the pokémon squinted his eyes shut tighter, willing it to be quiet.

“That’s so cool, I’ve never seen a pokémon like you before!” the boy beamed, and dug a pokéball out of his pocket. “I definitely wanna catch you!”

In the space where he threw his ball, a hoothoot materialized, its tiny wings barely keeping it off the ground. Wobbuffet’s tail kept up its cacophony, this time shifting its words. Running, it seemed, was no longer an option.

Endure, it said, and so the patient pokémon did.

The owl pokémon charged him at the sound of Benny’s commanding shout, and Wobbuffet almost nonchalantly focused himself inward while he readied his counterattack. He was on autopilot, really,
and the second he'd stopped thinking, it seemed as though the cauldron of whispering voices within him had ceased their unforgiving maelstrom. Benny marveled at the way the patient pokémon lit up in the darkness and sent his pokémon flying backward, stars in his eyes.

“You’re so strong!” he cheered. “You barely lifted a finger!”

I don’t have fingers, Wobbuffet thought, and suddenly there was a sphere being lobbed toward him that he didn’t feel the need to step out of the way of. His tail yelled at him to deflect it, but its words hit far too late, the instinct never kicking in like it so often did.

The world around him went away. Describing the sensation was... difficult. Something netlike on his skin, binding him. He could struggle free if he chose, that much was apparent—and in fact, his tail was ordering him to, voice the usual hurricane. While the shackles pulsed around the both of them, Wobbuffet pressed his luck.

How do you decide what to be passive about? He asked his tail.

What do you mean? It said.

Sometimes we have to run. Sometimes we have to stay put. Sometimes we have to fight. Sometimes we have to avoid it with all we are, Wobbuffet said. How do you decide?

I am instinct, it told him. I exist for this purpose. I exist to protect you.

Really, the pokémon responded, almost dryly. It feels like... maybe I exist... to protect you.

The webbing around them seemed to shrink, forcing Wobbuffet’s arms at his side. At the sound of his statement, the clairvoyant gales inside him shrieked in agony, a pitch he’d never heard in all his years. His tail’s voice imposed, louder than ever.

Enough conversation! It boomed. Break free! We are running out of time!

Wobbuffet fought against the aching pain in his head, speaking a single word back at it.

No.

The gales turned to typhoons, piercing the sound barrier, sonic booms that echoed inside his mind. He fought the urge to cry out.

Break free! Do you want to be shackled by this human forever?

Wobbuffet knit his brow, responding through the nauseating pain.

I don’t know what I want, the pokémon told it. So I might as well go with the flow and hope I find something.

You’ll be waiting forever before you do!

He mentally shrugged. I’m patient.

Why are you so quick to accept your own fate?!

Wobbuffet almost smirked while the ethereal nets around them shifted one last time.

That’s just the way it is.
A roar loosed itself in his mind again. Almost immediately after, the storms began to dissipate. The shackles around his body faded away. The world around him hovered—cloudlike, unearthly. It was a little cramped in here. He wasn’t particularly fond of it, but for now, he was too exhausted to complain.

Wobbuffet heard cheering, muffled through the walls of his new dwelling space. They sounded like syllables, mostly—nothing more. Quickly, though, the dreamlike walls faded, and he was suddenly hurtling downward toward the cave floor he’d known all his life. The sudden shift caught him off guard, and he struggled to land properly on his feet, awkward and without grace, arms out for balance.

When Wobbuffet was able to properly register his surroundings, one of the first things he saw was the human who he had battled, staring brightly down at him. The boy crouched, getting on the pokémon’s eye level.

“Hello, Wobbuffet,” he said, sounding strangely grateful. “I’m Benny! Looks like you’re my pokémon now.”

Wobbuffet tilted his head, taking in the news. His wibble had never spoken of traveling with a human, but he’d heard things from the noctowl perched at the cave mouth, the wooper that swam up the stream beside it. They spoke of dreams, of something greater, of how a pokémon with a human was a happy pokémon, a pokémon living its best life.

The patient pokémon liked his life just fine before. But this sounded fun, too. Anything sounded fun, really. He didn’t particularly mind going along with the boy, so he saluted peacefully and agreed.

Noticing the strange quiet, he posed a question to his tail as him and his trainer left the cave—

No complaints? He said. We’re going to the big scary outside world.

His tail was silent for a long while, still, before speaking once more.

That’s just the way it is.

“Houndour, use Fire Fang!”

“Wobbuffet, uh—” Benny halted, biting his lip. “Mirror Coat!”

Wobbuffet wanted to shoot his trainer an incredulous look, but the fact of the matter was that he was someone’s pokémon now, and a good pokémon tried their best to trust their trainer. Still, he wished sometimes that he had the nerve to tell Benny what he was doing wrong. It would be a lot more comfortable, but comfort was never really something the patient pokémon was taught to strive for, so he kept his mouth shut.

Predictably, the iridescence of his skin faded as soon as the attack made contact, and Wobbuffet was thrown unceremoniously backward, where the last of his energy left him and stars swam above his head. It was a typical routine, these last few months—save for a couple spells of luck—and he’d tried to keep his optimistic wits about him. Whatever can go wrong will, yes, and he will survive it, because that’s what wobbuffet do. Endure.

Maybe his trainer wasn’t clueless, even? Perhaps his master was employing some sort of secret training tactic that was meant to make him stronger. He wanted to trust Benny. He wanted to know why nebulas danced across the eyes of every pokémon he’d ever met who talked of human
companionship.

The boy let out a sigh, and Wobbuffet couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt. There was… probably more he could be doing. He could tell Benny that he knew, on his own, which counterattack to use. He could let Benny know that if the two of them were just patient, they’d surely get somewhere. He could inform his master that hardship only makes victory sweeter. His words were on tight lock, though, hidden below the undying need to be obedient and agreeable. Even if they did pass his lips, who knew if Benny would understand them.

Benny got down to Wobbuffet’s level while he lay there, and whispered a sentiment of encouragement and gratitude before returning the pokémon to his ball. The losses, the pain, the hardship—none of those things were what Wobbuffet disliked about life away from home. This, however, was.

He’d chatted with his companions, and they all talked about how much they loved being inside their pokéballs—how cozy it was, the walls like down pillows, dreamlike and warm. How after a long battle, all they wanted to do was curl up and rest, so what better option than a pokéball?

All the patient pokémon saw were walls. What was the point of seeing the world if you were going to spend it holed up inside a contraption? Granted, he didn’t have to stay here if he didn’t choose to. The devices were loosely controlled for a reason, to prevent humans with cruel intentions. It was uncomfortable, but that was all it was. He could handle that. He endured.

Over time, though, Wobbuffet noticed he was spending less and less time outside of his ball. He felt, through its walls, the way Benny would grit his teeth in a hard battle, fingertips brushing across the spheres in his pocket. Tracing across the ones that contained fainted and recovering pokémon, tracing across Wobbuffet’s, at full health and ready to battle.

The boy’s hand would pass over him, and he would curl in harder on himself, trying to make the prison a home.

Maybe it’s something I’ve done, Wobbuffet would ponder on his own. Am I too loud? I can be quieter.

Naturally, his tail would offer its unsolicited opinion to these thoughts.

Remain patient, it said, like it so often did. He’s taken to the others more. That’s just the way it is.

Benny must have noticed that his pokémon had somehow, despite all odds, become even more soft-spoken and reserved, because one starry night he threw Wobbuffet’s ball into the air, eyes serious. They stood there, on the hotel balcony beneath the shining moon. Waves crashed against the shore, their winds rustling the palm trees. Benny sucked in a breath before speaking.

“Wobbuffet, I’ve been thinking,” he said. “I don’t think I’ve been the best trainer to you.”

The pokémon was confused at that statement, uttering a quiet “Wob?”

“I mean… I’m not very good at using your attacks, and because I can’t get past it, I think I might have just… given up,” his voice had remorse hanging over every inch of it. “You don’t deserve that… you deserve so much better than me! You deserve a trainer who will let you reach your full potential.”

Wobbuffet had a lot he wanted to say. He wanted to let Benny know that he didn’t really care or want to battle any more than he wanted to do anything else. He wanted to let Benny know that if he was really struggling so much, the pokémon could just attack on his own. He wanted to let Benny
know not to guilt himself, because both of them were beginners when it came to a journey alongside the other, and there was plenty of room to grow. He wanted to tell Benny that it was okay, that he was patient.

“There’s a Pokémon Swap Meet here in Palmpona tomorrow, and I’m thinking…” Benny swallowed, mustering his courage. “Would you be alright if I traded you? To another trainer, one who would really be able to let you shine in battle?”

The patient pokémon ran over the thought in his mind. A yes or a no didn’t come naturally. The only instinct Wobbuffet had was to apologize—to apologize to Benny for being too difficult, too much of a learning curve, too much in general. He realized that was closer to a yes than anything—it wasn’t that Wobbuffet deserved better than Benny. It was that Benny deserved better than him.

Wobbuffet nodded. Benny tried to keep tears from his eyes, running an open palm affectionately over Wobbuffet’s head.

“You’re a really incredible pokémon, Wobbuffet,” he said, smiling through sadness. “Someone’s really gonna love you, someday soon.”

The pokémon shifted a little, wondering how the boy could say something with such wisdom when the two of them both had seen so little of the world.

The first thing Wobbuffet noticed about her was her voice.

It was loud. Not just loud, triumphant. Victorious, boisterous, confident. It boomed like the psychic whispers in his head when he would defy, but fell on his ears like soothing rainfall on a summer day, rather than a freezing hurricane. He never knew he could enjoy something so loud.

The second thing he noticed was that not a single badge lined her pocket, and for whatever reason, this fact filled him with an indescribable amount of daring. He’d noticed after a few days with them that his new humans—humans! With an S! Two of them!—had a habit of throwing down silly little rhymes whenever they ran into someone to battle. On a day when Wobbuffet was feeling brave, he pushed open the ethereal walls of his pokéball to punctuate their poetry, his voice its usual whisper.

He expected to be returned as quickly as he breathed the open air once more. Jessie had made it pretty clear upfront that she wasn’t fond of how often he came to say hello, but so often lately he would get caught up in the moment and be unable to help himself. His new humans were quite vibrant, and their chatty nature was oddly infectious. He’d taken good care to remain soft-voiced despite it, but there was something greater within him saying that if he was going to be given a new start alongside a new person, he might as well take advantage of the world practically welcoming him beyond his ball every change it got.

Usually, the patient pokémon would see his trainer with her scarlet lips pressed into an angry line, clutching his pokéball with such ferocity he feared it’d be shattered to pieces. To Wobbuffet’s surprise, Jessie was looking at him almost endearingly this time, a hand resting thoughtfully under her chin.

“Not bad,” she told her pokémon. “I like the new ending!”

James stood beside her, equally proud. “Yes, it does have a nice ring to it…”

He always made sure to join in, after that, eager to make her proud.
The third and final thing that Wobbuffet noticed about Jessie was that she was unlike any other human he’d known.

Granted, he hadn’t known many. But he swore she must have been some kind of powerful legendary pokémon masquerading around as a human being, because there was no way someone so positively wonderful could exist.

It was sometime around midnight when he heard her stifling tears into something, and it was one of the few times where he mentally debated the pros and cons of going to see what was wrong with her. He was a newcomer to her life, and if he was being honest, he didn’t know that much about her at all. But the sound of her crying so genuinely and without her usual theatrics sounded wrong, eerie, like a pokémon trapped and dying in the woods. Arbok was silent beside them in its ball, and initially Wobbuffet took it as a warning, seeing as the snake knew her so much better—but he could only listen to the controlled impulse for so long. Taking the risk, Wobbuffet burst forth to see her.

Jessie reacted defensively first, her teary expression morphing to anger quick. Though her burning sapphire eyes screamed get away, Wobbuffet couldn’t help but take note of the fact that she didn’t immediately return him to his pokéball like usual.

“Great, just who I wanted to see!” Jessie frothed. “Can’t you tell I’m not in the mood to deal with your antics today?!”

Wobbuffet said nothing to her. He didn’t know her as well as he would have liked, but he knew that when she was angry like this, the best thing he could do was lie in wait. Thankfully, he excelled at that.
The patient pokémon turned to face in the same direction she was—out at sprawling forests and towering mountains beyond the hill she’d been sitting atop—and sat down beside her, silent. She observed him out the corner of her eye, trying to paw for his true intentions. Still, he stayed quiet.

The lack of noise was beginning to drive Jessie mad.

“You’ve got some nerve,” she told him. “Always popping out of your ball without being called upon, not even sparing me at my weakest moments.”

Wobbuffet wanted to ask why she seemed so upset with him, but still didn’t recall him. Instead, he just looked to the ground, then to Jessie. She was quiet for a moment before her disposition softened, and she asked a rather strange question—

“Hey,” Jessie said. “Today when James and Meowth said that… thing about being unhappy…”

The pokémon wracked his brain, trying to remember exactly what sentiment it was they’d expressed. Thankfully, Jessie refreshed him.

“You… you said something afterwards and I just want to know,” she turned away. “If it was an agreement. If you also dread being around me.”

He thought long and hard. No, he liked being around her, for sure. There was such a lack of pressure. She didn’t want him to be an incredible battler. She seemed content to just let him hang around and do nothing. And she was funny, and smart, and easy to look up to. Sometimes she got angry with him, but it didn’t bother him much in the long run. He liked her an okay deal.

Wobbuffet shook his head, whispering his name in his usual, raspy pitch. Jessie brightened, a little.

“Really?” she said, misty-eyed. “Even though I lose my temper with you? Even though I yell?”

The pokémon didn’t entirely understand what the big deal was. What was wrong with that? In all her anger, she still fed him before she fed her starving self, cheered him on after a job well done. They’d only been together for a few weeks, but he’d enjoyed that time immensely. Wobbuffet nodded.

Tears welled back up in Jessie’s eyes, and she fiercely turned away from him, unable to comprehend it. She wiped at her face, gritted teeth and fed up with herself for being such an emotional wreck.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and Wobbuffet wondered who it was she was apologizing to. The angry fire seemed to put itself out. She carried on.

“Getting split up from the others today really made me realize how different of a life I could be living right now,” Jessie suddenly told him.

He decided now, if ever, was the time to speak. “Wob?”

“Those twerps, you know…” she gestured a gloved hand in no particular rhythm. “They’re out there, young and bright-eyed and living their dreams, and where am I?”

Wobbuffet looked to her, then to the stars. Was she not living her own dream? She seemed so happy, so vibrant.

“Starving on the streets, same as it’s always been,” she laughed darkly. “And I can’t help but think, where did it all go wrong? I was too theatrical to be an actress, too abrasive to be a Coordinator, too rough to be a nurse…”
Her pokémon was utterly astounded by how open she was being. He wondered how many people and pokémon got to be privy to these details, got to know her how a newbie like him suddenly got to. Something about what she was saying hit him where he could really feel it, deep in a part of his heart that he’d locked away long ago.

“Sometimes I wonder… what my life would be if I wasn’t too much,” she said, finally. “You know, if I was quieter. Softer. If the world hadn’t made me so… hard.”

Wobbuffet dropped his gaze from her to his hands. A blurry memory came into focus in his head, of two fledgling wobbuffet sparring in a grassy field, sunkissed faces lit up with bruise-lined smiles.

Almost as soon as the words left Jessie’s mouth, she seemed to denounce them, shaking her worries away, the fire back in her voice.

“Ugh, what am I saying!” she shouted, fists balled. “This pity act is so unsuited to a charming and fierce beauty like myself!”

She stood up then, as though she were announcing her convictions to everyone residing in the sleeping world below. Wobbuffet watched her go from crying child to ho-oh incarnate in a matter of minutes, sacred flames crackling off her and casting the night aglow.

“I refuse to give up and make myself smaller just because the world hasn’t learned the value in unyielding passion yet!” she roared, startling murkrow from the pines. “This is who I am and who I’ll always be, and I’ll fit in wherever I damn well please, and that’s just the way it is!”

Jessie dropped back down to the grassy floor, breathing heavily, as though the outburst had somehow taken anything out of her constant surplus of energy. Wobbuffet watched, hopelessly endeared, as she fell onto the back of her palms and smiled, starlight across her face. After a beat of silence, she turned to face him.

“Thanks for this, Wobbuffet,” she said, as if he’d done much of anything. “You know, you’re a shockingly good listener.”

He stared at her, expression same as ever, taking in everything that she was. The third and final thing that Wobbuffet noticed about Jessie was that—even when it would’ve done her good, even when it would’ve kept her safe, even when it foiled her plans—Jessie refused to apologize for her existence. She was big, and loud, and ruthless, and passionate. There was a glowing red target on her back that she not only knew of, but wholeheartedly embraced.

‘That’s just the way it is,’ was not a statement from the world to Jessie. It was a statement from Jessie to the world.

Despite how she looked in moments of weakness like this, Wobbuffet could tell, in his minimal knowledge of her as a person, that she was a million times happier this way than she ever would’ve been if she were forced to smother that blaze inside her. He knew it, and deep down, she did, too.

Jessie is so happy, Wobbuffet thought.

He looked up to his trainer with an open-mouthed smile, balanced his arm firmly on his head where it belonged, and bellowed his name at a volume he didn’t know he was capable of.

Maybe I can be happy, too.
“Wobbuffet, this is where we say goodbye.”

The sunset drenched Jessie and everything around her in a bittersweet shade of orange, and Wobbuffet could feel her calloused palm trembling at his temple when she looked at him with loving eyes. Her words sounded hypnagogic, inexplicable, their tenderness not doing anything to hide their lack of discernible meaning. The patient pokémon didn’t understand what she was trying to say to him, for once in his life. He sputtered out his name, a splintered and fearful inquiry.

“You stay here,” she told him, voice breaking. “And have a wonderful life.”

His words turned to nothing in his throat when Jessie stood up and turned away. She undid her hair, the sprawling comet trail she wore as a trademark finding its home back where it belonged. Wobbuffet’s statement melted into an incredulous whimper—his name, her name.

Jessie! He whined after her, and she bolted from White’s cabin long before she let the sound hit her ears.

Wobbuffet blinked his eyes shut tighter than their usual rest, tears absolutely strangling his throat. What was she trying to accomplish, with this? Who did she think she was fooling? And who did she take him for? He’d sat beside her under thousands upon thousands of starlit nights, listened to her break down about how everyone she loved had left her and how no one had been beside her by choice and how she ran away from those she loved most so that they couldn’t abandon her first. Did she think he was just another pokémon? Did she think that he didn’t know her, love her?

Stay put, his tail told him in all his turmoil. You’ve been given a comfortable life. You have a family here.

Shut up! Wobbuffet gripped at his head. I have a family there, too!

The human has cast you aside, it said, louder. That’s just the way it—

No! The pokémon shouted into their headspace. That’s not just the way it is! Nothing is just the way it is! You can force me to be passive all you want, but the only thing I’ll never be passive about is Jessie!

He unclenched his muscles, let out a shaky breath. Softening himself, Wobbuffet turned to his mate, her squinted eyes sparkling in the fading sunlight. He struggled to find the words as they fizzled out somewhere inside him.

“I… I’m sorry,” he told her, bringing his gaze from her to the wynaut at their feet. “You're so kind. But I can’t stay here. Not without her.”

The wynaut let out some murmurs, one of them tilting its head. The innocence in them sent a piercing needle through Wobbuffet’s heart, and he tried with all he was to explain himself.

“I have to—” he started. “She’s… she’s my—”

The Kalosian princess was smiling. She looked as beautiful as ever in the dimming orange of the world around them, placing a single arm across Wobbuffet’s face. It rested there, and his cheeks burned at the touch. Voice velvet as ever, she spoke to him.

“Go,” she said, still beaming. “Go be with her.”

He wanted to hesitate—wanted to look her in the eyes and ask her if this was okay. Of course there was a part of him that wanted this—a life of love and stability beside a beautiful person who adored
him for everything he was. It wasn’t enough, though. Nothing would ever be enough to compete with Jessie.

As if to encourage him, the Kalosian princess pulled him forward, her painted lips meeting his own, as much as they could with their equally flat faces. They broke apart after a minute that lasted an hour, and she repeated herself once more—

“Go.”

Wobbuffet fought the tears in his eyes, and nodded firmly to her. Stars blinking on like fairy lights around him, he ran.

Off the small property, through thorny berry bushes, past hundreds upon hundreds of trees. He ran as fast as his makeshift legs could carry him, ignoring the cacophonous thunder that rang in his head and told him he was too late, she would be long gone, this was futile. He didn’t know how he knew which way to turn—all he knew was that he had to find her. He had to be beside her again.

When Wobbuffet had met Jessie, he was stuck somewhere inside himself, a creature without a voice. A passive player in his own life, watching the world go by. It was only when he saw how unapologetic she was about herself that he learned how to be himself, little by little. Every year, his voice climbed an octave until it was a vibrant shout. Every day, he apologized a little less for who he was.

Jessie was big and bold and loud and wonderful and without her, Wobbuffet didn’t want to think about the person he’d be. He had feeling he wouldn’t be much of a person at all.

A distant explosion at his flank let him know that something was amiss, and he desperately turned the corner to investigate it, simultaneously hoping and fearing. As he neared the scene he saw it, and his heart raced a mile a minute—she was there. She hadn’t gotten far. The red emblazoned across her chest looked like home, the fiery trail of hair behind her a badge of honour.

“You’re finished! Rock Wrecker!”

A stranger was firing attacks at his family and The Twerps, and they were bunched up in a huddle while one was en route straight toward them. Unthinking, unflinching, Wobbuffet cast himself aglow, tearing out of the forest beside them and jumping in front of the blast. The impact hit him hard, but he’d taken far worse hits in his life. He steadied himself, stubby feet planted firmly on the ground, sending the cascading boulders right back at the rhyperior across the divide.

“Wobbuffet?!” Jessie cried incredulously, and Wobbuffet nearly roared his name as he finished his counterattack.

“Wobbuffet, you were so happy back there!” his trainer told him, her voice shaking with tears. “So why did you come here?! Go back, now!”

She was ordering him. Not ordering—begging him. In the pain in her voice, Wobbuffet focused everything he’d learned from her into his own. He channeled her confidence, became the vibrant being she had always been, to remind her who she was, who they were. The patient pokémon turned to face her, a knowing grin on his face as he addressed her.


Meowth and Pikachu marveled at the pokémon, side-by-side in their awe. The cat’s voice trembled as he spoke.
“You left dem… fer us?” Meowth’s expression fell. “You’re da best pally dat ever was…”

Beside him, Jessie stood in heartbroken amazement with tears staining cobalt eyes. She cried from anger. She cried from joy. She cried from sorrow, far less often.

Gratitude, that was a new one.

“You’re a fool…” the woman said, swallowing hard, forcing the sobs back down her throat before she raised her voice. “A fool!”

The hunter and his pokémon sent another powerful attack barreling their way, and at the sound of Jessie’s impassioned command, Wobbuffet tore forward, a shining and protective rainbow. His body was moving before she said a word to call him to action, their limbs positioned like mirrors of each other, their hearts beating perfectly in sync. Adrenaline coursed through the patient pokémon, and when the attack hit him, he felt absolutely nothing in its wake. Nothing but love, but drive, but the undying need to protect that which was dear to him.

Behind him, Jessie kept her tears down, knowing that if she let them surface again she’d be inconsolable long before she won the battle. People didn’t return. People didn’t come running back to her. Jessie was loved, but she was no one’s first choice—there was always someone better, someone softer, someone nicer, someone who was not too much.

Wobbuffet was eclipsing the setting sun in front of her, his form shining every colour perceivable, as though his only purpose in life was to protect her.

Jessie’s life was a long, tortured recurring nightmare where she watched people’s backs as they disappeared on the bleeding horizon.

Wobbuffet was determined to be her exception.

Benny watched as the patient pokémon tried to articulate himself, hands moving wildly about in grand gestures of storytelling. He couldn’t help but marvel at it—this absolutely was a completely different breed from the pokémon he’d known so long ago. Though he didn’t understand Wobbuffet’s exact words, he could tell that what the pokémon was saying was an explanation of why he had turned out this way. It was easy to infer that whoever she was, Jessie had touched his heart in a way that was beautiful, and surprising, and necessary.

All around them, kids dropped pokéballs into machines and whispered bittersweet goodbyes with smiles on their faces. Every one of them had a different reason for the decision, be it well-thought out or impulse, be it deep or casual, be it easy or hard. No two trades were the same, and no two trades ever produced the exact same result.

The boy couldn’t help but feel warmed as he heard their footsteps echo on the boardwalk behind them. These kids didn’t know what kind of wonderful new friends they were in for, sure—but neither did their pokémon.

Meowth was caught at a low-point in the busy afternoon, half-present at his duties while he lazily examined his claws and cursed himself for not bringing his nail file with him. His teammates hovered around him, the lot of them somehow all ending up in the same place in the lull. Whatever awkward smalltalk they were making, he was utterly tuned out, exhaustion finally kicking in after a long day on his feet.
Something in his peripheral broke him from the daze, a flash of cream-coloured fur, barely visible as it darted around the corner. Whatever plane of existence the scratch cat had gone to while waiting for work to kick back up, he was fully grounded now, entranced by the sight and wondering if he imagined it. He turned away after a beat, but found himself repeatedly glancing back at the alleyway where it had dove. The impulse was something he found hard to ignore, ever-present.

He knew what it was instantly, though he couldn’t say how.

“Takin’ my fifteen,” he muttered to his teammates, handing them his staff pass and running off toward the break in tourist traps. “Be right back!”

They watched as he tore off without another word, blinking curiously at the sight and how quick he was to uproot himself.

“Wonder what’s gotten into him?” James said, and Chimecho simply uttered out its name with equal confusion.

Meowth was angling himself through the maze of buildings behind the boardwalk, desperate to find what he was sure he’d seen. How he was navigating the unfamiliar territory, he had no idea—his legs seemed to move on their own, some ancient instinct deep inside taking over and advancing him forward. The intrusions in his head couldn’t stop from popping up, and likewise, he couldn’t help but voice them aloud to himself through ragged breaths.

“What could dey be doin’ here?” he panted, lungs burning. “Was dey driven out like Arbok an’ Weezing was!”

His old gang. His street family. They were out here, cast aside to the streets of a Johto town so nameless he was surprised it was on maps. Though he willed them not to, his thoughts went to Meowzie—the idea that she was still somehow starving on the streets alongside that wretched persian sending tears to his eyes and bile to his throat.

The atmosphere hanging around his team had been so tense as of late. Jessie and Lickitung desperately trying to navigate their relationship, James pouting on the sidelines while he lamented not being able to understand her, Wobbuffet off with some stranger...

...Maybe I could get away from that tense atmosphere for awhile, he clung to the idea. Could I go back? Would they take me back?

Turning a corner, he skidded to a halt, pawpads hard against the concrete. In the deepest part of the alleyway, he saw tons of them there—the entire gathering of meowth splayed across empty boxes, roosting high on fire escapes, their meows intermingling, alive.

When the language of them hit his ears, he was back. Back in the city of angels, with trash at his bedside and dirt in his fur. With stolen food in his mouth and smoggy air in his lungs. With the putrid stench of food trucks and cannabis intermingling into a sickly cloud. Years hadn’t passed, he was right where he’d always been, fur against fur as a hurricane of felines scrambled through drab gray streets.

Meowth didn’t notice that at some point in his mad dash and seeing them all there, his front paws had shifted to the ground. He didn’t notice how his head was hung inches away from cement, didn’t even register that when the words came out of his mouth, they sounded more like his name than anything else. There on all fours, he faced his family, looking no different from the day he was born.

The clowder of meowth began to notice him, then. One by one, their lithe bodies turned, golden
charms cast eerily aglow in the dying orange of the seaside sun. Their silhouettes nearly black in the fading light, eyes ominous, predatory. A few of them hissed territorially, others with low rumbles in their throats as they faced him. Meowth’s gaze raced past them, searching for her. She was nowhere.

She was nowhere because these were strangers.

She was nowhere because he was a stranger.

The more he focused, the more he realized this gathering was not his own gang. He’d latched onto an instinct, and refused to believe anything else, and his body had moved on his own, and…

*What am I doing here?* He thought, rising back to his feet—two on the ground and two at his sides, where they hung unnaturally, where they belonged.

Reality began to settle as he turned from the group and, slowly, walked away. A cold sort of feeling in the pit of Meowth’s stomach that made him ashamed for chasing an illusion of his own memories. He’d seen a reminder of a time long gone by and completely forgotten who he was, what he’d done since then, what he’d become.

*What am I doing?* His mind repeated, and he smiled a wobbling, tortured smile, unintentionally speaking aloud once more.

“Heh, shoulda known better dan ta t’ink I got somet’in’ somewhere waitin’ for me.”

His feet dragged him back to the open space where his team was still rendezvousing, curious. Jessie turned to him with an eyebrow quirked, obviously wanting answers for his sudden outburst.

“Well,” she regarded him. “Did you find whatever it was you were in such a rush for?”

He laughed, a little sadly, and looked to his side. The cat didn’t meet her—or anyone’s—eyes.

“Nah.”

James was quietly pulled out of repose, a soft whine leaving him as he shut his eyes tighter, then jaggedly opened them. In his arms, Chimecho stirred alongside him, its bell tinkling softly as it swiveled to peer up toward its trainer. The shabby digital clock at his hotel bedside told the man it was well into the early hours of the morning, and he fought the smarter impulse to go right back to sleep, focusing his sleeping vision.

He took in his surroundings best he could in the dark of the room—the paintings of ocean flowers hanging on the walls, the seashell arrangements brandished alongside them. Meowth in a tight circle at the foot of his bed, purring softly. He loosed his pokémon from his arms and sluggishly flipped over beneath the stifling covers. Wobbuffet was out like a light, alone in the adjacent bed.

James snapped awake, suddenly, nearly bolting upright as the scene registered. He looked around wildly, and Chimecho quietly floated beside him, trying to tap into what it was he was so agitated about in case it needed to soothe him. It was about ready to sleepily let its Heal Bell ring when James suddenly relaxed, eyes falling on the sight of long scarlet hair up against the moonlit ocean outside. He quietly untangled himself from under the covers, silent footsteps toward the balcony.

“Get some rest,” he whispered to Chimecho in the darkness. “I’ll be back soon enough.”

His pokémon nodded, crawling back into their shared nest, and James quietly slid open the glass door, letting the sound of waves bleed into the silent room.
Jessie startled a little, a quiet yelp fizzling out in her throat. She was blushing a little when she turned to meet James, voice indignant as ever.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack!”

“I’m sorry,” he said, genuinely. “That’s the quietest I can be, it seems.”

She exhaled, wanting to shake the sudden scare off but ending up sighing much more heavily than she would have liked. The dark sea crashed against the shores, rhythmic.

“What are you doing out here?” James inquired.

She side-eyed him. “Pondering.”

“At this hour?”

“Is this not the perfect hour for pondering?” Jessie retorted.

He leaned on the balcony beside her, mimicking her stance.

“...and what sort of ponderings have you out in the cold, staring out across the endless ocean?”

She scoffed at his audacity. He chose the strangest times to be bold.

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Jessie said, a sentence he knew meant don’t try.

James peered into her, brow knit with worry. He’d been watching her struggle all day. Something about this reunion with her pokémon did not come easily to her—not like how she was with Arbok, not even in the same realm. Try as he might, there wasn’t a single part of him that could grasp why she seemed so torn up, so walled-in in the face of an old friend. All he could tell, all he could feel was that she was agonizing. It was a burning in his heart he so badly wanted to silence, knowing that if he felt this heavily, what she must have been feeling was insurmountable.

He thought on his own reunions with friends, parsing them for anything he could use to sympathize. Seeing Chimecho and Weezing was a set of tearful memories up against each other, but ultimately, those tears were joyous, important, necessary. There was only one reunion he was torn up about, only one that he had to psyche himself up for, and even then...

James shut his eyes, trying to remember the frame of mind he was in. Fear, mostly. Fear that his friend would resent him for his lack of involvement in its life after running away all those years ago. He picked his words with care, readying himself for the vulnerability they would pull him into.

“Cacturne had another trainer before me,” he said, not meeting her eyes, and Jessie turned to look to him, expression morphing into surprise. The statement was sudden, and open-hearted, and the weight in James’ voice told her that he wasn’t confident in his ability to speak on it. He did, regardless.

“What?” was all she could manage. He kept his eyes past her, on the breathing ocean.

“We found it in a forest. I always thought that strange,” he explained. “You know, the more I wondered about it, the less sense it made. The desert is awfully far from Petalburg. Across seas or mountains, with no other alternatives of travel.”

“Only someone like you has the mind to pay attention to subtleties like that,” she rolled her eyes.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But in any case… it hadn’t traveled there. It was left there.”
She made a quiet noise of resentment, barely detectable. He didn’t know, in his anxious heart, if it was meant for him or the mystery trainer he was speaking of. He swallowed, and kept on.

“Leaving it in Eterna… I don’t think I have to tell you how hard it was,” James said, voice trembling. “I felt… as though I was no better than whatever wicked soul had left it before me.”

What he was saying was raw and honest, and the themes interwoven within it were resonant in a way Jessie didn’t want to acknowledge. Coiled inside her was a tangle of cloudy baggage she didn’t know where to start with, especially not with someone like James. Though the two of them had been joined at the hip for the entirety of their adult lives, and for a good chunk of their formative years, there remained a towering barrier between them with glass so opaque it was unparsable. Jessie didn’t have the room inside her heavy heart to carry all of his problems, and James was utterly blind to hers in the wake of the fortress built around them. They were best friends—James carried within him her favourite colour and how she took her coffee and the name of her lip shade to its exact hex code. Jessie had memorized the cadence of his laugh, the exact degree he’d start complaining of the weather, she’d teased him about his embarrassing middle name. They knew everything about each other. They knew nothing about each other.

“Going back, I…” he was still speaking. “You saw me, Jess. I almost couldn’t face it.”

James had tried to break that cycle, cowardly as he once was. Since this journey had started, he had changed so much, worked so hard. Perhaps it was why the universe had been kinder to him, perhaps it was something Jessie hadn’t paid nearly enough care or attention to. Coming to the realization, her heart suddenly swelled with a strange sense of pride at how far he’d come. It was so much more forgiving than the resentment she was used to at her own misgivings alongside him.

Jessie steadied herself. She needed to catch up.

“It’s just, like…” she mumbled, refusing to meet his eyes. “Ugh, you know—”

Her face was burning, and she knew he could see the struggle painted onto it. Pokémon were easy, they were kind by nature and they usually couldn’t repeat your inner demons to others—humans were intimidating. Their true intentions were not only easily hidden, but always shifting and changing with the world around them. If safe people existed, they existed far from her realm of understanding.

She tried anyway.

“Lickitung and I aren’t like you and your cacturne,” she finally managed to say.

“How so?”

Of course he had questions. Maybe that would make this easier.

“We… we never really… bonded like trainer and pokémon should,” she said. “To this day, I can’t understand a lick of what it’s saying.”

James chuckled genuinely, and she smiled at the sound of it. She’d been saving that one for him.

“I… I don’t know how to say this without sounding cruel,” she admitted. “But of all the friends I’ve had to part with, I think this was the one I dealt with most gracefully.”

James knew she was lying—with how twisted up she’d been all day—but something about how she said it sounded completely sincere. Jessie was a creature of layers, of depths, of multitudes. It was both unbearably enchanting and utterly terrifying.
“So…” he messily navigated. “You’re fine, then?”

She wasn’t, and his question was rhetorical, but still underlined with curiosity. Untangling the mess inside her was hard enough. Articulating it with her limited vocabulary was on a whole new level of impossible.

“Well… on one hand… years ago, in this drab little beach town, I met my closest friend and dearest partner,” she said. “Without the cosmic destiny of that encounter, my life would have been very different, and not in a way I’d like to dwell on.”

James nodded, following. “And on the other?”

“...I was forced to part with a friend I didn’t get to say goodbye to,” Jessie said, after a beat of silence. “It’s the lack of control, you know—the lack of consent. Even though I would do it over again, it’s hard to reconcile with.”

He understood, for the most part. There was a bittersweet tinge to every parting, a sunset’s painful nostalgia. Jessie kept talking, her words becoming more and more frantic as she fell deeper into her thoughts.

“And it’s as though…” she said. “Pokémon are the closest thing I have to… to children, James. They’re creatures in my care who rely on me to be strong, and caring, and to always be there—”

She was getting upset. He wanted to interrupt before she fell too deep into despair, but she did it all on her own, sparing him the worry.

“It doesn’t matter if it knows my true intentions, Lickitung probably still spent years wondering where I had gone and why I had abandoned it,” she lamented. “I mean, who am I, my mo—?”

She stopped herself, a poised hand hovering inches away from her mouth, as if the words had caught her off guard and she was making a desperate attempt to grab hold of them as they left her. Colour tinged her face, and she willed it away, feeling James’ concerned eyes at her side.

This is why she didn’t do this. Ten words spilled out of her when one would suffice.

“I’m sorry,” she said, stopping herself. “I’m getting away from myself. What I mean to say is… there’s a fog hanging over this reunion and it’s maddening. I spent all this time wishing they would come as easily to me as they did to you… and now I get another, and it’s nothing I anticipated.”

“They didn’t come easily to me, Jess,” he said, trying to sound as non-confrontational as possible. “That’s what I’m saying. Cacturne and I spent a whole day wandering around aimlessly, making smalltalk like strangers in some kind of stage play. We weren’t at all ourselves.”

“You could understand it, at the very least!” she bit back. “Words don’t pass between us. I haven’t a starting point. I don’t have anything to work with, James. Just a pokémon I left behind and a multitude of conflicting issues.”

His olive branch cracked, a little. Their circumstances weren’t exactly the same, true—but could she not see that he was trying? That he wanted to understand, even though he couldn’t? That whatever demons she was hiding in her past and had refused to share with him, he would welcome them with open arms if it meant he could understand her, more?

“You have to have faith in friendship,” he said, a little more noncommittally than he would have liked. “I’m sure the two of you will come to some sort of understanding. If it really did dislike you, it wouldn’t have been so happy to see you in the first place, no?”
“You’re not listening to me,” she said, growing agitated. “It may very well have been happy upfront, but the power of friendship doesn’t solve years upon years of wondering why someone who was supposed to be beside you just turned tail and ran!”

Her words struck a chord somewhere, and he found himself getting equally upset.

“You’re not listening to me, either,” he said. “I’m saying there’s an equal chance that it forgave you long ago, and that it’s much more interested in building something entirely new with you than dwelling on the past!”

“I think I know more about my own pokémon than you!”

“Just moments ago you were saying you didn’t know it at all!” he shot back. “I can’t for a second understand why you assume the worst of it!”

“And I can’t understand why you assume the best!”

Her words fell upon James, and it hit him all at once—the self-awareness Jessie lacked, that he had in spades. Always a beautiful contrast of each other, always brilliant opposites.

“...Perhaps because I’m not talking about Lickitung,” he said softly, smiling cruelly to himself. In his tone, she could tell that it was not a counter-argument he’d planned points in advance—but one that had only just come to him. There was a darkness in his expression, and when it finally registered with Jessie what he was talking about, guilt tinged her heart. The mental image flashed in her mind, then, a vivid memory of a frigid sunrise as she tore off across a sleeping bridge, the bike chain that usually made its home in her hand thrown haphazardly atop a goodbye note. What came after were visions her imagination conjured, though their basis was still in reality—of James, alone and brokenhearted and trudging through alleyways, his forgiving heart still refusing to hate the woman who had abandoned him. In the freezing night, he kneeled down next to the dumpster with hands clasped, and prayed for her return.

She stood up, sharply, her heart not any lighter, her mind no more eased. She'd tried. She'd tried to open up and, like most things, it had exploded in her face. There was simply too much—too much she'd been keeping inside for far too long, too much she'd seen and done and felt, too little ability to properly tell it. Where would Jessie even begin with her troubles? At the beginning? The first time she woke up sobbing because hunger pangs had shaken her so badly, because the ice outside had crept into the shack she was holed up in? The first time she fell in love with a boy who bore fists at her? The last time she saw her mother's seafoam gaze, heard the woman's velvet voice?

She hadn't been talking about Lickitung either. Like everything, James was one step ahead of her.

"We're forgetting this conversation happened," she said as she turned away from him. It was not a question. "Goodnight, James."

He curled his knees to his chest as she went, swallowing hard the anxiety that'd pooled in his throat. He'd tried. He'd tried to understand the multitudes she contained and, like most things, it had exploded in his face. There was simply too little—too little he knew about the things that had haunted her throughout her life, too little his ability to be the kind of friend she could open up to and dump those worries on, too much insecurity and fear within him to try and make more of an effort. Where would he even begin to assuage her troubles? With telling her upfront that she looked like an angel surrounded in rainfall the day they met? With the sentiment that after years of being lost and confused at her departure, seeing her again made him realize that life was too short to hold grudges? With the promise that he would never dream of leaving her, because at his core, he had fallen
maddeningly, irrevocably in love with her?

Soon as the thought cropped up in his head, he bit back tears. This wasn’t how he was supposed to come to the realization. Not in the wake of a fight with her, not in the wake of him ruining her night further—but it wasn’t something he couldn’t run from, no matter how hard he could’ve tried. The waves washed against the shore, an incessance on par with his racing heartbeat, unending. Lost in their sound, she occupied his every thought. For every minute of every hour of every day, for every year since they had met, she took up every vacant space that lingered in his heart. James had no listless thoughts—over time, they all defaulted to Jessie.

The man sunk into himself, exhaustion taking him over. When he heard the sliding glass behind him open again, he was expecting Meowth, or Chimecho, or even Wobbuffet on the other side of it. Instead, a voice lifted him, a stark contrast to the bite it had carried only moments ago. He melted into the sound, trying to allow it to heal him.

“Come to bed,” Jessie ordered. “I’m angry, not heartless.”

He didn’t know what to say to her, and her care in metaphorically looking over her shoulder before leaving him alone out there warmed him despite everything. She had grown so much, as the years had passed—tried so hard to become kinder, to listen to her angry impulses less. Even at her worst, he felt so far behind her, it was no wonder the two of them were so prone to clash.

James rose from his seat on the weak-willed beach chair, nodding without words. Jessie couldn’t meet his eyes—the more guilt she felt, the angrier she got with herself, and she didn’t need to take her unchecked rage out on him when he already looked so pathetic and downtrodden. Apologies burned at her throat, but her pride shoved them down. The demon had won, tonight, it’s searing alabaster glow stronger in the moonlight. The swordswoman would try again tomorrow.

“I’m sorry,” James muttered, and she wanted to scream.

When are you going to learn that not every misgiving in the universe belongs to you? Her thoughts raced.

The sentiment would have been shot down if she’d spoken it aloud, so she elected not to start the argument up again. She knew exactly the retort that would come, how it would leave his lips as it hid beneath his breath—

“When are you going to learn that you are my partner, and that my life is yours?”

Jessie was on her own again, knees bunched up against her chest and eyes focused on the sun as it died and the stars as they shone. Not a soul passed by the dock as she sat atop it, all of them off experiencing far more interesting parts of the meet, leaving her the solitude she’d so badly craved. The sun and the sea collided together, mixed paint on a canvas, silver and gold.

She sighed. It must’ve been the hundredth that had passed her lips since arriving here. They started satisfied, relaxed, and grew heavier and heavier as time went on. Wooden boards creaked behind her, the telltale signs that she’d gained a visitor, but she didn’t have it in her to turn around and force herself to interact with them. Instead, she kept her eyes on the waves, willing their steady rhythm to take her somewhere kinder.

“Can I sit here?” Benny asked, and she barely turned to face him, trying to force some semblance of kindness to her tone.

“Do what you want,” Jessie said.
Expression soft, he dropped to a sit beside her, his legs hanging off the side of the dock, misted by
the icy tides. Both of them sat with their gazes peering into the nearly-set sun and the sea that
devoured it whole. For a long while, neither of them said anything.

Benny didn’t know Jessie. Well, that wasn’t entirely true—he knew what Lickitung had told him,
but Lickitung seemed to have barely known her, as well. Despite this fact, there was a sense of
comfort to the pokémon’s voice when it spoke of her, as though she were a dear point in its personal
mythology. He saw it in Wobbuffet, too—in the way his eyes lit up like the sun at its apex, love
unending.

He knew what Lickitung had told him. And so, he tried.

“Y’know,” the boy began. “Wobbuffet’s really happy.”

She didn’t say anything to him. Not after the last time she tried to talk this out with someone. If
James couldn’t get through to her, then what good did a stranger have to say?

“Happier than I’ve ever seen him,” Benny said, eyes on the ocean. “Brighter, too. He might as well
be glowing.”

The waves picked up a little when a gale skimmed across them. Remoraid leapt from the water in the
distance, glittering trails of azure shooting from their mouths. They hit the waves and repeated the
process, a strange sort of dance.

“I might be way off base, but I kinda get the feeling you think Lickitung is upset with you,” the boy
told her.

Jessie clenched her jaw and shut her eyes tight, pushing anger back. She didn’t like that he knew
that. She didn’t appreciate that he, or Lickitung, or anyone could see through her—especially when
her best friend and dearest partner couldn’t.

“If you really think that, then I don’t know if I can really convince you otherwise,” Benny said, and
Jessie’s eyes slowly opened back up. “I mean, of course I’m always gonna vouch for Lickitung’s
good spirit! It’s my closest friend, after all.”

She was… surprised? Relieved? Something inside her relaxed itself at what he said. An
acknowledgement of her feelings, rather than a dismissal. Instead of trying to convince her she was
crazy for latching onto a less optimistic outlook, he sent validation her way. To him, her worries
were real, tangible, rational.

“So I guess what I wanted to say is…” he turned to her, smiling. “Try not to think of this as you
failing your friend. Don’t forget that on the same day, you met another friend whose life you ended
up changing for the better.”

Jessie was looking at him now, expression far kinder. He kept talking, and she listened, enraptured.

“I run these meets now because they made me believe everything happens for a reason,” he said.
“Wobbuffet and I were both struggling. To be friends, to battle together, to work well together at all.
I even struggled to find someone who would trade with me. And then there you came, out of
nowhere.

“I can tell you and Lickitung were probably struggling to find your footing too. I don’t think it’s a
coincidence that all of us found each other, Miss Jessie. I think it’s destiny.”

The word lingered on the salty air, and she spoke it to the breeze, tone enamoured with the world.
“Destiny…” she near-whispered, eyes back on the sea.

“Wobbuffet loves you more than anything or anyone in this world,” Benny said, gratitude drenching his voice as though he’d been born to feel nothing but. “You didn’t do something cruel here, all those years ago. You did something amazing.”

Standing up, the boy turned to walk away, giving her a thankful wave as he made his way back off the direction he came.

“That’s all I wanted to say,” he smiled. “I hope the pain eases soon.”

_I hope the pain eases soon._ She ran over the words in her head. So gentle, so validating, so warm. Was this what it felt like, to have people who knew what to say to you, when to say it? Were there more people like that out in the world, who would understand her, who wouldn’t try to shut down every problem she had, but instead just acknowledge them? People who would make her feel, even for a moment, a little less insane, irrational, broken, twisted?

She moved her legs from her torso, dangling them over the swirling seas as the world around her fell into slumbering quiet. The stars awoke.

Jessie smiled.

The mid-morning sun was crawling higher in the sky, and Wobbuffet and Benny were tightly gripped in each others arms when Jessie got down on a knee and, for the first time in days, looked Lickitung directly in the eyes.

This gesture went straight to the pink pokémon’s heart, any racing thoughts it had settled in the wake of her gaze on its own. There was still a trace of sadness lingering in Jessie’s stormy blues, the clouds within them not entirely dissipated. They swirled and thundered, and the demon fought the warrior, and she smiled past her warring mind as she placed her hand on the pokémon’s shoulder.

“I want to believe,” she said, a little shakily. “That one’s mistakes don’t make them as bad as those who have hurt them.”

Lickitung leaned into her touch, wishing with all it was that it could tell her she was right. Behind her, James looked to his shoes, her words hitting him somewhere deep.

“I want to believe everything happens for a reason,” Jessie looked to Wobbuffet, then back to Lickitung, holding its gaze.

“Are you happy?” she said after a moment, trying to keep courage in her heart.

Her former pokémon looked at her, incredulous at the question. Could she not see? How happy it was? To have known her, to have seen her again?

Jessie didn’t have ears for its words. So it did the next best thing, and dragged its tongue cheerfully across her face.

She shrieked, tenderness momentarily lost, and fell backwards roughly, expression shuddering with shock. Benny smiled, as genuinely as he always seemed to. He knew what it meant, and though Jessie didn’t miss it, so too did she.

Wiping her face with her sleeve, she brought herself back to her feet, regarding the pokémon again.
“Delightful,” she deadpanned through smeared mascara. “Utterly enchanting. I’ll be sure to never ask that question again.”

Behind Lickitung, Benny stifled a chuckle through his teeth, and Lickitung couldn’t help but to join in alongside it, looking very much like his pokémon. The image, somehow, didn’t fill her with sorrow, or with jealousy, or with questions about if she could have been better—only with a certain kind of a serenity, the telltale signs that maybe, in time, she could heal from her wounds. That something, somewhere, was guiding her toward her own serenity.

As they said their goodbyes, Lickitung reached out a stubby arm toward Wobbuffet, beckoning the patient pokémon forward. With a little confused reluctance, Wobbuffet shook its hand firmly, the two of them smiling wide-mouthed smiles. Lickitung cried out its name a little faintly when the pokémon opposite pulled it forward, transforming the handshake into a full-on hug.

“Take care of him,” Wobbuffet whispered to it, and the pink pokémon understood loud and clear, nodding against him in affirmation as it proposed its own request.

“Take care of her,” Lickitung said, and Wobbuffet grinned as he pulled away.

“It’s what I do best,” he said with a bright salute.

Lickitung watched Jessie slowly disappear on the horizon, fiery trail behind her lit up in the blazing sun. There wasn’t any anger toward her, and there was a part of it that wished it was better at communicating, better at reassuring her that things were okay. In the end, that might have been why they didn’t work out as trainer and pokémon, and Lickitung had made peace with that. In a way, this closure was more than it could have ever dreamed. To hear its trainer say goodbye to it, to know that she, too, was happy.

Sunlight hit Jessie’s face, and she let her anxieties blow away in the seaside winds. She’d never excelled at internalizing the truths she needed to internalize, only the ones that were the easiest, the ones that went down like iced coffee on a torrid summer afternoon. She left Palmpona with some sort of resolve, though, and it was a high she was going to ride until the waves would have her no longer, until they threw her into the unforgiving sea. She hoped, by that time, she’d be strong enough to swim to shore.

Everything happened for a reason, and every action lead to another, every consequence connected, bore importance. A message from long ago hit her, one she realized she’d began, perhaps, to parse the meaning of—

All lives touch other lives to create something anew and alive.

A chapter’s close did not have to mean a tragedy. After all, there was always another chapter directly after, just waiting to open. Maybe in a lesser story, a tragedy of sorts, the ending would be unhappy. The hero falls, the villain reigns, the world falls to turmoil. Hope is lost.

Jessie was comforted by this idea.

She was not the protagonist of a lesser story. No amount of rotten luck would ever convince her that she was.

Chapter End Notes
oh my god i wanted to write wobbuffet backstory for FUCKING AGES i feel so alive
whats UP this chapter made me cry so fucking much

hey i wanted to pose a question. Are y'all chill with us doing two johto chapters instead
of three? i love johto much as the next guy but we literally don't have ideas for a third,
and the two we have i think are pretty strong. what's more, kanto has a whopping, like...8-10 chapters planned, and overall i think we're all itching to get into it and will lose our
minds if we sit around trying to shoehorn in an obligatory 3rd johto chapter. is that cool?
is that cool with everyone? this question is rhetorical i just want validation.

i also made the decision that i'm gonna start illustrating chapters, one per chapter. once i
complete the story, i'm gonna go back and add some. i feel awesome about my art right
now and want archive readers to experience it. i already draw an absurd amount of DTE
fanart anyways.

all the loose ends and irresolved emotional plotlines will be coming to a head in the next
chapter, so hang tight just a little longer!! we're super fucking excited for what's in store.

i think i had more to say here but i literally don't remember. thanks for reading!!!! lots of
new faces leaving reviews lately. i love & appreciate you.

as always, i'll do my best!
In Sickness and in Health

Chapter Notes

oh, we in it now.

[just gonna slap a trigger warning up here, tw: jessebelle existing]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“For you, my sweet, it’s no trouble at all! Mark my words, I’ll be there as fast as my legs can carry me in their eagerness to be by your side—”

The unmistakable crackle of searing toxic fumes lingered an inch from the boy’s backside, and he dropped his cadence, shuddering. Clearing his throat, Brock muttered a few more words of affirmation to Joy and rehung the phone on the wall.

Croagunk’s pointed palm lost its noxious luster, and the pokémon turned away from his trainer, lidded eyes unfocused. Chansey was running from backroom to counter and back again, a waddle that would be almost comedic if not for the grace with which she carried herself. Brock moved his gaze from the wall, to them, to the lingering patrons waiting in line and browsing aisles. The sun was due to set in a few hours and the place was absolutely packed, and for some reason, he’d elected to drop everything and run over to the understaffed Pokémon Center a few blocks down at *precisely this moment*.

Chansey was in again, then out as quick as she came. Her expression remained its same happy, wide-mouthed grin, but Brock could tell by the sweat on her brow and the way her makeshift hair sagged that she was mere inches from falling apart. He looked to Croagunk, who slowly returned his gaze

“Can you tell me,” Brock said. “Why on earth I just agreed to that?”

“Crooo,” the frog croaked at him—*You know why.*

The boy ran his open palms through his hair, cool absolutely lost in the wake of everything. When his voice came out of him again, it was far more high-strung than typical of him, painful-sounding in its paradoxical restraint and lack thereof.

“Okay! I’m ready for this day to end!” Brock shouted up at the ceiling. “We’re absolutely packed, and the list of tailored requests is a mile long, and apparently my solution to that is to *leave!*”

Croagunk said nothing, the pouches on his cheeks idling as he crouched.

“The next person who walks through that door, Croagunk, I swear to you,” the boy said, voice low, unhinged. “I don’t care who or how. I will hire them on the spot.”

The telltale bellchime of said door being flung open pulled Brock out of his contemplative desperation, and he immediately swung himself around the back’s entrance to get a look at what he may or may not have pledged himself to. Several figures practically collapsed into the pharmacy, all frozen in various attempts to catch their balance again before they began to argue.
“Watch it!”

“You watch it, furball!”

“No, you watch it! You ain’t da one carryin’ an unborn kid!”

“I’m growing awfully tired of you using that oversized omelette fodder as an excuse!”

“Please,” James whined, looking about ready to drop to his knees. “I don’t want to play peacemaker today! I’m tired!”

Brock almost felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him, looking at what was definitely Team Rocket having a domestic in the corner of his little shop. He took a moment to weigh pros and cons in his head. On one hand, there was an air to them that seemed different, dressed in tourist clothes and touting an egg that looked well-taken care of, even from a distance. On the other, it was Team Rocket having a domestic in the corner of his little shop.

Croagunk was staring intently at him, a gesture that Brock understood carried the connotation of “Well?” The boy sighed, broadening his shoulders again before he moved past shifting crowds and went to approach the trio.

“I’m a man of my word, I guess.”

Behind him, Croagunk pulled coins from the register at an agonizingly slow rate.

Soon as Brock neared them, they took note of his presence, eyes widening. Their dispute was abandoned in his wake, all of them too taken aback by the sudden twist of fate to continue arguing with one another. Meowth protectively clutched at the egg in his hands, the close proximity of such an all-knowing person in their history stopping at nothing to convince him it would be pried from his hands, sent somewhere far away.

“Team Rocket,” Brock finally said, scanning them with ever-narrowed eyes.

“T-Tall twerp…” Jessie stuttered back, a little meekly.

His stern demeanour stayed on them for a hot minute, but was broken down in a mere instant. Swiftly, Brock put a hand on both Jessie and James at once, clutching onto their shoulders as he stared them down intently.

“I don’t like you and you don’t like me,” he started.

“Hold on, dere—” Meowth wanted to correct him, but he persisted.

“I need someone to do me a solid and I don’t know who else to ask!” Brock said. “Look at this! I don’t think this many people even live in Cianwood!”

He had a point. For a small, independent pharmacy nestled between far more interesting businesses on the stretch of road, there were a ridiculous amount of people present.

“Doing solids is what we excel in,” James immediately brightened.

“That’s debatable,” Brock mumbled, then turned back to his pokémon with a nervous look. Jessie focused in on his chansey, the subtleties of panic in the pokémon’s expression awakening a fierce instinct that slept somewhere deep within.

“Put us to work,” she said, bluntly, and her teammates seemed taken a little aback at the
determination with which she said it. “What? This is child’s play. We’ve survived food service at the *Hoenn League.*”

“I really just need someone to work the register while I run down the block,” he said. “Chansey can take care of the more complicated stuff—”

“She looks like she’s having quite the time attempting,” Jessie crossed her arms. “I can give her a hand.”

Brock raised an eyebrow. “You can?”

“Violet City Academy,” she said, almost nonchalantly, and Brock seemed genuinely impressed.

Jessie neglected to mention the near-humanless wing of said academy she was stationed in, or the fact that she didn’t actually graduate. In most situations, however, it was hardly a point of contention.

“Okay, that’s a story for later, I guess,” the boy was walking toward the counter now, and his odd new companions were following without needing to be beckoned.

Croagunk was standing on the sturdy wood finish dressed in lacy pink, and Brock greeted him among the chaos by placing his hand on the pokémon’s motionless head. With it still poised there, he turned to the former Rockets.

“If you three try anything,” he said. “You get to answer to Croagunk.”

The pokémon in question didn’t appear to change anything about his outward appearance. But it was as if the steady croak emitting from him hit an ominous crescendo, as though his eyes were burning with a kind of malice that human and pokémon alike were not meant to understand. He remained completely still except for the rise and fall of his cheeks.

The trio gulped in absolute unison, gripped with fear and knowing exactly what this creature was capable of. They weren’t planning on doing anything rotten in the first place, but just looking at Croagunk made them feel as though they had committed atrocities that couldn’t even be spoken of.

Confident in this move, Brock didn’t stay for a second to discuss matters further with them. He threw on his backpack and rushed out the door, leaving them with nothing more than a generous wave and the promise that his pokémon could help them with anything they didn’t understand.

People rushed around them, their chatter turning to white noise. As if to punctuate the suddenness of the situation, Greninja chose this moment to greet the waking world, intent on keeping them in line in a place where things could so easily go wrong. It let out a low croak, and Croagunk side-eyed it from the other end of the counter, emitting his own.

There, with two ruthlessly vigilant frogs flanking them, the trio truly began to understand the meaning of the words “scared straight.”

Brock stumbled back into the pharmacy when the sun had just barely finished setting, looking about ready to collapse onto the hardwood floors as soon as he hit the cedar-soaked air. To his surprise, they were situated in almost the exact same position they had been in when he left them. Chansey was singing a cheery tune while she swept the floors, and the former Rockets were standing between the other two pokémon present. Brock straightened himself out, trotting toward the scene and patting Croagunk on the head.
“Did you actually make a friend?” Brock said, looking up at Greninja, who gave a cogent bow.

Croagunk let out a drawled croak, leaving it at that. The boy turned to the trio, pleased to see they hadn’t destroyed the place in his absence.

“When I said I’d beg help of the next person to walk in, I really wasn’t expecting it to be you three.”

“Well,” James said. “To your credit, you handled it better than most people we meet lately do.”

Brock let out a good-natured laugh, oddly serene. “Sounds like there’s a story behind that.”

“More’d’n a few,” Meowth said, finally relaxing a little. Brock locked in on the egg in his hands, its deep blue finish absolutely radiant even in the low-lighting of the shop. There was a beat before he spoke again.

“What brings you guys out to Johto?” he said. “Is Ash here?”

“Nah, haven’t kept track of da Twoihp in a while,” Meowth ran a paw across the back of his head. “Team Rocket’s done for, so we’s just normal travelers now.”

Come to think of it, Brock had heard something about Interpol shutting down the organization. The idea of the three people in front of him ever reforming themselves seemed laughable, as a concept. Here they were, though—in his shop, dressed like tourists, willing to drop everything to help out. He was unreasonably curious what had happened since their last meeting to change them to such a degree.

The clock on the wall marked closing time, it’s steady tick gentle in the domestic air of the shop. Brock was of the firm belief that kindness was rarely wasted.

“Where are you staying?” he inquired.

“Wherever,” Jessie said, nonchalantly. “Depending on the shape of our wallets, we might splurge on a hotel.”

Brock smiled. “No need. My home is yours.”

In flawless unison, the group bunched themselves closer together and leaned over the counter, looking up at the boy with galaxies in their grateful eyes. Wobbuffet unleashed himself in the dead center of their grouping, immediately snapping to form despite barely being present.

“For real?!” they all beamed.

“Of course,” Brock said. “You all saved my skin, after all. Let me finish closing and I can take you upstairs and make us dinner.”

The words barely left his mouth before Jessie started salivating like a hungry herdier, an impulse from a life long passed she didn’t realize she still had the mind for. It had been an eternity since she’d tasted the kid’s cooking, and in that moment it felt as though her entire life’s purpose was to do nothing other than experience it again.

“Welp, Jessie’s gone,” Meowth said.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Brock said with a smile. “Croagunk can show you upstairs, I’ve got things handled down here.”

Chansey ran back into the broom closet to acquire some manner of supplies, and Croagunk leapt off
the counter with a swiftness that made the entire team flinch. In direct contrast, his steps were slow as he trudged off toward the staircase at the back of the shop, angling his head over his shoulder as if to ask them ‘are you coming?’

They found their answer in the promise of perfected cuisine and the fear of what would happen if they were to refuse him.

Meowth and Jessie, to an outsider, could have easily been in a competition to see who was capable of devouring stew faster. Their faces were practically living in their bowls, hidden from the low-light that hung around the living space. Above Brock’s pharmacy was a cozy little home, its walls adorned with pictures of wild-haired kids and certificates marking medical accomplishments. Its size seemed so temporary, but its subtleties contradicted this notion entirely.

“That’s really something,” he was mid-way through saying. “You’re Kanto-bound, right? What then?”

“What do you mean ‘what then’?!” Jessie swallowed a mouthful of veggies. “That’s where we have the most work to do, of course.”

“I suppose that’s fair,” Brock agreed, arms crossed. “So… what’s in the egg?”

Meowth had passed it off to James, who had finished his seconds and elected not to go for thirds (and fourths, and fifths…) like his friends had. The man looked down at it, warm and sleeping like it so often was.

“We don’t know, actually,” he informed.

“It was wit’ Arbok ‘n’ Weezing’s colony in da forest near Meteor Falls,” Meowth said, oddly astute. “But dey found it abandoned. Whoevah it belongs to musta not wanted da poor little guy.”

Brock placed a hand on his chin, interested. “Meteor Falls, huh…”

“Yes, not too long ago,” James affirmed.

“Well, looking at the colouration, I’d be inclined to say it’s a lotad,” Brock observed. “But you usually don’t see them that far north…”

“Eh, no spoilahs, tall twoihp,” Meowth said, endeared. “I like not knowin’ who da kid is. It’ll make it all da more special when we get ta meet ‘em.”

“I can respect that,” the boy said. “In any case, it’s well taken care of, especially given your lack of an incubator.”

“Yeah, funny story—” Jessie started, and James finished her thought.

“We were actually stopping by with the hopes that you were selling one!”

“I’ll admit, I was curious when you all stumbled in!” Brock said. “Usually, it’s all the same regulars, out here. I can give you one on the house, how’s that sound?”

“Divine,” Jessie answered. “But are you certain?”

“I still feel like I kinda owe you guys,” he admitted. “It’s no bother, really. Raising an egg is a joy I wouldn’t dare deprive even my worst enemy of.”
“Hear hear!” Meowth punctuated, raising his bowl to the warm lights above.

Jessie took a long sip of her coffee, letting the sting of it invigorate her senses. Looking at Brock, she was struck with the sudden realization that he had grown into someone nothing short of incredible. With as much as she ended up running into the boy, she never really was able to pin him down to one concrete line, start to finish, and this fact mystified her. What was it that he was about?

“You know,” Jessie said, after a comfortable quiet. “I don’t think I know what it is your deal is.”

Brock chuckled. “My deal?”

“You know,” she gestured vaguely. “The bandanna twerpette does contests, the twerpy little redhead is… off swimming somewhere, or something. Twerp classic is still out there trying to win a league. You all have your passions, but we’ve never became acquainted with yours.”

Jessie didn’t seem the curious type to Brock, too self-interested to make time for much of anyone else. There was something subdued in her expression—maybe he’d imagined it—that had flipped this part of her on its head. He almost wanted to counter the question, ask what it was she was all about, her own origins.

“Well, after Ash and Dawn and I split, I decided to follow my dream of becoming a pokémon doctor,” he said. “I shipped off to medical school in Johto while my pokémon attended Violet Academy.”

Jessie’s eyes absolutely flew open.

“That’s the funniest part, to me,” Brock continued. “It was supposed to just be Chansey, but Croagunk made it very clear that he was coming with her. He was a real fish out of water out there.”

The redhead whipped her gaze around, her eyes locked intently onto Croagunk’s. He had stirred slightly at the sound of his name, looking up at the dinner table where they were making idle chatter. Jessie and him held eyes, and in his dead stare she remembered ace bandages on her fingertips and the tap of a glass syringe against her manicure. Her voice was a raspy whisper when it came.

“The instructor in room 403 belongs in the farthest reaches of hell, agreed?”

Croagunk said nothing for a moment, then slowly nodded, eyes still on her. It was the most emotion she had ever seen the pokémon show, and for all there was to say about the power of mutual love, twice as much could be said for the incredible power of mutual hatred.

Brock didn’t seem to notice this quiet exchange, two school children gossipping about their strict teacher. He carried on.

“I worked as an assistant at more than a few pokémon centers all across the world, and I’m settled down here for a while to take a breather,” he laughed, remembering the chaos of the day. “Easier said than done.”

“No kiddin’” Meowth agreed. “So what was all dat time ya spent wit’ da Twoihp? Soul-searchin’?”

“Guess so,” Brock said. “It was a conduit if anything. I didn’t have dreams before then because I didn’t see myself ever leaving Pewter City.”

James blinked, curious. “Why not?”

“Too much responsibility,” he said, simply. “I had a gym to run and nine baby siblings to take care
of.”

“Quite the tall order for such a young twerp,” Jessie noted.

“Tall is right,” he said. “I’m amazed I got out of there.”

“What happened to ya parents?” Meowth said bluntly, diving right into the question nobody wanted to ask.

Brock’s eyebrow twitched a little, and he masked the reaction with a forced, quiet laugh.

“Who knows,” the boy said. “In my wildest dreams they’re still in Pewter, and Forrest doesn’t feel like the world is on his shoulders, and every night the kids in that house go to bed happy and well-fed.”

Admittedly, Brock felt a little strange venturing into such personal territory—but Meowth had asked, and the boy wore his feelings on his sleeve with pride.

“They left on their own, then,” James said, and Jessie’s eyes went to the floor.

“Yeah,” Brock said, and the firmness in his voice returned. “Mom said she was gonna go get groceries. I didn’t see her for years, after that.”

James’ teammates were oddly quiet, and it was well complemented by the fact that he found himself feeling far more talkative than usual. He was curious to know this end to this story, always having felt a strange sense of kinship with Brock he could never entirely identify. The two of them in the stands at Sinnoh contests, shoulder-to-shoulder, one-sided pleasantries.

“That must have been nothing short of dreadful,” James said. “What an awful excuse for a goodbye.”

“That’s being generous,” the boy responded, and his tone took a hard turn, venom-drenched. “Wherever they are, the guilt better eat them alive.”

The lot of them had seen Brock give some of the worst offenders in their personal books a pass. They recalled a strong-browed, empty-hearted twerp from Sinnoh, one who they’d fantasized time and time again of tormenting if only they were strong enough to face him. Brock always seemed strangely respectful of the kid’s awful methods, calling them ‘different’ when ‘abuse’ would suffice. They were convinced, in all they knew, that there was not a bone in Brock’s body capable of hatred.

Twerps proved to remain full of surprises.

James swallowed, balling his fists against his slacks.

“Your parents,” he said. “Did you ever forgive them?”

“No.”

There was zero hesitation in the answer. Brock had his response the second the words hit the air. Its sound was a solid stone, set and unmoving, and Brock was the picture of Pewter with it on his tongue.

James shifted a little, a part of him deeply uncomfortable with the boy’s response and the swiftness with which he said it. His coherency melted somewhere on his lips, simple questions all he could manage—
“Why not?”

Brock leaned back in his chair. “Why should I?”

The question was simple enough, but James found himself perplexed by it nonetheless. He attempted an articulation, falling just short of what he wanted to convey.

“You…” he picked his words. “You have to!”

“Says who?” Brock retorted. “Forgiveness is for people who show remorse for the hurt they’ve done to others. Forgiveness is earned. You of all people should know that by now.”

“Well, yes, but…” he had a point, but it still unnerved James. “That’s precisely what I mean… you know the scope of what we three have done and yet here we are, no different from friends!”

“Like I said, I can tell you’re trying,” the boy said. “I have plenty of forgiveness for you.”

“But not for them?”

“Not for a second.”

“They’re your family!”

“My family?” Brock said, incredulous. “What’s a family to you, James?”

“They raised you,” James offered. “They cared for you, they made you who you are today, they reared a home for you to live in!”

Jessie and Meowth inched their faces far back into their bowls, hoping that no one would notice the fact that they were very much completely out of food. James was practically trembling, voice at an octave they rarely heard and far more worked up than they’d seen him in a long time.

“I don’t owe my parents anything for keeping a child alive for a decade or so,” Brock practically spat, his tone unshaken. “I raised more kids than they ever did, and those kids owe me nothing.”

“They’re—you—” James said, teeth gritted. “Your— blood!”

“And that’s all they’ll ever be,” the boy countered. “A family isn’t blood. My friends are my family, and my siblings are my family, and my pokémon are my family. My time and love belong to people who deserve it.”

“How can you sit here,” the man began. “And forgive someone like me, but not your own kin?”

“You’re someone I knew for a very short time,” Brock responded. “And my parents are people with the power to shape lives, who used that power to hurt and neglect, rather than to love.”

James stayed quiet, not liking how easily the sentence resonated.

“There are some things that can’t be forgiven,” Brock continued, then turned to face James, whip cracks and towering structures surfacing somewhere in his memory. “You have to know that, in all you’ve been through?”

The man shot up from his seat, one egg-less palm slammed on the table, silverware ominously singing in the relative quiet of the night. His team flinched, eyes peering out from behind decorated porcelain, to see him red-faced and livid, an absolute stranger to the friend they so intimately knew.
“What do you know of my hurt!?” James snapped. “And who are you to tell me how to feel toward those who had a hand in it!?”

The outburst had grounded Brock, a bit, and he realized this was not the time for his one unmoving moral conviction to utterly destroy the redemption effort of someone who had come so far in empathy.

“I’m a stranger to everything except the hurt itself,” he said, level-headed now.

James felt his clenched muscles lose themselves a little, and his anger metamorphosed into shame within the chrysalis of his heart. Brock’s expression wasn’t something he could entirely read, its rest same as ever—always lost in thought, always picking words carefully. At the man’s flank, his friends shared a cursory glance with each other, looking nervous. He closed his eyes, trying to even out his own tone.

“It seems I’ve gotten away from myself,” James said, letting out a shaky exhale. “Perhaps it’s best I retire for the night. Thank you for the lovely meal.”

He straightened his back as he stood, offering no more words as he headed off toward the spare bedroom. Realistically, James wasn’t out of earshot, but there was a part of him that turned what was behind him to syllables, fuzzy and dreamlike. He prayed that he hadn’t made too much of a fool of himself, hadn’t disappointed his teammates with his frivolous sensitivities.

James realized mid way through his walk that he had the egg in his hands still, and that Meowth hadn’t even attempted to ask for it back before the man turned in for the night. He focused in on the feeling of its warmth on his palms, willing it to heal his hurting heart, to invite him inside its walls and shelter him from pain.

A quiet crack emanated from it.

James’ eyes were slowly pulled open, and he stared down at the egg, heart racing. A second crack snaked its way up the deep blue shell, sending another shot of adrenaline through him. The argument, the tension, the shame—for a moment, it all disappeared, and he ran backwards to where his friends were awkwardly trying to rehabilitate the conversation.

At his re-emergence, they initially kept their quiet, unsure of how precisely to remedy the previous situation. As he neared, though, they saw the way he was carrying himself was entirely different from before—no longer stiff and with weighted shoulders, now practically stumbling through the dining room as though something were chasing him.

“What’s up, Jimmy?” Meowth inquired, and James could barely stammer out a response—

“It’s—the—!” he struggled. “Hatching! It’s hatching!”

Meowth’s expression went from zero to a hundred quick, and Jessie and Brock similarly leaned forward in their seats, entranced. Wobbuffet had been taking a very necessary siesta, but sensed the commotion and had re-emerged at some point. The egg continued to break itself apart, glittering white light breaking from its cracks, stained glass against the blue sea of its shell. James handed the egg to Jessie, panicked.

“I don’t know what to do!” he yelped.

“You think I know any better?!?” she retorted, shoving it at Wobbuffet.

“Wobbuffet?!?” he shouted, handing it to Meowth.
“Wait, wait, I changed my mind!” the cat wailed. “I ain’t cut out ta be a parent! Meowth’s feelin’ woozy!”

Brock watched on the fringes, a little amused, as the four of them spent a good minute like this—playing some twisted form of hot potato with the egg, all shouting in panicked cadence over each other as if there was much to do about it at all. It was James who was holding it when the light radiating from it became blinding, incredible, and erupted into a shower of brilliant sparkles.

All of them cringed at the otherworldly light as it set the entire room aglow. Eyes shut tight, James felt the pokémon take form in his hand, felt appendages where there were previously none, felt the roundness of the egg change ever so subtly. When the light on his lids dimmed, he opened his eyes in unison with the others, peering down at the pokémon as it greeted the world for the very first time.

The leaves at its crown were curled around its face, keeping its eyes from the harsh and sudden light. Slowly, it unfurled them to a standing position, crimson gaze blinking up at the group, dazed. Its voice was small, curious.

“...oddish?”

James and the pokémon were locked with their eyes on each other, neither able to tear themselves away. The oddish blinked a couple more times, taking in the sight of the man. It pulled itself to a stand in his cupped palms, attempting to move closer to him.

“Oddish!”

Meowth scrambled up onto the table in a desperate attempt to gain height, fur and claws ungraceful
in his ascent. He stood there with paws framing his mouth, tears streaming down his face, awestruck
by the birth he’d just witnessed. He’d been a part of this, he realized—he’d helped make this life
happen.

“Oh, lookit you!” the cat sobbed. “An oddish! Who’da t’unk it!”

“It never gets old,” Brock affirmed, arms crossed. “That’s a fine pokémon, too! Grass types are really
easy to raise…”

His words trailed off somewhere in James’ head, and the man swallowed roughly, trying to look the
pokémon in the eyes again. A fine pokémon. Oddish was a fine pokémon.

A tremble in his hands and a nausea in his stomach and a numbness in his fingertips grew, and when
he willed it away, it only seemed to crash its waves against the shores of him twice as hard. His
nerves were a stormy sea, a world where control had no place. He tried to paddle his ship, regardless.

Oddish is a fine pokémon, he repeated in his head. Oddish is fine, it’s a lovely grass type, you love
grass types! You’ve held many an oddish in your hands, you’ve seen them wandering at night and
felt fine! Oddish is a fine pokémon, pokémon are inherently good, a pokémon would never do harm
unto you without extenuating circumstances…

The oddish shifted itself forward a bit, its intent to nuzzle against James’ torso, to assuage some of
the love that had filled its eyes and was now overflowing from it as it peered up at him. Soon as it
moved, he startled, flinching as though someone had struck him, blinking his eyes shut tight.

Oddish is a fine pokémon, your fear is all in your head, this is an irrational thought, this is nothing
more than a delusion of danger—

James willed his thoughts to something distracting, the events of the day, something grounded in
reality to keep his mind from wandering to a time long passed. They came to Cianwood. They
wandered into the pharmacy. They met up with Brock. They had a good dinner. They talked about
life. They talked about life. They talked about the present, they talked about the future, they talked
about the past, about the past, about forgiving, about not forgiving, about forgiving people who
neglected you, about forgiving people who hurt you, about forgiving people who—

Oddish is a fine pokémon, James practically screamed at his mind as it betrayed him. You’re safe, it’s
fine, you’re fine—

He left.

James couldn’t tell you where he went, only that it was somewhere else. What was left of him on
planet earth passed Oddish to Meowth, wordlessly, robotic. Almost soon as his fingers stopped
touching the pokémon, tears welled up in its eyes and it began to wail. His friends were talking, but
all he managed to hear was hypnagogic syllables, consonants paired with vowels that only made
sense somewhere far from him.

Meowth was rocking the kid with all he was, his attention pulled in two different directions, unsure
of where to focus. Brock was at his side, far more experienced in the matter, a soothing presence in a
time of chaos.

Jessie’s eyes stayed on James as he dragged a hand across his brow and left, silent.

“That one… it looks like a hoppip, doesn’t it?”
“Grrrow!”

“You always say that, Growlie!”

James rolled over, taking his eyes off the clouds drifting across the endless blue skies. The well-trimmed grass was lush beneath his bare cheek when he turned to face his pokémon, who gave him a doting lick and barked its name cheerfully. The boy laughed, pulling his growlithe closer into a hug. The world, normally so stifling, remained open here.

“Goodness me, you still have that awful little thing?”

Growlie was off the ground in an instant, its serene demeanour shifting in the blink of an eye. Gums bared, it kept a low rumble in its throat at the sound of the voice, putting its body directly between her and James.

James, by comparison, was far more nonchalant, pulling himself up to a lazy sit and feeling more daring than usual. It was a beautiful day, and he was going to enjoy his time at his single haven in the world.

“What do you want, Jessebelle?”

“I beg your pardon, dearest,” she said. “But I do believe I was invited to a weekend at your Saffron estate alongside you, and thus far you haven’t been the most honourable of hosts.”

“I don’t want to host you!” the boy told her. “Nanny and Pop-Pop’s is my special place, I come here to feel better!”

“My, my,” she brought her fan up further to slate eyes. “I can see you still haven’t learned any manners.”

Growlie took the moment to bark fiercely in her direction, its fur standing near vertical, embers lining its throat. At the sound of it, she took a rehearsed step back, voice dripping with disdain for the creature.

“No wonder with the company you keep,” Jessebelle observed. “It’d do you well to replace this rotten mutt!”

“Growlie’s my best friend, I’d never replace it!” James said. “Anyway, what would you know about raising pokémon? I bet they’re all scared of you!”

“Oh, but James, didn’t you know?” her eyes narrowed. “I have a pokémon of my own as well, of course.”

James’ face fell a bit. “Since when?”

Jessebelle lowered her cover, smiling maliciously. Reverently, she tossed a well-polished pokéball upward, catching its descent with flawless precision. The pokémon sleeping inside it sparkled to life, landing on the ground with an almost timid twirl. Imperfected, but there.

The boy had trouble stifling the bright expression that naturally came to him. He absolutely adored grass types, and oddish was one of his undisputed favourites. James was excited to see one, then jealous that it wasn’t his own, then nervous beyond all measure.

What kind of pokémon would cozy up to someone like Jessebelle? He was immediately worried that it hadn’t been given a choice in the matter, that it hadn’t learned how cruel she was yet. What kind
of person was she to a creature in her control? Did she water it? Did she give it room to wander at night, remember to let it drink in the moonlight like oddish needed to? Did she know anything about it at all, or was it just another toy to her?

In any case, the pokémon was absolutely stunning. Its colours were lush, vibrant and saturated, its eyes bright. James could tell just by looking at it that it was purebred and well taken care of. Whether that was telling of her or the servants she paid to do her work for her was up for debate.

“Wow,” James said, reaching out to touch the leaves crowning it. “Jessebelle, you got an oddish?”

Her pokémon reacted to him almost instantly, fiercely twirling around and kicking his curious hand away with its feet-like roots. He yelped a little in surprise, rubbing at his fingertips where it had made contact. It turned away from him, hypothetical nose in the air.

“You really weren’t told, were you?” Jessebelle said. “It was a gift from your parents to their soon-to-be daughter-in-law.”

“What?” he peered up at her. “Mother and father gave it to you?”

“Isn’t it just darling?” he could see her smiling with her eyes. “They said it’d be easier to keep you in line with a pokémon of my own.”

Growlie was back beside him, now, gnashing its fangs with every fierce bark. It didn’t like that she had one more potential way to make its master cry.

“Oh, James, you poor naive thing,” she giggled, girlishly, like she so often did—the picture of innocence, lycanroc in mareep’s clothing. “Oddish, let’s put these unrefined folk in their place!”

James didn’t even have to call out an attack for his pokémon to listen to—in all its loyalty and obedience, it lost itself at the sight of Jessebelle, time and time again. It fired off embers at Oddish’s feet, howling with determination as it did so. James stood behind, proudly.

The boy took a moment to consider the circumstances. He wasn’t going to lose to her. He’d spent countless hours curled up in bed by lamplight, memorizing advantages and strategies and plans for the day he left on his own pokémon journey. Jessebelle had never thought of pokémon in her life, let alone of them as battle partners. At best, they were accessories to her, symbols of status.

The sun was absolutely blazing at the peak of the warm summer day, and even if type advantage failed them, he knew it would give Growlie the boost it needed. For once in his life, James felt confident in the face of her—her wickedness unable to pierce his spirit, her terrible words burned to nothing in the protective fire of his friend.

Oddish took the hit, unprepared for the immediate turn of tides, and cried out in pain as it fell back, singed and obviously feeling it. Jessebelle remained unperturbed by this, folding fan still at her face.

“You’re awesome, Growlie!” James cheered, and the pokémon gave him a triumphant bark.

Across the small divide, Jessebelle looked almost bored, gentle breeze sailing through the folds of her gown. When Oddish rose to its feet, the corner of her mouth was pulled into a cruel smile, and she called out the attack, unflinching.

James wanted to do a double take, but there was hardly time to do a single take with how quickly everything thereafter happened. There was no change in her voice when she called out the savage attack, there was no grace period where it had to charge that he could dodge from. Sunlight soaked into Oddish’s leaves and metamorphosed into pure, searing power that hit Growlie full force, type advantage be damned. The puppy pokémon didn’t stand a chance, falling to its side with a weak whimper.

“Growlie!”

James ran to its side, his legs moving entirely on their own. She’d taken it out without batting an eyelash, unleashed an attack acquired by no hard work of her own. It made him sick—like everything else, she’d simply bought her power, disregarding any bond she could’ve instead focused on forming with her pokémon.

She was towering over him now, drill-curls ominously framing her face, eyes observant, burning into him.

“You cheated!” he accused.

“What do you mean, James?”

“Your oddish is too low a level to know that attack!” James said. “You probably just paid for it to be strong!”

“Of course I did,” she laughed. “All’s fair in love and war, sugar.”

James grit his teeth, eyes back on his fallen comrade, who was slowly coming to after the brunt of the attack.

“I hate you,” James said quietly, then raised his voice. “I hate you! You’re so mean, Jessebelle!”

Her voice was mock-wounded, her gestures to match. Calculated and transparent.

“Mean? I do beg to differ, James,” she said. “I put up with far too much lip from the likes of you. You ought to be more grateful that I’m so gentle.”

When he spoke again, it was in her own thick accent—mocking, dripping with malice, dark under his breath.

“Well, bless your heart.”

Jessebelle snapped her fan shut.

“Your turn.”

James turned around, fearful and unsure of what she meant. The lilt in her voice was gone, the false innocence vanished. Her tone was cold, now. Methodical.

“Oddish,” she commanded. “Stun Spore.”

“The battle is over!” James said, jumping to his feet to protect his pokémon. “Leave Growlie alone!”

“You should worry less about what’s going to happen to that horrid thing,” she said, eyes
narrowed. “And more about what’s going to happen to you.”

James swore that he saw it—her oddish hesitating for a moment, scared to follow her command. What came next was something he wouldn’t reflect on until much, much later—the fear of what she would do to it overpowering the fear of what it would do to him.

A deathly miasma of spores erupted from the pokémon, and Jessebelle was well-prepared, fanning them away from herself as if she had practiced the move time and time again. James was completely blindsided by it, a defenseless child with no point of reference, no natural instincts. Powder swam through his senses, invaded his lungs, itched under his skin. He fell to his knees long before it really hit him, hacking so roughly that tears streamed from his eyes.

There was nothing in Jessebelle’s gaze as she stared down at him, collapsing on the grass. No good, no evil, only a blackened void in the swirling dark ocean of her eyes. James felt his muscles spasm wildly, and he cried out in pain, head against the grass, dirt staining his clothes. He was frozen, ragdolled as he lost form in the sea of green. The sensation of powerlessness was unlike anything he had ever felt in his life.

James tried to fight, willed his limbs to move. Pins and needles like an angry swarm rocketed inside of him, their aura impossible to break past. Tears kept streaming down his cheeks, the only part of him that remained mobile. There, at her mercy, all he could do was cry.

A growl beside him grew to a crescendo, and he wondered if it was real or if he had imagined it. “I thought I’d gotten rid of you!” Jessebelle nearly shrieked. “Oddish, take care of this pest!”

Somehow, despite all odds, Growlie had risen to its feet. When Oddish released a second Stun Spore at the puppy pokémon, it was quick to react, making up for lost time—burning the feeble cloud away with the fire that blazed inside of it. It roared its name as it dispersed the danger, and Jessebelle reeled back in uncharacteristic worry. Brow knit, she went to call out another command.

Growlie dug its teeth into the collar of James’ suit jacket, mustering all the strength it had left to hoist the boy far into the air and catch him on its back. It was a risky move, and the odds were against them both, and if it failed, things would be a lot worse—but there was an instinct that burned far more than skin-deep within the pokémon, a mutual understanding between the two of them that no matter what, above all else, they would keep each other safe.

It managed to get him safely onto its back and darted toward the estate without a second thought. Desperate for its muscles to stop their unending ache, Growlie shut its eyes tight and focused on the sun above their heads, borrowing its strength. Jessebelle and her Oddish ran behind, but it was a futile attempt—with her hands carrying her gown and her dedication to elegance as she bolted after them, there was no chance of her ever catching up.

Her voice faded, its wickedness sounding more like a memory to Growlie as it fell behind them. James blearily opened his eyes, stomach twisting as he watched scenery swim past, colours bleeding together like paint. He’d died and gone somewhere more serene, he was sure of it. The sun was warm. Growlie was warm.

James awoke hours later with salveyo on his tongue and ice beneath his skin, joints frozen together and spores still lingering in his lungs. He clutched Growlie tighter, clenching his teeth through the pain as his body worked out the poison. Jessebelle was standing with his grandparents at the doorway, and she painted a far-too-vivid tale of how clumsy idiot James had stumbled into a nest of grass types and how they hadn’t taken kindly to him, how scared she was, how she didn’t know what to do. She shed a few tears, the tragic victim of this dreadful tapestry she’d woven.
The boy shivered fiercely, burying himself under covers, nails desperately dug into orange fur. Growlie whined anxiously, lapping at his burning forehead. Jessebelle’s story could have ended ages ago, but she kept on talking. In all her confidence, she stayed far from his bedside.

James counted his blessings and tried to fall back asleep.

Jessie heaved out another ragged breath, willing herself not to collapse to the freezing cave floor after what felt like the thirtieth incline within it.

You really picked a good place to sulk, James, she grit her teeth, eyes heavy.

It was far into the night, now, and he still hadn’t come home from wherever he’d wandered off to. James really wasn’t one to stray far from the group, even at his worst, and the fact that the morning was due in a short while and that he was still out doing god knows what somewhere was making Jessie far more nervous than she ever would’ve liked to admit. Back at Brock’s, their pokémon were all waiting up equally as worried, now with the burden of caring for a child that cried far more than it smiled.

An exit finally came into view, and the woman immediately brightened as she ran for it. Finally in moonlight again after a long trek, she soaked in the energy of the night and let the crashing waterfalls around reinvigorate her drive.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw him—James was at a lower level of the cliffside, his slacks rolled up, his feet dangling in the freezing water. Leaning on his palms with his head tilted back, it looked as though he was trying to drift away to somewhere kinder, as if he could fall asleep at any moment.

She dusted off her outfit and followed the railed paths and artificial stairs down to him, peering onward. He didn’t seem to notice her, or the world, or anything around him, lost in the sound of thunderous cascades crashing into the rushing waters at his feet.

“You’re going to catch cold at this rate,” she chided, and James startled a little, turning over his shoulder to look at her.

“You always say that,” he said. “And you’re always wrong.”

Jessie crossed her arms, walking closer to him.

“It’s ridiculously late, James,” she said. “What are you doing so far out here?”

He turned away, kicking the waters a little.

“Pondering.”

Jessie had to hold back from rolling her eyes, unsure if him mirroring her words from their last argument was meant to be a passive-aggressive gesture or a simple nod of solidarity in good jest. She wanted to have good faith in him, but he was making it very difficult lately.

“Well, pondering hours are long over,” she said. “Let’s go back. I’m losing precious beauty sleep.”

There was a beat of silence. Still, he kept his eyes off her.

“No one asked you to come out here.”

This man is testing me, she prickled.
“Yes, James, no one asked me,” Jessie said, sarcastic. “But you’ll find a room full of anxious Pokémon and an inconsolable child screaming at the top of its lungs for several hours can be very persuasive!”

James stiffened, she saw it in his shoulders, in the halt of his idle movements. When his voice came out again, it didn’t sound like the person she knew. Cold, and dark, and devoid of the love he so easily gave to so much of the world.

“I’ve no desire to be around anyone right now,” he said, almost robotically. “Least of all that… that thing.”

The way he spat the sentence made her skin crawl. She’d never heard James talk about a Pokémon that way, not even through schemes and plots, not even when he was sailing through the air, bruised and charred from their attacks. It didn’t sit right with her, goosebumps crawling up her arms.

Inside her, the fear did what all her emotions did best—transformed to anger with a fierce, white-hot glow.

“I’m growing absolutely nauseated by your attitude, James!” she shouted at him. “I have no idea what’s gotten so far up your ass that you’re acting this way, but you’re completely delusional if you think I’m just going to sit here and accept it like the others have!”

James finally had the mind to look at her—turning back over his shoulder, this time with a far less disinterested expression. Swiftly, he rose to his feet, just as ready to bite back, far less meek than he’d ever been.

“I’ve done no wrong to you!” he said. “You chose to come out here! You chose to pick a fight with me! I can’t do anything about what people out of my control do, and you’d do well to not blame me for it!”

Jessie trudged closer to him, hands moving wildly as she spoke.

“Of all the selfish…” she cut herself off, practically incoherent. “What is your damage?! You think you can just do whatever you want with no consequences? What have we been doing this whole time, James?!! Why are we here?!”

“That’s rich coming from someone like you!” he shot back. “Look me in the eyes and tell me that you don’t think of yourself first in nearly every situation! That you don’t run away from pain all the same!”

“I’m more than my vanity, James!” Jessie said. “If you paid attention to anyone but yourself you’d know that! But you don’t! You don’t know a damn thing about me!”

“You don’t know a damn thing about me!”

James screamed it twice as loud, voice unhinged, tears staining it. It echoed across the canyon, where noctowl fluttered from the trees, where magikarp dove to the bottom of the lake, where wobbuffet shuffled back into their dens. Walls upon walls of water hit the surface of the still lakes around them, their booming rhythm turning to white noise in the silence James’ punctuated outburst had left.

Jessie stood there, eyes on him, surprised to see his on hers. Fixated there, as though he were scared to look away, no matter how desperately he had wanted to. James didn’t look people in the eyes if he could help it, and she didn’t dare force him. He was looking at her, and he was trembling.

The woman loosened her stance. Her raised shoulders fell, her balled fists flattened. She made herself
smaller, for the first time since she was a child, for the first time in a long time. He couldn’t take his
eyes off her. At James’ most panicked, and upset, and ruined, she expected him to look anywhere
but, spare himself the stress. Something or someone had trained him like a wild beast, beaten him
down until he was too scared to look away.

Was it her that James was seeing, right then? Or…

Jessie sighed, and her partner cringed at the sound of it. As though someone had just hit him. As
though the release of her anger signaled something wicked to come. She evened her tone. She
brightened her eyes.

Moments like this mattered the most.

“You’re right,” she said, stomach churning. “I don’t.”

She took a gentle step closer to him, desperate to show him she meant it.

“So tell me what’s wrong,” Jessie said, taking his hand in her own. “Please.”

James was already shaking, but his form seemed to give way even more, words stuck inside him,
muscles barely functioning. There was no easy answer. What was wrong was years upon years of
scars too deep to excavate, coming to a head on a difficult night. After far too long, he looked away
from her, and she found it curious how relieved the simple action made her feel.

“I—I—” he stuttered, stuck somewhere just before inconsolable. “I—d-don’t—know where—to start
—”

Jessie looked to the floor, lost in thought. This was it, then. They’d both reached their breaking
points, after years upon years of building solid brick between them. She visualized it in her head, her
laying down the first one, cementing over it and piling on more and more at an incredible speed.
Every once in a while, he placed his own atop hers.

“Perhaps… the beginning,” she said. “As far back as you’re able.”

James bit the inside of his cheek, still looking down. He shut his eyes tight, swallowed hard, sucked
in a trembling breath, and nodded.

“Stay with me?” he asked, terrified.

“Of…” she blinked. “Of course.”

He let out another tumultuous exhale, turning away from her. One by one, James undid the buttons
on his polo, unsteady hands making it far more of an undertaking than he would’ve liked. In some
ways, it was—the simple action was so much more than just that. He pulled apart the last one,
focusing on breathing properly before he let the fabric fall off his shoulders, to the grassy turf below.

Jessie wasn’t sure what, exactly, she was supposed to be looking at here. She’d seen him in all states
of undress a couple hundred or so times, as time was of the essence and dutiful performers needed
not to feel shame when getting into proper costume. James looked the same as ever—the way his
frame stuck upward a little in nervousness, the way unfairly soft lavender draped itself across his
neck, and the way long scars crisscrossed his back.

He read her confusion pretty instantly, and turned back around to face her.

“You’ve never asked,” he said, sounding almost hurt. “Decades we’ve known each other, and
you’ve never asked how I got these scars.”

Colour tinged her cheeks, and she looked away. “I assumed you’d been mauled by an ursaring, or something.”

James cringed, her excuse not making him feel that much better. The scenario she presented was one he would take over the truth any day.

“A pokémon didn’t do this to me,” he desperately tried to steady himself.

“James…” Jessie trailed off, trying to find suitable words. “What are you saying?”

He was shakily pulling his arms back into his shirt, eager to protect himself from the chill of the wind. He didn’t know what he was saying. No one had ever asked him in such intimate detail, before. He struggled to believe it was even worth mentioning. Didn’t everyone have something in their life worth collapsing to nothing over?

“Do you remember… my family?” he said. “Do you remember my… my…”

Darkness clouded his expression, and he struggled to say the word. It was his least favourite word in the english language, stuck on his tongue like blackened and searing tar that bubbled on a hot summer day. Hearing it punched him out of his body, made his palms drench themselves with sweat.

“…fiancé?”

Jessie peered into him, thankful she didn’t have to comb her memory too much. She remembered… mentions of a fiancé, and being at one of his estates—all of it was overshadowed, however, by a moment they’d shared in a twilit balloon, so lost in each other’s eyes that they’d forgotten their third on the dirt road below. The image invaded Jessie’s head, and she found herself frustrated at how it sent her heart racing and brought pink to her cheeks. She’d always thought on it fondly before, and now of all times, when she needed less distractions, it was making her stomach sickeningly fluttery? The whole idea was an absolute joke.

“Only vaguely,” she finally said. “Why?”

“She…” James said, and then blinked back tears. “I don’t, exactly… we never really…”

He buried his face in his hands, unable to find a way to phrase his trauma elegantly. Even when talking about the cruelty the world had dealt him, he was more concerned about bending to the whims of it, minimizing his pain, throwing rose petals over his broken headspace.

“…she did this to me.”

Jessie kept her eyes on him, lips pursed in fearful curiosiity. He couldn’t be implying what she thought he was… right?

“I don’t understand…” she said. “Your… your fiancé did that? How? And why? When?”

The questions made his head spin, and he didn’t know where to put his eyes or how to say his hurt without sobbing or if it was even worth her time. More than anything, he was scared she’d forget in a week, and they’d be back to the way they were.

He tried anyways.

“I was never the child my parents wanted,” he said, eyes on the grass as the wind jostled it softly.
“They thought… maybe someone like her would shape me up.”

“You weren’t given a choice…” Jessie was beginning to remember, now—money had been involved. A hefty inheritance… comments James had made here and there about his wealth, strangely contrasted with absurd comments about how he suffered alongside it.

“Even as a child, you’re right, I was incorrigible,” he said, smiling weakly. “So they… so… she… spent years trying to beat it out of me.”

The sentence, the way he said it, the way he meant it… Jessie wanted to believe, more than she’d ever wanted to believe anything, that he was being hyperbolic. That he was exaggerating. There was no way. There was no way someone’s own parents could idly sit by while their son was beat within an inch of his life, right?! He had to have been joking, he had to have meant something else, something less literal—

She remembered, all at once. Her and Meowth, cloaked in black, ducked behind a sturdy machine, age-old brick cool beneath their palms. Their eyes focused forward, for impending threats and for paths of escape. James crying out their names like a lost child, desperate, petrified. Whip cracks hard against the stone floor. Tortured screams, unearthly.

It couldn’t be true. There was no way it was true. Jessie clenched her teeth hard, balled her fists so fiercely she was certain she’d pull her bones out of where they belonged. Her whole torso trembled with rage, with scalding emotion she could not contain. Tears stained her eyes, choked her throat. How could anyone do this? How could anyone in their right mind do this to him?!

“How could anyone do this? How could anyone in their right mind do this to him?!

“Why didn’t you run?!” she sobbed, a whirl of feeling storming in her eyes. James was taken aback, unsure where her anger had come from.

“I did,” he said, trying to diffuse her. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Why didn’t you run sooner?!”

“Well, she…” James swallowed dryly. “I didn’t really… stand a chance against her oddish’s Stun Spore.”

James refused to say things directly. He threw out these comments almost nonchalantly, with a smile, at times. She’d thought they were jokes. Jessie had never considered the idea that he was being literal, that he was doing anything other than whining.

She recalled a time when she’d been bedridden from Stun Spore—not just any pokémon’s, either, the pokémon with the most potent pollen of any grass type—and he’d waved off her theatrics, detached, level-headed, completely lacking in the anxiety he normally wore so well. She thought he was just being a jerk, but realized in that moment that he’d become so desensitized he didn’t have the heart to feel for her. Both of them were numb, in completely different ways.

“That’s why…” Jessie cried, his feeling toward the newly hatched pokémon finally making sense. His aversion toward grass types for so long resurfacing in her head, how irrationally excited he was when he’d caught his weepinbell. How proud he was of himself.

“That’s why,” he affirmed, embarrassed at his own misgivings.

The way he said it, as though it were his own fault, made her want to scream. She was blazing, an absolute supernova of a woman who, in that moment, felt as though all the anger and love and protection contained within her had the power to burn the world to nothing. Flames crawled across
her fingertips, magma ran through her bloodstream. She was explosive, and ignited, and ruthlessly bent on revenge. For the first time in her life, it was toward someone who had done no harm unto her.

She understood, then, what James had so often said to her—

*Your pain is mine as well,* he would smile. *My life is yours.*

With no one to beat down, with nothing to fight against, Jessie felt more powerless than she’d ever felt before. She wanted to find James’ fiancé and tear her limb from limb, claw at her until she was nothing, watch her drown in the bubbling cauldron of the volcano that Jessie had become. Anger was so easy. Everything else was so hard.

She tried anyways.

Jessie attempted a graceful trot forward, but in all her fierceness of mind, it was more of an awkwardly well-meaning stomp. He flinched as she neared him, eyes shut tight, residual instinct taking over. It only made her want to burn the world more. Still, she persisted, wrapping her arms around him, pulling him close.

The feeling of her hands on his back, beneath his arms, holding onto him for dear life—he was so well-acquainted with it, but so, so lost. He couldn’t count the number of times they’d clung to each other like this—in fear, in celebration, in boredom, in domesticity—where words so often failed them, they used an embrace.

Now, though, he was so acutely aware of all that Jessie was. His trembling hands trailing over the small of her back, the curve of her waist, the way crimson locks pooled at her shoulders. The way her fingertips traced gentle lines on the back of his polo, as though she were trying to will his scars far away, trying to erase all he had been through. And her warmth—like the sun on a pleasant summer day, like a campfire surrounded in close friends, like a space heater and a downy blanket while snow slowly fell outside. More than anything else, Jessie was a fire who kept all she loved warm.

In the small stretches where their skin met, she lit his blood aflame, leaving him red-faced and thankful and safe, so safe, so protected. He loved her. He loved her more than anything or anyone.

Their heartbeats seemed to bleed together, in sync as though nothing else in the universe existed. She could hear his against her ears, buried in his chest and filled with the scent of rosewater and fizzy drinks and petrichor.

“You are something else, James,” she nearly whispered into him. “You know that, right?”

In hearing his heartache, Jessie did not pity him. She praised him for surviving, celebrated his safety. He understood her a lot more, in that moment. What she had said to him was no doubt what she herself had hoped for in the investment of vulnerability. His instinct was to deny her claim—to minimize himself, to shut down the thought. To say that he was just a man, just a boy, just an abused child who managed to get away with some scars. He fought it with all he was.

“Oh, of course,” he lied. “The strong and tenacious find each other, don’t we?”

Jessie laughed. Softly at first, a quiet chuckle muffled into his shirt, then louder—open mouthed and free, head raised. He laughed with her, the two of them breaking apart from each other, then collapsing back into the hug all over again. Tears resurfaced, hysterics consumed them. They cried, they laughed, they cried. Whatever it was—this chaos that they had gotten themselves into, it felt
good. It felt right.

James was the first to collapse to his knees, exhausted from tears, ribs aching. Jessie slowly fell with him, tumbling quietly to the grass while stars swam around them, while her and her mess of a best friend filled the night skies with bittersweet air. She pressed her forehead against James’, and he responded to the gentleness by cupping her cheek with his hand, and they laughed and cried until the sounds trailed to nothing and Jessie slowly, reluctantly opened her eyes to look at him. He was staring at her expectantly, but not impatiently. After all he had said and all she now knew, she didn’t blame him for the curiosity in his eyes.

He had given so much to her. Known so much of his own pain. An impulse crawled at her throat, and Jessie feared that if she didn’t follow it now, in this perfect moment, she might not ever.

She let out a nervous exhale, pulled herself away from him, and sat with her knees folded and her hands balled quietly on top of them. He tilted his head, and Jessie prayed to the moon, to the sky, to the stars above for their courage, for their kindness, for their strength.

The words fell off her painted lips more easily than she ever would have imagined them to, and James had to stop himself from audibly gasping the second they hit the night air.

“My mother’s name was Jane.”

Meowth weakly rubbed his paws against his eyes, desperate for any semblance of comfort that it could offer him. He wanted to ask the shining moon bleeding through the room for the energy to carry on, but he’d already asked so much of her, and he was certain her patience with him was wearing thin.

At his flank, a baby oddish was crying as thought that were all it was put on this earth to do, and Arbok and Weezing were making feeble attempts to calm it down. The snake was loosely clutching it in its tail, rocking it softly with an off-key lullabye. Beside it, Weezing was attempting to amuse it with funny faces, and falling short in that its bicranial biology couldn’t seem to make up their minds in unison.

Greninja was propped up against the wall, observing, as it did. In all its wisdom, it knew there wasn’t much it could do to remedy the situation, so it elected to sit by on the off chance that things escalated to a point of intervention, or to a point where it could make itself useful. The frog’s eyes stayed on the child.

The psychic types were quietly chattering off on the balcony, and Meowth heaved another sigh, not wanting to bother them but knowing he was running out of options.

“Take a rest, yous two,” Meowth said to Arbok and Weezing, rising to his feet. “I can take over for now.”

The poison types nodded a little reluctantly, and Arbok softly passed the pokémon to Meowth, who took it in his arms and shushed it a little. Sluggishly, the cat made his way to the sliding doors and pulled one open.

Wobbuffet stirred more than Chimecho, swiveling his body around slightly to meet Meowth’s eyes. Chimecho’s attention on him was far less enthusiastic, the wind chime pokémon looking much more worse for wear.

“Hey,” Meowth said nonchalantly, in a moment where Oddish’s tears had lessened to a whimper. “How goes stuff out here?”
“Not great,” Wobbuffet said, simple as usual.

Chimecho didn’t say anything, instead it elected to bury its face deeper into Wobbuffet, who gave it a comforting pat.

“Chime, buddy, I know yer sad an’ all, but…”

“I’m supposed to protect him,” Chimecho said, bleary-eyed. “I didn’t even know he was upset until he’d run away…”

“Dat’s not any fault’a yours,” Meowth reassured. “Everyt’in’ happened so fast, an’ Jimmy hardly made a sound.”

“I should still know,” it said, and Wobbuffet continued to stroke its head gingerly. “Extrasensory abilities are no good if I can’t help out.”

“About dat…” Meowth rubbed at the back of his neck, and on cue, Oddish started its uproar again, wailing its name loudly.

“I could really use a Heal Bell right now.”

Wobbuffet was giving Meowth a look, and if the cat weren’t so fully exhausted, he might have picked a fight with the patient pokémon. Meowth knew what it meant, without words, and wanted to roll his eyes. Wobbuffet was such an Emotional Support pokémon that he’d now resorted to being the Emotional Support pokémon for the other resident Emotional Support pokémon.

“Look, I know ya probably ain’t feelin’ up to it, Chime,” Meowth said. “But da sooner we get this kid t’ sleep, da sooner we can all get some shuteye too. If Jessie ‘n’ James ain’t back by den, we can go lookin’ fer ‘em ourselves.”

Chimecho considered the proposal. Every ounce of it was too depressed and downtrodden to want to do anything besides stay collapsed in a pathetic heap against Wobbuffet’s comforting presence. Meowth had a point, though—action felt better once it was put into motion. It was the motion part that was difficult.

Pitifully, Chimecho began to hover off the ground, pulling away from Wobbuffet and bringing itself to a quiet float. It wiped its teary eyes with its tail and nodded softly to Meowth.

“Yeah, okay,” it said. “I’ll try.”

“T’anks, pal,” Meowth smiled earnestly, trotting closer to it. “I owe ya one.”

The wind chime pokémon floated up to Oddish’s side, so that the two of them were cheek-to-cheek, close as they could be. Focusing itself inward was difficult, over the clamorous sound of the child’s bawling—but it was no new territory to Chimecho. Being the eye of the storm was the pokémon’s greatest strength.

It let out a gentle chime, the frequency of it soothing as ever, not at all indicative of the tumultuous mental state the pokémon was in itself. The sound filled the air—slowly, until it was all that could be heard up against the quiet night. Oddish’s sobs turned to cries, and its cries to whines, and its whines to unsteady shudders and sniffles. Meowth rocked the grass type in his arms, whispering gentle affirmations to it with the hopes that it could find solace.

“Dat’s it, kiddo,” the cat cooed, holding it closer as its eyes grew heavy. “Time for yous t’ finally get some shuteye.”
The night was still as could be when Oddish finally drifted off, perfectly at peace as though the chaos that had lined its heart moments before was nothing. Meowth watched its chest serenely rise and fall in a steady rhythm, content.

“T’anks again, Chimecho,” he sighed, relieved, then looked the psychic type in the eyes. “Hey. He’ll be home soon. I know he will.”

“I hope you’re right,” Chimecho said, and floated in behind Meowth as he laid the baby pokémon in the spare bed. Wobbuffet came soon after, and he and the wind chime pokémon added themselves to the small nest Arbok and Weezing had made. There in a pile, the four of them tried—and failed—to sleep through their worry.

Meowth wandered out to the kitchen where the commotion had all began mere hours earlier, looking worse for wear and hoping there’d be some manner of leftovers waiting there for him. He was surprised to see Brock still awake, pink frilly apron hung over his pajamas as he finished up washing dishes. As if anticipating the cat’s arrival, a pot of coffee had been freshly brewed, and the smell of it alone brought Meowth back to the world of the living.

“Hey!” Brock said, simply, brightly. As though the night had not been so hectic, as though he had not invited the literal definition of chaos to be his burden.

“Hey,” Meowth mirrored, far less enthusiastic as he brought himself to the table. “What’re you still doin’ up?”

“I didn’t know if you guys had a handle on things back there,” he said. “I figured it wouldn’t hurt to be on hand. This is my area of expertise, after all.”

“Startin’ ta t’ink you got too many’a dose, kid,” Meowth smiled weakly.

“It never hurts to cover your bases,” Brock said, and gave a terse nod, as if agreeing heartily with himself.

Meowth hadn’t noticed him pouring the coffee, half ready to fall asleep right there on the soothing, cool wood finish of the dining room table. Brock gently sent a mug down on the table for the cat, and as soon as Meowth noticed it there he was absolutely dousing it in cream.

He took a sip, and, naturally, it was divine.

“T’anks, tall twoihp,” Meowth said, too numb to notice his burnt tongue. “Ya ask me, it’s a miracle we even got dat kid t’ bed.”

“You did a pretty good job, considering how heated the circumstances were,” Brock said, sitting across from him. “Newly-hatched pokémon are very perceptive to the emotional energies around them. Not only that, I’m thinking it definitely imprinted on James, since he was the first thing it saw.”

“Dat’s gonna be fun ta deal wit’,” the cat told him. “I dunno what’s up wit’ him. I’ve never seen him lookin’ like dat.”

Brock crossed his arms, eyes downward. “He seemed fine right up until the point when it hatched…”
Meowth joined him, lost in thought. “Well…”

The boy peered into him, wondering where his mind had traveled to.

“Jimmy used ta have dis… t’ing wit’ grass types,” he said. “He couldn’t be around ‘em for too long widdout freezin’ up. But he got over it a long time ago. Since den, he’s raised tons of his own. Loves em, even.”

Brock placed a hand on his chin, pieces falling together in his head. His memory was far-reaching, sound. He didn’t forget many things, least of all beautiful women—though the one in his mind’s eye, he didn’t dare let his heart flutter for. Even he was wise enough to know that no good would come of a courtship with one like her.

She had a vileplume. Of course.

The way Meowth talked about his friend’s pain was with an air of genuine curiosity, genuine confusion. It was strange, to Brock, that he knew more of James’ inner demons than one of the man’s closest friends. Unsure of how much he should say, how much he reasonably could say as an outsider, he picked his words carefully.

“Do you think maybe something triggered the fear and made it suddenly resurface?”

“Guess it would make sense,” Meowth laughed, only a little hysterically, and buried his face in his paws. “Man, whadda mess. What if James stays like dis forever? What’s da poor kid gonna do?”

“‘A mess’ is right,” Brock said. “But that’s how raising any child is, even in the best of circumstance. I can’t tell you it’s easy. I can only tell you it’s worth it.”

“Dat’s what I’m holdin’ out hope for,” the cat responded. “I held onto dat little guy for weeks upon weeks, t’rough everythin’. We was inseparable. I can handle if it’s attached ta James ‘n’ not me… I just hope it doesn’t hurt too much on dis joihney. Just hope I can make it smile a little more.”

Meowth took a hard sip of his drink, and Brock couldn’t help but look to him a bit lovingly, pride-stricken. The cat had the heart of a caretaker. Looking back, the boy never would have guessed it ran so deep.

“The housecat’s job is often overlooked, but it is important nonetheless,” Brock said, only half-joking. “And if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you make a wonderful housecat.”

Meowth laughed darkly, not meeting his eyes. The flattery made his heart swell, but it was overshadowed by the comment that fell out of him before he had the mind to stop it.

“Eh, gotta have a home to be a housecat,” he said. “But t’anks. I’m tryin’ here.”

Chimecho woke up slowly to the sound of pebbles softly clinking against the window, and it floated over to the glass pane, eyes blurry. It willed its vision to focus as it peered through the foggy aperture, but it hardly needed twenty-twenty vision to recognize what was standing below.

Excitedly, Chimecho tore downstairs, psychokinetically pulling open the back door and ramming James’ torso at such a speed that it winded him. He reeled back, holding his crying pokémon close.

“I’m sorry,” James said, gingerly thumbing away its tears. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking, you must
have been so scared—"

“Chime chime!” it shouted at him, and its tone was half-angry, half-relieved, half-overjoyed. James was fine with that, he figured it was about what he deserved.

Jessie tapped him on the shoulder and motioned to the open door, where cold wind was filtering into Brock’s home. Oddly silent and even more strangely content, the two of them seemed to speak without words, making their way upstairs and shutting it quietly behind them.

Almost as soon as they entered the darkened guest room, their pokémon began to stir from their collective cuddle pile on the king bed. Arbok periscoped upward with a quiet trill, Weezing rose up into the night air, Meowth rubbed sleep from his eyes and brightened. Wobbuffet was the last up, as usual, but when he saw Jessie he ran at her a mirror image of how Chimecho had to James, clinging to her leg and refusing to let go.

“Wobbuffet, keep it down,” Meowth said, whispering through clenched teeth. “If you wake da kid back up my claws is gonna be on ya before you can even t’ink about counterin’ em!”

The patient pokémon nodded, muffling his quiet whines into his trainer. Oddish stayed asleep, curled up in a makeshift bed that Arbok had crafted its coiled tail into. Meowth looked to his friends, not knowing where to start.

“Where do I even begin wit’ yous two,” he said, the lack of inflection in his voice sounding far more ominous than if he were to be angry and loud.

“Meowth, it’s late,” Jessie said. “All of us are exhausted and none of us should be awake. Are you in agreement?”

“Well yeah, but—”

“Tomorrow we’ll talk,” Jessie said, smiling and strangely at peace. “Promise. Right, James?”

James looked to Chimecho, still in his arms, then to the rest of the pokémon, all run down and emotional after a long night, their eyes heavy and their bodies drooping.

“Of course,” he said. “Promise.”

“Ugh, I can’t argue dat,” Meowth said, eyes shut. “An’ it ain’t like I don’t want to! Ya really gave us all a scare!”

Oddish began to stir a little, and Arbok flinched in anticipation, raising the grass-type and giving it a gentle rock. It seemed to quiet down, but the room all took it as a sign to save any misgivings with their standing for tomorrow.

“Right, bed,” Meowth said, yawning with his whole face. “Pile on. Let’s go.”

He practically threw himself into the bed, and Jessie and James both reached for their pokéballs on the desk adjacent, figuring their pokémon would enjoy the solace. Arbok chattered its name at Jessie when it saw her going for one, shaking its head when she brought her attention to it.

“You want to stay put?”

“Chaa,” it nodded, sounding worried. Her heart sunk—these pokémon adored them so much, and they’d made them wait up all night, worried sick.
“You too, Weezing?” James said, looking at his own pokémon.

“Weez.” it affirmed, equally heartsick.

James looked to Jessie, unsurprised to see her also looking to him.

“Well, we’re outnumbered on this matter, it seems,” Jessie said, taking in the room full of pokémon.

“Let’s hope the bed can handle it,” James grinned.

The lot of them arranged themselves, curling under the covers in a chaotic, messy cuddle pile. Wobbuffet on the far end with Jessie holding onto him like she did, Arbok loosely curled around her waist, its head resting on her shoulder. Weezing at James’ foot and Chimecho in his arms, and Meowth in between his two best friends, utterly knocked out as he held onto Oddish.

James turned over to face Meowth, who was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, and instead was met with Oddish’s eyes, slowly opening to take him in. The grass type’s gaze began to sparkle. This time, with joy, rather than tears.

Oddish wiggled closer to him, calling out its name in the quiet of the night. The pokémon nuzzled his cheek—squishing their skin together, so happy to see him that it couldn’t contain itself. James peered into it, heart racing, and its candy apple stare turned to deadly crimson in a flash. He shut his eyes. He swallowed. He breathed deep. He held on tighter to Chimecho.

The wind chime pokémon awoke, letting off its signature ring, quiet enough that everyone remained asleep, loud enough that James felt his heartbeat even out, felt his agonized stomach settle. Without opening his eyes, he reached out a free hand and gently pulled Oddish close. The pokémon leaned into the touch, chirping happily.

“Baby steps,” James whispered to Oddish, their skin in loose contact, his eyes shut tight.

“For you and I both.”

“Up and at ‘em, people, up and at ‘em! It’s an absolutely beautiful morning in sunny Cianwood city!”

Jessie pulled her eyes open, gummy with makeup she’d been too exhausted to remove, unperturbed by the fact that Wobbuffet had fallen to the ground with a loud thud. Her pokémon kept snoring, equally unobservant. Brock was standing at the doorway, looking positively radiant as he banged his pan with a metal spoon.

“Up?” Jessie whined. “We only just got here!”

She buried her face in her pillow, and James lazily pulled himself to a sit, Chimecho still in his arms. Meowth mumbled something in his sleep, him and Oddish having migrated further into each other’s arms as the night had progressed.

“You can stay in bed all day if you want ,” Brock said, crossing his arms knowingly. “But I don’t think you want to miss my home-cooked Feel-Better-in-the-Morning smorgasbord!”

Meowth stirred, sounding enticed. “Food? Does Meowth smell food?”

Brock almost smirked, knowing their attempts were futile.
They were out of bed pretty fast as soon as reality set in, and Brock had somehow managed to fit an absolute buffet of comfort food onto his average-sized kitchen table. The boy was an absolute miracle worker, and the sight of impeccably thick pancakes piled on flawlessly seared bacon piled on meticulously ironed waffles made them wonder if this was it—if they had found their white tomorrow in an apartment atop a small-town pharmacy. Briefly, they considered skipping Kanto altogether, calling it quits with syrup on their tongues.

Brock was—quite understandably—glowing as they devoured his hard work, and he excused himself only to throw open all the windows and let the sun’s rays drift through, lifting everyone’s spirits further. The house breathed as pokémon ran through it, as Croagunk sat atop his step-stool and burned his own pancakes to a horrible crisp (just the way he liked them), as Chansey organized pills in the back room downstairs before they opened, as Chimecho attached itself to the railing outside and napped in the warm sun, wind drifting through its ribbon-like tail. Oddish didn’t cry with James in its sights, even though it would be a lie to say the man wasn’t avoiding it. It was almost uncanny, how different the morning was from the dark and eerie night.

There was still an hour or two left before the shop was due to open, and James was enjoying a momentary lapse in sound while his friends were off in their own corners, getting ready for the day or enjoying the outdoors or getting some last-minute shuteye. Brock and him were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder, warmed by rich coffee and talking culinary art.

“Of course I can give you the recipes!” Brock said, excitedly. “There’s no better feeling than knowing your cooking is being well appreciated.”

“Well appreciated is an understatement,” James laughed. “If I can channel even a fraction of this, I doubt we’ll be eating much else.”

The boy beamed as he took another long drink from his mug, eyes shut with warmth as he faced forward. There was a silence—as much as there could be, with the voices of humans and pokémon through the walls of the building, with the gentle crescendo of the world waking up outside—and the two of them leaned into it, comfortable and safe. It was Brock who broke it, his tone erring on the serious side, his eyes fixed on James.

“Hey,” he said. “I think we were both wrong.”

“What do you mean?” James asked.

“Last night, we let our similarities divide us,” Brock said. “When we should’ve been doing the opposite.”

James looked to his lap, feeling undeserving of such a soft apology. “It’s my fault, really. It’s unfair of me to think I know your pain when I haven’t even experienced a fraction of it.”

Brock was incensed, to some degree, at the thought. The idea that there were so many people walking the earth who didn’t know that they didn’t deserve what had happened to them, that it wasn’t normal. Statistics raced in his head, his siblings, their smiles. He couldn’t protect everyone, no matter how badly he wanted to try.

“The worst you’ve been through is the worst you’ve been through,” Brock said, simply. “I might not understand your feelings, James…but they’re real. If you ask me, that means they matter all the same.”

James stole a glance at the boy, surprised at how the sentence had made his heart lurch, how it had filled a hole somewhere in his aching frame that he didn’t even know was there. It was such a simple
thing to say, and yet it meant so much.

“Thank you for your anger,” James said. “I hope to gain some of my own, some day.”

Brock was taken aback at first, but the surprise quickly dissolved into a smile before he addressed James again.

“Well, for your sake and the world’s... everything in moderation.”

Ship horns blared against wingull cries, and Meowth didn’t even realize—until the oddish in his arms started to fuss—that his whole body was shaking as he boarded the ferry.

One word shouldn’t have set the lot of them on edge. One word shouldn’t have inclined Chimecho to heal their worries. One word shouldn’t have held so much power within it, but it did. Not merely a place, but a presence—

NOW BOARDING: KANTO.

It felt like a homecoming in the middle of a booming thunderstorm. Like finding out the final boss had two more forms, each stronger than the last. Like being best friends with the mercurial ocean, and guessing day to do whether or not she was going to throw you into the depths or carry you gently aloft. Everything they’d worked so hard for, everything they’d tried their best to undo—it was coming to a head, ready to test what they were really made of. All of them knew, with absolute certainty, that nothing was going to be as hard as the trials they were about to face.

Jessie held herself steady, trying to find her fire. Their luck was absolute garbage. They had a kid to take care of now, and who knew how well James would fair in caring for it, let alone existing in the same space as it for too long. Their collapsed headquarters was in Kanto, their old friends were somewhere in Kanto, their mistakes, their undoing, their cruel mark on the world. A sizeable chunk of it, concentrated into one very small place in the grand scheme of everything.

Whatever Karma had for them, they hoped they would survive it. They hoped that in all her kindness, she would be merciful.

As the ship left Cianwood’s harbour, not many words passed between the former Rockets. There was no need when they all felt the same, eyes on the water as it crashed against the boat’s underbelly. When the sun dipped and the waters turned to that of Route 27’s coast, it only felt stranger—territory they had navigated countless times, so unknown, so alien. Though they knew the region like the back of their hands, they couldn’t have been more lost.

And then, on another hand… if they survived this, there was no doubt about it: they could survive most anything.

The seas swirled below. Unforgiving. Merciless. The earth and those who walked it, far kinder.

The clear bell of the north wind was blowing them toward a new beginning.

Chapter End Notes
i've been eager to write this chapter since i started this story, and i feel even stronger about the next one. buckle the fuck in.

congrats to the... i think 3? people who predicted what was in the egg as early as RIGHT AFTER THE CHAPTER IT DEBUTED IN. if you cross referenced the colouration of it with the pokemon native to hoenn in the games, you could narrow it down to two potential candidates, and it was pretty obvious which of the two was happening, given these characters.

also hope it's chill that i'm diverting from canon compliance. but, like, i wanted to give miyamoto a first name. so she's got one now. her codename in team rocket was 'calamity'

it's gonna get bad before it gets good again.
i hope y'all will be willing to go on that journey with me!

also this is probably a longshot but if anyone's at sakuracon next weekend and sees the shortest chubbiest FOX of a jessie next to the tallest, handsomest james ever, that's me and ven. come say hi!

as always, i will do my best!!!
When the former Rockets first set foot on Kanto soil again, they’d stayed dead-eyed and directionless as they made their ascent. Beyond a few sarcastic remarks to lighten the intensity hanging around them, silence seemed to linger, unmoving. It barely picked up when they hit the skies, barely faded when they started to drift. Below their feet was a region wrought with their own wrongdoing, and not a single part of any of them knew where to begin.

It was overwhelming. Theoretically, they could land anywhere and find something waiting there for them. The thought was an unkind contradiction, confidence tightly swaddled in fearful anticipation. None of them had cared to learn where they were now, more avoidant than content to continue sailing across clouds until they ran out of fuel and were forced to dock and face their problems. Cinnabar was a noticeable point in the distance—its volcano shuddered and towered, marking the land. Beyond that, Kanto seemed to lack steady crystallization, watercolour paint blurring beneath the basket they were nestled in.

It took a good while for them to notice—first Oddish, then Wobbuffet, then Meowth, then Jessie—that the balloon was taking a very subtle dip. Its descent was slow, but still concerning, and Jessie tapped her foot impatiently as she watched them draw closer and closer to the messy treetops. Before she could turn to offer its captain some choice words, Meowth was a flash of cream-coloured fur, jerking messy pawsteps closer to James, anxiously calling his name.

Something was wrong.

Though a mental fog had made its home with them since they’d arrived, the glossed-over look in James’ eye was far heavier than its presence. He was staring with his eyes locked on the forest floor below, slack jawed despite the rigidity of his frame, unresponsive to his friends’ calls. The lot of them had seen him get this way before, but they’d been lucky enough that it hadn’t ever happened anywhere but on the ground.

Jessie grit her teeth, grabbing the flame out of his jurisdiction and spitting an order to Meowth.

“Chimecho’s pokéball,” she said, not wanting to waste words.

“Roger,” the cat said as he gently, but shakily, passed Oddish to Wobbuffet. He dug through their bags, tail flicking wildly.

Meowth thankfully managed to discern—without the knowledge of a trainer—which ball belonged to the wind chime pokémon. Before he could even toss it, the shell cracked open entirely on its own in the cat’s grasp. Chimecho must have become acutely aware of the energies outside in the moment and taken its own initiative.

With the serenity of its bell sending waves of calm over her, Jessie was able to man the balloon and
lower it a few yards off into a conveniently-placed parting of trees. The pokémon was curled around James’ neck, now, making quiet chatters of its name up at him in an effort to get him to come back to earth in a similar fashion. He’d loosened a bit, but his voice was taking a while to catch up. Silently, he looked toward Chimecho and extended a pointed finger toward his bag, messily spilled onto the basket floor.

The pokémon seemed to understand immediately, diving into the satchel’s insides and pulling out his index. James shakily opened the notes app on the device, typing letter by letter at a slowbro’s pace. Though every second that passed grated on Jessie like a rock lodged in her shoe, she willed herself to be patient. Anything that turned her partner into the mess he was now couldn’t be something that was easy to articulate in the throes of it.

He seemed to finish, swallowing hard as he shakily brandished the message to his teammates. When Jessie read the words, she cursed heavily under her breath.

“Here?” she said incredulously, and James nodded.

The woman took in their surroundings, trees as far as the eye could see. She did recall a towering structure in the distance, but she’d hardly registered it as anything of note…

“...are we on the property right now?” Jessie asked.

Fear seemed to strike James’ expression, and he quickly shook his head no. That was a relief, at the very least.

She crossed her arms, unsure of how to proceed. The gesture, while mundane to her, didn’t do much for James’ state, and she forced herself out of it when she noticed Chimecho curling itself back around him and sounding a second Heal Bell.

“We’s safe, den,” Meowth piped up. “We can take a breather, yeah?”

“We have to,” Jessie affirmed. “James isn’t exactly in top form for high altitudes.”

To her surprise, James was the one who responded.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out.

“Sorry,” she mirrored incredulously at him. “You’re sorry?! Are you hearing yourself right now, James?!”

He flinched a little at her anger, and Chimecho shot her an acid-coated look. Jessie sheathed herself, carefully picking words.

“I’m not angry with you,” she clarified—the idea that she had to, so often an afterthought. “I’m angry that you feel as though somehow you’re at fault for… anything.”

“She’s right, y’know,” Meowth trotted closer to him. “Jimmy, if what ya said was true, den… of course yer petrified at da idea of bein’ here.”

“You need to be kinder to yourself,” Jessie said, and Wobbuffet punctuated it with a muted utterance of his name, careful to not disturb the peace.

Oddish offered its own reassurance in the patient pokémon’s arms, but James could not meet its eyes. He wanted to apologize again—this time for the mere act of apologizing when it seemed to incense
his friends so much. James wisely decided against it, words not making sense as they came out.

“We have to go in,” he said, the life in his eyes flickering back for a moment, and his teammate’s jaws might as well have hit the floor.

“What the actual hell are you talking about?!” Jessie said, unable to contain herself. Rather than becoming smaller, James only seemed to recover himself more.

“It’s par for the course, isn’t it?” he reasoned.

Jessie shut her eyes tight, willing herself desperately to find her inner peace. It was never something she excelled at, especially not in high moments of stress. If he was insinuating what she thought he was… it only made her gorge rise more, searing magma at her throat.

“Are you crazy, James?!?”

“Define—”

“You cannot apologize to them!” she barked. “Not only are they utterly undeserving of it, if you give them the chance, you have no idea what they might—”

“Jessie,” he grabbed her palm, tone softening. “Jessie. I don’t want a single word with… any human being that dwells in or around those hallowed halls.”

Her heart soared at his hands on hers and the tenderness in his voice—reassuring, milk and molasses. Fresh out of his own mental breakdown, stopping his convictions to comfort her as if she were the one really suffering in this situation, as if she were the victim. God, she couldn’t stand him.

“Then why?!”

He tilted his head, surprised it wasn’t obvious.

“Growlie,” he said as though it explained everything. In a way, it did.

“Your starter?” she responded, realizing it had entirely slipped her mind.

James nodded, eyes blazing. The tremble of his frame betrayed the drive in his expression.

“A less courageous man would leave it and convince himself for years that a life of luxury is better,” he smiled, weakly. “Pity I’ve been reborn, eh?”

Jessie backed up from him a bit, nervously running a hand through acres of crimson hair. He was talking absolute nonsense. Of course this was important, and of course it was something he’d have to face eventually—no one expected, however, that it would sneak up on them like this. Still, the fates seemed to be pushing them toward it, and when had they ever lied, before?

“James,” Meowth said, voice tinged with apprehension. “Buddy, it’s naht dat I’m doubtin’ ya, but… do you really t’ink now’s da time? Dis ain’t like anyt’in’ we seen on dis joihney before.”

“That’s exactly it,” Jessie agreed. “This isn’t prancing around at contests or making ramen or sewing sparkly dresses! This is… how do we even begin with a place we’ll never be welcome?”

“This is our one step back,” James said, not meeting their eyes.

The two of them made a well-coordinated noise of curiosity and confusion, and James persisted.
“There is some evil in the world that Karma cannot kill on its own,” the man continued. “In those cases, do you think She might forgive us for what we do to take the reigns of our own fate?”

“James,” Jessie nearly whispered, saying his name for what must have been the hundredth time that minute. “What are you saying?”

“It’s more of a question, really,” he faced her, then Meowth and Wobbuffet.

“Do you still have some criminal left in you?”

There was so much passion in the single inquiry, as though the fear in his heart were nothing, as though he hadn’t lost himself at the mere thought of breathing the air around them moments ago. James looked as though some greater force had taken him over, valiant and bold, flames burning away the darkness seeping out the cracks of his shattered form.

Jessie found herself taken by him, more than she’d ever been. The resolve radiating off him seemed to take its hold on her as well, nothing around them but the sound of bug types chirping in the awakening thicket. It drowned somewhere in the uproarious song of her heartbeat rattling in her ears, and her words came wantonly, without much consent.

“God, I thought you’d never ask.”

James smiled, one of his many award-winning smiles—the genre for today was closed-mouth, lidded eyes, tilted head, warm and grateful. Muted lavender on blazing green, with stirring starlight around dimmed in comparison. Meowth added his own resolve, trying to smother the fear in his heart.

“Let’s make dis one our last!”

His human companions looked to him, then back to each other, nodding intently. A thought struck James, and Jessie watched it pass through him, the way his expression twisted up in amusement only for a quiet second before he regained the faux-cool demeanour he wore so well in times of stress. The wildfire in his eyes faltered only for a moment, and when he looked back to Jessie, it was back in full blaze, his voice a hearth to match.

“Double trouble time, right?”

She was expecting a stupid pun. Instead, the reignited thief elected to snatch away her heart.

“Sounds great to me, James.”

“Don’t forget Meowth again,” the cat quipped, ever-present and intent on remaining that way.

Wobbuffet stood on the fringes, blissfully unaware of what it was they seemed to be referencing, but supportive nonetheless. James had outstretched his hand—just as he had so long ago—and Jessie had grabbed it with heart aflutter, just as she had. Meowth followed with both his paws atop their embrace, and the patient pokémon added his own free arm. They were not four people, but four corners of a single, sturdy square. In that moment and always, they were one, singular heart.

Far into the night, when the stars were in full shine against the moonless sky, the group stood silent against the silhouette of their deflated balloon.

Cloaked in midnight black—with the always exception of Meowth—the trio found their eyes wide open despite the darkness hanging around them. Adrenaline raced through their veins, but they remained rooted to where they were, none of them able to push themselves forward and make the
first move. The process of detaching themselves alone had too many steps. Getting into the
doghouse, let alone on the property… just as everything else in Kanto, even with it all sprawling and
laid out before them, was overwhelming.

The night was far too still. Not even the sounds of pokémon could be heard where they were, and it
didn’t at all help the mood. The reality of the situation began to sit with James, and he felt his nerves
start to pry themselves open, raw and restless. He couldn’t afford to have second thoughts, yet here
he was, swimming in them.

Jessie heaved a sharp exhale, her ability to procrastinate spent with the ticking time bomb of a sunrise
looming somewhere in the cosmos. Swiftly, she dug into her bag and threw her remaining pokéball,
firm and unmoving as Arbok took form. She said nothing to it as it peered curiously at her fashion,
motioning to James to follow suit. Rigidly, he did.

Weezing joined the party, with Greninja following soon after. Neither of them greeted the waking
world with much noise, each of the pokémon seeming to read the room far before they materialized.
Chimecho’s eyes shone up at James, glittering with tears that threatened to spill over. He didn’t know
where to begin. Most of them knew what was coming, but none of them wanted to speak it.

James decided it was best to rip the bandaid off.

“We’re going on a very dangerous mission to rescue a dear friend,” he said, voice wavering. “And
none of you are to follow us.”

Arbok’s expression fell to shocked worry, and Weezing’s soon mirrored. Greninja’s eyes flashed
from solid lines to pupils, unable to hide even their surprise. Sobs wracked Chimecho, despite all its
efforts. The snake tore forward first, begging its trainer to denounce her partner, who was clearly out
of his mind with his silly fantasies.

The dark look in Jessie’s eye didn’t do much for the pokémon’s heart. She couldn’t meet its gaze as
she spoke.

“Listen, you... we...” she struggled to articulate herself. “You all have an important role to play
here.”

“If somet’in’ happens to us,” Meowth said. “Ya gotta find ya way to safety. Ya gotta carry on, or
there’ll have been no point ta us goin’ on dis quest!”

The poison types shared incredulous looks, gazes impossibly trying to settle in one place. It was
Weezing who spoke up next, looking for an out.

“Wee~zing, weez,” it bellowed, floating closer to James, four eyes tinged with fear and
apprehension.

_We’ve barely gotten to know the new you at all, _it had said. James swallowed tears.

“Char,” Arbok agreed. “Char~bok…”

_Not again, _the snake shut its eyes tight, rivulets glittering from them. _I don’t want to do this again._

The two of them felt as though they’d been stabbed, Jessie worst of all. Intentionally or not, her
pokémon knew exactly what to say to absolutely gut her with raw, blistering empathy pangs. Faces
flashed in her head involuntarily—the faces of people she’d run from. She tried to focus in on James,
on Wobbuffet, on Lickitung—on everyone she’d made amends with, on everyone she’d come back
for. The woman forced herself to tattoo their smiles across her heart.
“You too,” Jessie said, looking to the side and nudging Wobbuffet forward. He stumbled with Oddish in his arms, swiveling around to face his trainer. In contrast to all the other pokémon—absolutely ruined and in various states of tears—the pacifist defied his nature. He was annoyed.

Jessie noticed, and crossed her arms indignantly.

“*What?*” she said, and Wobbuffet’s words came under his breath.

“Wob~ba,” he near spat. *What am I?*

“What are you *talking about***?”

“Wobbu~ffet!”

*To you! Is this all I ever was? Just another pokémon?* He shot back.

Jessie softened, heart shuddering. She’d never heard him say so many metaphorical words at once, and the thought chilled her.

“Oh course not,” she said, voice nearly breaking. “Wobbuffet, you’re…”

Silence swept over the pair as Jessie tried to find the words—concise, simple adjectives connected to delicate similes—to explain to one of the most important people in her life that he was just that. Wind jostled the trees, transforming the quiet of the moment to something a little less eerie. Jessie kneeled, gently reaching out a hand to touch her partner’s face.

“…my guiding star.”

All traces of his anger vanished, expression growing closer to the dismay and confusion that was worn all around him. He was touched by the words, by the careful nature of them, by all they implied. Still, he persisted.

“Wob~bu~ffet?” he whispered, sounding resigned, voice breaking.

*Then why?*

“Come on, now,” she smiled despite the sadness shining in her crystal blues. “Don’t you trust me? There’s no way I’m letting myself die in a stuffy wasteland the likes of this!”

There was a hesitance in her words, but she spoke them as though the act of doing so would inch herself closer to believing their sentiment. It was typical of Jessie—a creature who believed there was infinite power in talking her wishes to reality. It was difficult to listen to them with spirits unchanged.

The crew of pokémon were comforted by the mask of confidence. James found himself with his eyes lingering on her a second too long, whisperings in his head wondering how someone managed to hurt so much and come out of it so vibrant. The shattered glass in Jessie’s eyes looked more like diamonds, now and always.

“We’re coming back,” she drove the point home. “Of course we’re coming back. But we’re not risking losing you lot while we claw tooth and nail.”

“We do have a duty to a friend to get you home safe, after all,” James said, looking to Greninja.

The frog was quiet even for its normal disposition. There was something buried in its shifting irises, halfway between muted disbelief and flaring passion.

“Best dat ya come outta dis unscathed,” Meowth affirmed. “We put ya t’rough enough blast-offs,
The words of their companions were sincere, and there was a part of the collective pokémon herd that did genuinely believe them. They’d seen so much hardship together, survived a ridiculous amount of battery and bruises, and come out of it stronger and much more beautiful. Still, the tears kept coming, residual doubts and worries refusing to leave. To this, the former Rockets saw nothing they could do but fall to their knees alongside them.

James went first, then Jessie, then Meowth. One by one, the group became a single mass, arms wrapped tightly around each other, heads dipped into the crevices of their pokémon. There in the darkness of the night, they fit together like perfectly manicured hands in shoulder-high leather, like three lumpily-shaped rice balls fastened into a patterned bento, like the satisfying click of a lockpick finding where it needed to be.

There was a catharsis to their tears mixing, to the sound of their hearts all beating as one. Surrounded in treasured friends who loved him for all he was, James found himself with the lingering thought that if the end did come that day, this life would have been enough.

Eventually, they had to pry themselves apart to chase the sunrise before it came. With Chimecho’s face still in James’ hands, he spoke in gentle tones, desperate to heal all he saw in his pokémon’s eyes.

“You are the most important piece here,” he told it. “Take care of Oddish, alright? I’ll be back before you know it.”

Chimecho sniffed back tears, trying its best to mirror his determination. Its expression wobbled and gave, but it nodded despite everything.

“Chimechime,” it told him. Don’t keep me waiting too long.

James smiled—genuinely this time—and stepped back from it with a lilt to his voice.

“Once,” he acknowledged. “But never again.”

Nervously, then, James swallowed and side-eyed Oddish, who was still looking worse for wear in Wobbuffet’s arms. The weed pokémon had come a little ways in its temperament, but it could clearly tell something was amiss in the group, even if it didn’t entirely understand the implications. Hiccups of tears were threatening to spill back into a full-blown upset. Slowly, James shoved his fear to some vacancy in the back of his heart, leaning down to meet its eyes.

“Don’t cry now,” he said. “We’ll be back before you know it.”

Greninja observed the man, cast on the fringes where it stood a relative outsider. James’ words held conviction, but he was shaking like a leaf as he reached out to caress the young pokémon’s face. He looked it in the eyes only for a moment before turning away, but kept the physical contact, comforting it without peering into it for too long. The silent ninja found its center, focused in on the vibrations that ran through the world around it—trees in the wind, bug types in the thicket, distant rivers swirling below cliffsides. James’ heartbeat was near-deafening despite the pokémon’s focus. Still, he stroked the child’s face, hushing its own pulse to a steady calm.

It was strange, to Greninja—the feeling of understanding more, and understanding so much less.

As if to reinvigorate the group before they set off, Chimecho rang its bell, and the frequency of it soaked into their hearts like it never had before. Despite how its mood must have been, James had a feeling that the wind chime pokémon had been saving that one for the right time. The thought would
have sat ominously with him if not for the gentle tolls swimming through his anxious mind.

It was Meowth who cast them the final quip before the pair began their trek through the tangle of trees—

“Hang tight,” he grinned, fanged and confident. “We’ll see ya at sunrise.”

The trio had been walking through what felt like acres upon acres of forest, following James’ trusting lead. To his credit, the man was a lot less outwardly nervous than his team anticipated he’d be—it seemed the worst had been over once he’d had time to process where he was and how best to remedy it, his fear smothered by the resolve to bring his friend home.

Extravagant structures were starting to draw near, and unless Meowth’s memory was fooling him, he distinctly remembered there being a gratuitous amount of high railing stretching out far beyond the mansion’s own scope. It wasn’t a problem back then—security hardly intimidated hardened criminals like the lot of them—but now, out of practice and with stealth of the utmost importance, it was seeming just a tad precarious.

“Hey Jimmy, ya maybe wanna letcha team know how da heck we’s gettin’ into friggen’ Alcatraz?”

He didn’t look back at the cat as he answered, but Meowth could hear the smile in his voice.

“The same way I always used to get out as a lad,” he said with a strange air of confidence.

Almost on cue, James seemed to find what it was he was leading them to. It didn’t look like much—a normal gathering of shrubbery a little bit off the path, next to a massive tree with a hollowed out hole in its center.

He stood there for a moment with eyes closed and senses tuned, as though he were waiting for something. Then, he dropped to the grassy floor and beckoned his team closer to his level. They peered into him curiously, but eventually lowered themselves beside him.

The two of them watched as James dug his hands into the mesh of grass and dirt below, dirtying midnight-coloured gloves with the paint of the yielding earth. It was far more comical than precise, and Jessie couldn’t help but arch an eyebrow and wonder what kind of plan he was cooking. Tunneling in was definitely their style, but he could have at least warned them to bring shovels.

Their doubts were immediately put to rest as James pulled back the ground itself in one swift, reliable motion. The earth he’d gotten hold of, they saw then, was planted firmly into a sort of barrier that prevented it from taking root entirely. It was as though he was pulling a blanket off a sleeping treasure, laying in plain sight. His team blinked a little, unsure of what they were seeing.

Below the quiet earth was a sturdy metal plate with a handle etched into it, and just as effortlessly, James lifted it to reveal a rusted ladder that led to an ominously dark abyss below.

“These tunnels run under all my family’s estates,” he only kind of boasted.

Jessie blinked a little, understanding, but not entirely. “Why?”

“If I had to hazard a guess,” James responded. “I’d say it’s due to my parents’ debilitating paranoia that the government was coming to take their wealth from them. It does offer a quick escape route, no?”

“Rich peoples is terrifyin’,” Meowth shuddered.
“Hear hear!” James agreed as he began to ease himself in, the worn handles of the ladder like an old friend as he clicked on his flashlight and began to descend.

Jessie and Meowth followed suit, and it wasn’t too far of a climb to the vast and roomy underground. It was pretty impressive, for what it was—a well-squared hallway of a passage that made any of their measly shovel operations look like nothing in comparison. James seemed to be tearing through it with relative ease, his sense not nearly as heightened as the others assumed they should be. For such a maximum security estate, he was awfully confident that he knew its tricks inside and out.

“James, should we be…” Jessie said, the rare voice of reason. “Making sure there isn’t some sort of surveillance down here?”

“No need,” he waved. “You won’t find a single camera. How do you think I managed to escape, after all?”

It made sense, but something about the statement unnerved her. That was too easy. Everything was going off without a single hitch, which was noticeably suspicious, given the circumstances. Karma had been generous before, but never like this. The thought itched at her brain no matter how she tried to silence it, tried to put her faith in James to know his childhood home better than a stranger like her ever could.

The tunnel forked off into path upon path, and the idea that this intricate of a secret passageway beneath the mansion existed was unsettling, to say the least. James’ nonchalant attitude toward it wasn’t helping—it was just so normal to him—his team observed, as he would briefly consider the lay of the land, then lead them mere seconds later through whichever path he deemed most effective. He was completely unphased.

The stakes were theoretically high, right? So why was this one of the most boring break-ins they’d ever orchestrated?

*And why do I so badly want to make problems when there are none?* Jessie realized. *This is a blessing!*

Finally, they reached one of the tunnels’ many ends, branching up via stairway rather than the shoddy ladder that resided the way they came. For the first time since they’d left for the mission, James reacted like his team expected him to—inhaling shakily before he slowly, quietly pried the doors sealing the exit apart.

The three of them emerged into starlit greenery somehow ever more lush than where they’d come from—walls upon walls of flowers and trees, pristinely pruned and watered to perfection, petals and leaves vibrant with delicate care. It almost took a moment for them to register that they were in a greenhouse, its walls so heavily dappled in vibrant emerald that the world outside nearly stopped existing.

“We’re at the far end of the west garden, now,” James informed, voice a whisper. “All we have to do is scout a path across the garden itself, and the doghouse is right there.”

“All of this is starting to seem far too convenient, James,” Jessie pointed out, again.

“Up to this point, yes,” he said. “But now that we’re in, every square foot of the place is riddled with cameras. The greenhouse is one big blindspot, but once those doors open, it’s a battlefield out there.”

“Finally, something interesting,” the redhead responded. “So what’s the best course, then? Scout a path? Take some of them out? Oooh, more tunneling? There’s got to be shovels in here somewhere,
right?"

She was almost hungry for the opportunity to sneak around like a proper criminal again. Like with everything, her passion alone made it far too endearing.

“Leave dis to me-owth,” the cat uttered, dropping on all fours. “I got natural camouflage! Just a cute little stray passin’ t’rough...”

“Think you still have your wits about you?” James grinned.

“Dey never left,” Meowth boasted. “Dey was jus’ nappin’.”

With that, he darted toward the door and quietly pushed it open, trying to get the hang of four paws at his behest when he was much more accustomed to two. With Meowth out the door scouting a path, the two humans were left alone at the mercy of time, nothing to do but wait. Jessie took the opportunity to drop to a sit on a nearby rock, and James followed wordlessly, needing the be close to her like he needed air to breathe.

A beat of silence followed, and not a single sound of the outside world punctuated it, the only gateway to it and them the measly crack that remained in the greenhouse door. It was an aggravating amount of dead air—probably so peaceful when the sun shone its rays down on the structure, now unsettling in the moonless night.

“Hey,” Jessie breached the stillness. “Are you sure about this?”

“I think it’s far too late to be asking me about second thoughts, dear,” he quipped.

“That’s precisely what I mean,” she turned to face him. “Where’s this confidence coming from? How are you not a mess over where we are right now?”

“Are…” James peered into her, heart detecting something unsteady in her voice. “Are you?”

Her cheeks burned red. She didn’t like that he’d read her so quickly, and that she was barred from shouting by the confines of a stealth mission. Her voice was a rasp as she tried anyways, through an undignified whisper.

“Of course I am!” Jessie covered her bases. “Terrible, horror-movie things happened to you here! If it were up to me I’d just set the damn place on fire and never look back!”

James was genuinely taken aback by how worked up she was over this, especially given how mere minutes ago she’d seemed elated to live through another good, old-fashioned break-in. Now, more than ever, he felt as though maybe he’d exaggerated his own story.

“I’ll admit sometimes I can be a bit childish about it,” the man said. “But when I’m well prepared enough, it’s alright. You have to remember, I came back here of my own accord before.”

That was news to Jessie. She was certain he’d left when he was a kid and never come back. What kind of idiotic thinking led him back here?

“You what?” she marveled. “What kind of idiotic thinking led you back here?”

“It was…” he bit his lip, realizing how bad a move the truth would have been just then. His brain danced through dialogue options in a video game, desperate to find the one that would get him at least a neutral ending.
“It was after I had exhausted what I thought was every option,” James finally said, skirting around precisely when in his personal timeline it was—almost directly after Jessie had run, after he was left alone with rusted training wheels and questions upon questions he knew would never get answers.

“God, I’d rather die,” Jessie spat.

“That’s eventually the conclusion I came to, yes,” he reassured her. “Thankfully some strange sort of angel with an R across his chest found me first.”

“You got out,” she said, as if to calm herself.

“I got out,” he echoed. “And that’s why I’m back in, and why I’m fighting every impulse I have to be strong. Growlie deserves to get out, too.”

“It’s really worth all this, to you?”

“If that was Wobbuffet in there,” he offered. “Would you do it?”

“James, if anyone ever hurt Wobbuffet I would kill everyone in the universe and then myself.”

“It appears we’ve reached an understanding.”

It made sense on paper. Still, she couldn’t help herself from hating that they even had to do this. Jessie was a fighter at her core, but she had recently come to the conclusion that she was tired, that they had done enough fighting.

The woman looked off to the side, perplexed by the colour that still lingered on her cheeks as she addressed him again.

“Brave looks good on you,” she muttered, oddly restrained.

James couldn’t justify it with mere words, but to be called brave by the most courageous force of nature he knew made him feel some beautiful, overflowing kind of way. His heart lurched in the manner it so often did before tears hit him, but they never came. Instead, he was left with the sensation of flowers giving way to more flowers in his ribcage, wrapping tightly around him and working swirling aromatherapy through his wavering soul.

He didn’t have time to try to dignify and okay response before Meowth came back in through the greenhouse doors, looking pleased with himself and ruthlessly confident. He rose back to two legs with a relieved sort of stretch, and only when he got close to the pair did he notice that both of them were blushing with semi-averted eyes. There was a multitude of quips lingering on the scratch cat’s tongue, and he so badly wished it were any other time, any other place, any other day, so that he could properly unleash them. Instead, he cleared his throat, pointing a clawed appendage at himself

“Meowth’s still got it,” he announced, arms crossed eagerly. “You twos ready for da best cat burglar in the world ta show you to victory?”

“Can you prove you’re not the only cat burglar in the world?” Jessie shot back as she stood up.

“Eh, probably not,” Meowth said with a resigned smile. “Gotta be somet’in’, dough.”

Pristine gold was cool even beneath James’ gloved fingertips, and he had to suppress the chill of anticipation that ran through him. The last time he’d seen the towering structure, he was practically bound and gagged against his will, and it stood a sort of heaven on the darkening horizon, pulling
him forward.

“We don’t have all night,” Jessie urged him. As much as she knew how overwhelming this likely was for him, her sympathy didn’t outweigh the survival instincts she knew far better.

“Right,” he said, forcing bravery to his voice.

“You head in,” Meowth said. “We’ll keep watch.”

For a mansion with higher security than most bank vaults, the dog house was one of the few doorways that wasn’t alarmed. It remained the same as it always had been, with a lock that was easy to pick, its blinding shine wearing to something far more beautiful in age. James took a deep breath, pulled the doors open, and walked into the haven’s enveloping darkness.

The door shut quietly behind him, its lock clicking back into place without a hitch. The man almost forgot to tap on his flashlight, feet moving on their own, without external guidance. There was no real need—he could have mapped the whole doghouse blindfolded. Were it not something he knew he’d be punished for, the boy would’ve slept there every night of his young life.

After a beat of being on autopilot, James finally managed to get some light on the room. He nervously ran it across the floor, unsure of if he was really ready for this moment, buzzing insides constructing exit strategies in his mind. The thoughts stopped when the light caught a flash of immaculate orange fur. Its unveiling began to shake as it moved across the extravagant dog bed, where Growlie had already stirred at the sound of another in the room, and was staring at James with ceaselessly sparkling eyes.

The pokémon let out a sort of bewildered whine, as if it was sure what it was seeing was some kind of contrivance. Quickly, the thought began to dissipate, and James fell to his knees on the velvet carpeting as his first and dearest friend rocketed forward into his arms.

Growlie was lapping at James’ face as though it were desperate to memorize every inch of him, just in case he vanished once more to the unforgiving night. The man stifled giggles into its fur, trying not to be taken with the dime a dozen kinder sensations of his childhood. He pulled himself together, taking the puppy pokémon in his arms and placing it back on the ground in front of him, expression firm. James took another deep inhale, voice at a whisper.

“I’ve missed you so much, Growlie,” he said. “But we have to keep our voices low and escape from here. Do you understand?”

James was expecting confusion—what he got was utter resolution. The pokémon did not question his motives, or why he wanted to take the both of them out of this comfortable life, this comfortable home. It looked instead as though it had been waiting for this day its entire life.

Growlie went to nod, but James watched its expression change before it could melt itself into the gesture. In a moment, its optimistic determination left. The pokémon’s lips curled back, its jaw clenched tight, an ominous growl rose within its throat. Fear lined its eyes, the kind of fear James was so used to seeing in his childhood, the kind of courage in the face of an enemy far bigger that Growlie so often displayed, the kind of emotion that was only present when something… someone… else was.

James’ blood ran cold as he registered that Growlie was looking not at him, but directly over his shoulder.

“Well, well, well. You certainly took your sweet time gettin’ here.”
The flash of a pokéball illuminated the darkness, and Growlie rammed into James full force, sending him far into the corner of the doghouse. Crushed carpet burned the side of his face, and he hit the ground hard as Growlie’s cry echoed out.

He fought to blink his eyes open through the pain, gripped with fear at what he knew was waiting there for him. He could smell the telltale decay—rotting flesh baking in the sunlight, same as it ever was—it was a scent so pungent and vile, one that had stamped itself on his soul, one he always felt in the back of his nose after a nightmare, after a flashback, forever lingering. Always present, forever inescapable.

Jessebelle loomed across the divide, her demonic silhouette illuminated like a cruel marionette in the light of his toppled flashlight, merely an outline. Vileplume beside her, spores still lingering on its massive petals. It shook them once, and the sound of the heavy flora flapping rang at a frequency that grated on James like nothing he’d ever heard before. Growlie had pushed him out of the way of its attack, and the smaller pokémon laid paralyzed and spasming on the furnished floors, whimpering in petrified agony.

“Did you hear dat?” Meowth jolted, gaze swiveling back toward the doors.

“Something’s wrong,” Jessie pounded against one. “James? James! What are you doing in there?!”

She propped a foot firmly on the ground and pulled with all she was, but the door stayed firmly affixed. He was the master lockpick, and he was trapped inside with no way out.

Jessie was certain she’d known, in all her years, what fear felt like. Now, she wasn’t so sure she had until that very moment.

Within its walls, James’ muscles ached with the impact of his body being thrown across the floor. His head was swimming with the scent of rot and the humidity of lingering spores and snapshots, snapshots, snapshots—each more painful and vivid than the last. He found his vigor in Growlie’s hopelessness, found his courage in the sound of its pained whines.

*How many times has it protected me?* James repeated, a dutiful mantra to blanket himself from the reality of the situation. *Who am I to not try?*

“Positively boorish of you to keep a lady waitin’,” Jessebelle said as the man messily rose to his feet.

James was a person who lived in his head more often than not. A sizeable chunk of time was spent crafting imaginary scenarios where he looked down the nose of every person who ever abused him—burning eye contact—as he told them exactly what they were, exactly what they deserved. In these fantasies, he was valiant and bold, always with the right quip on his tongue to leave the snarling predators speechless and enraged, yet somehow still powerless to retaliate against him. He’d memorized the words this better version of him had used, gone over their script more times than he could count, with the hopes that someday he would find use for them in reality.

Somehow, the second Jessebelle had emerged from the darkness, he’d forgotten every single one.

“You know, for a delinquent, you really ain’t much, are you?” she prodded. “Maybe if you came home a little more often, you’d have had more time to do a little recon on the security upgrades.”

*No way…* James nearly fell back over. *Did they switch the cameras around? The alarms?! How many more people know we’re here? Were Jessie and Meowth—*

“Or… maybe…” Jessebelle crooned, taking quiet steps closer to him. “...a vital mistake in your darlin’ little stealth operation… the fact that I just so happen to be spendin’ the weekend with my
dearest in-laws… why, James, isn’t that romantic? It’s kismet, you and I together at last.”

Growlie cried out in pain again, the high pitch of it transitioning into an impassioned snarl.

“It’s nothing,” James retorted, voice barely a whisper.

“What’s that?” the redhead narrowed her eyes, as though she heard him, but wanted the control of command. “You’ll have to speak up, sugar.”

“It’s not fate,” he said, louder this time. “It’s not kismet. It’s nothing, because we’re nothing, because you’re nothing to me.”

The woman tilted her head almost curiously as his words registered. With every second of silence that passed, more and more adrenaline shot through James, somehow smothering reality’s shackles and putting more words to his throat.

“What happened to us, James?”

The tenderness in her voice caught him wildly off-guard, and he found his muscles softening despite everything. His friends were pounding on the door, their voices muffled and frantic. He remained transfixed, and she paid them no mind.

“What are you talking about?”

“We used to have such promise,” Jessebelle declared. “Two young and beautiful nobles, deeply in love and with a clear path set for them. What turned you so wicked? So uncouth that you’d abandon your bride at the altar and disrespect her every turn you got?”

“Is this… is that a joke?” James couldn’t help from raising his voice. “You happened, Jessebelle! I only loved you as a stranger!”

“But you did love me,” she grinned wickedly, and it was so, so unfair—she stood far above him, reveling in the idea that she’d ever had any kind of shackles on him. His arms, his legs, his heart—it was all a prize to her.

“I love…” James’s heart was beating in his ears, the only sound for miles. “I love the passionate, and the loyal, and the brave. I love the generous, the kind of heart forged in fire and darkness cores made of absolute steel.”

Not breaking eyes with her, he sidestepped rigidly. Despite everything, his legs remained firm. His voice did not shake. He wasn’t sure, in all honesty, if it was adrenaline or genuine courage—but somehow, he was an unmoving stone as he put his body between her and Growlie, arms outstretched like a sturdy shield.

“My heart beats for the protectors in this world,” he continued. “I love whoever takes heartache and turns it to courage.”

He breathed in, and the scent of humid decay burned his throat, and he fought the urge to puke with everything he was, eyes watering. Regaining composure, he persisted.

“The woman I love is a hearth,” he said. “And you are a barren tundra.”

“After all I’ve done for you,” she feigned sadness. “That’s what you have to say?”

“You’ve done nothing for me!” he retorted. “You beat me and violated me and took my autonomy
away from me, and you have the nerve to blame me for running?!”

“I was only looking out for us, dearest…” she wept. “If I didn’t try to teach you some manners, we
never woulda lasted!”

“I was a child!”

“And you were out of control!”

James grit his teeth, words poison.

“All you taught me,” he spat. “Was what to never become.”

Genuine anger flashed in her eyes, the way it so often did before she smothered it to keep her elegant
composure. Jessie and Meowth were still thundering themselves at the door, and beneath their
syllabic shouts, Jessebelle reached the conclusion that she had found one of the only people immune
to her poison. Her words, her complexes, her framing—they worked so well on others, but none of
them dared to pierce James. She had let him see too much of herself, not been tender enough with
him to offset the cruelty. Even if he could never convince another person that what happened within
the walls of the mansions scattered across the world was real, he had somehow finally convinced
himself. This was a battle she had lost. He was standing with flames crackling at his throat, burning
her metaphorical spores away.

Pity. She’d have to make do with real ones.

The quiet of the room was deafening, far more uproarious than the sounds of James’ friends
desperately trying to get to him from outside, than the sound of Growlie whining in pain. For the first
time in her life, Jessebelle said nothing, her words holding no power here. James felt the courage
he’d been forged in and made of mere moments ago drain as reality set in—no exits, no way of
protecting himself, nothing. She was reaching for the facemask hanging at her hip, its seemingly
innocent filter more lethal than any pistol.

In a last ditch effort to die with dignity, James grit his teeth, shut his eyes, and charged her. If he
could kick her mask out of her hand, if he could manage to throw her to the ground, if there was any
way he could steal a moment’s worth of time—

More than anything, James only wanted to die fighting, instead of in the costume of the helpless
ragdoll he’d spent so much of his childhood wearing.

Despite everything, Jessebelle was too quick. She covered her mouth at breakneck speed—her
motions were rehearsed, well orchestrated, familiar—and Vileplume knew on its own that the act
was its starting signal. James’ lungs were decorated in spores long before he could get within a few
feet of her. In his head, he charged in bravely and was felled after fighting it with all he was. In
reality, with nothing to shield him from the attack, he collapsed to his knees in a fit of throat-searing
coughs, limbs losing their form entirely. When he went down, it was next to Growlie, and the two of
them made wordless, shining eye contact, both searching the other for some kind of glimmer of hope.

James could hear the funeral dirge of Jessebelle’s footsteps, and he tried not to become lost in it, tried
not to think of all that the simple sound held within. It was so often the call to action before he was
hoist over her shoulder, before her hands were on him, probing him, dragging him, claiming him as
their own. The memories were his greatest enemies, but they stuck loyal to him as though they were
friends—her face was always what lingered. There was such pleasure in the ravenous way her eyes
narrowed, how her wicked smile caught the light and shone toxic candy pink. He’d only ever seen
her that enthused when she was torturing him—in all other areas, she remained stoic, polite.
He could hear her, but in a twist of fate, on his side, he could not see her. It wasn’t the first time, of course—more often than not, she’d pin him down, shoulder-to-floor, forcing his eyes on hers. Making him look. If he was lucky, he could shut them. Most of the time, he was powerless.

He couldn’t move. He could never move.

Somehow, there was an optimism in him and Growlie’s shared gaze. Even if it would soon be broken by the wraith that haunted his life beginning to end, James found himself satisfied to at least have this. His defeatist nature was leaving him, but at the end of everything, he at least knew that he would go down fighting for a cause he believed in.

His friends’ faces flashed one by one through his mind’s eyes, and he didn’t notice through the lack of feeling on his face that he had been crying. A part of him hated it. He didn’t want Jessebelle to have the satisfaction, to know she’d broken him one last time. An errant thought passed through him, and he couldn’t help but linger on it as he heard her drawing near—

*What would Jessie do?*

James didn’t want to imagine her ever in a position like this, but his brain was out of his jurisdiction and the threat of death at the hands of his abuser had put all rational coping out the window. Hard as he tried to fight it, he pictured her where he was, far less complacent. Fighting through paralysis with grit teeth, nails chipping on the velvet rug as she resisted, rose to her feet.

Growlie let out a tortured howl in the quiet of the night. Jessie would have still had some fight left in her.

She did.

A resounding slam of mahogany against marble roared throughout the doghouse, and James stayed motionless as Jessebelle’s feet swiveled around in startled shock. She made a noise that sounded almost feral—hard against the back of her throat, sudden and quick. He fought through the numbness to angle his head back, muscles screaming as he tried. There, in the opened door, was his salvation.

Jessie and Meowth were mere silhouettes at its entrance, starlight framing their bodies as they panted ragged breaths and faced the scene head on. Neither of them seemed the slightest bit surprised at what they witnessed within—somewhere along the way, they had to have figured out what must have transpired.

With Jessebelle’s shadow off the flashlight, James watched as the shine caught Meowth’s eyes and set them aglow. Two full moons, safe and looming. There was a ferocity in him James had only seen a few times—claws unsheathed and tail positioned out for balance. He was facing down a human who he was ready to tear limb from limb.

Jessie, on the other hand, was not descended from and capable of evolving into a powerful apex predator.

She was far more terrifying.

In the black of the night, her form was near shapeless, an ever-moving, ever-shifting cloud of darkness looming at the gate’s edge. The starlight caught one thing—her brilliant crimson mane, looking more like fire than it ever had as its makeshift flames practically rolled off her back. Her shoulders were hunched, her fists were balled and shaking—James couldn’t see her face, but he was certain it was contorted in rage with teeth bared and shining. Just by the way she was carrying herself and even through his haze of paralysis and fear, James knew she was frothing at the mouth and out
for blood.

Jessie’s gaze dipped for a moment, registering the sight of her partner on the ground. If she wasn’t made of molten steel before, she definitely was now. Fear blossomed in James’ heart, and he cursed to himself that his state of being could have caused her any more stress than the insurmountable quantity she was already under. This was his battle, and he hated to burden any of his friends with it. She addressed Jessebelle head on, coherency having left her long ago.

“You just fucked up real bad.”

Her voice was the same contradiction she always was, simultaneously unhinged and collected. Jessie was not a calculating person. Normally, she tore forward with claws sharpened, living on impulse and leaving the consequence to fate. Now, it seemed as though she were taking a moment to analyze the situation in order to properly assess which artery to go for to end the woman in front of her in the most painful way. To say it was haunting was an understatement—James had never seen her like this before, so pushed to her limits of empathy that she had turned into a feral revenge machine.

Jessebelle looked incensed only for a moment before she remembered who she was. The anger and worry in her eyes quickly flared out, doused by amusement. She laughed—airily, like she always did, razor sharp manicure pointed at the sky.

“Oh my stars,” she said through giggles. “Look at what the actual meowth dragged in!”

“Not much for famous last woihds,” the pokémon retorted, tone cold.

“Don’t you worry a bit, kitten,” she said. “I assure you they won’t be.”

James desperately squinted at them to try and better register the scene, but the angle his head was thrown at was impossible, and from the ground he couldn’t see much of anything beyond sharp outlines against foggy apparitions of his friends. Desperate to get more vantage, he slowly propped himself up on his arms, elbows flat on the ground as he flipped onto his stomach—and raised his head?

All at once, it registered what he’d done. His eyes widened, and he took a vague note of his vitals. Static was swimming in his veins, the telltale sign of blood-flow fighting the poison coursing through him. He could feel a dull itch beneath his skin, far different from the nothing that was there only moments ago. He was returning to himself, if he could just buy himself a little time—

*She has no idea what she’s done, has she?* James had to stop himself from smiling at the thought. *Years upon years of taking her poison, and now I’m accustomed to shooing it off.*

Despite the feeling slowly—but surely—returning to him, he remained slack and without form on the velvet floors. The less inclined Jessebelle was to turn on him again, the better.

“Well,” the woman in question said. “Y’ain’t gonna bore me to tears like my James here did, are you? Don’t tell me this mangy little feline is gonna try dear Vileplume?”

Meowth’s claws lit up, putting the starlight filtering in through the windows and door to absolute shame. Jessie dug her hand into her bag, knowing that if she could take on battles upon battles to keep money flowing into her wallet, to win ribbons when put up against Top Coordinators, to carry on in a world where battling was what kept you aloft, she could easily take a brittle and sheltered porcelain doll of a woman. Jessebelle’s walking anaesthetic tank wasn’t a threat against any of her pokémon.

Her pokémon.
Her… pokémon.

_Fuck, _Jessie realized, hand shoved into her utility bag, running over clutter after clutter that felt a lot more like empty space, like pointless weight on her body. In all her confidence, in all her desire to end this here and now, she had somehow forgotten—how, she couldn’t say—that they’d left every single one of their pokémon back at their camp.

Meowth wasn’t a pushover, but he wasn’t strong either. If anything, he had speed on his side, but even then it was a longshot, and Jessie refused to die here. Not by this wench’s hand.

The woman kept her hand submerged in the mess, as though the metaphorical holster held a weapon within it. It wasn’t like Jessebelle knew it didn’t, and she didn’t seem like she was in much of a rush. Nothing about James’ fiancé seemed like she prioritized efficiency—rather, she relished in having fun with the creatures she took as victims. There was, perhaps, _some _time to think of a plan. Jessie ran options in her head, feigning competence in looking for a pokéball as she ran her hand through the bag at her waist.

Her fingertips brushed something warm, and her heart stopped.

Its surface was polished, smooth, radiating the same comfort as a hot drink on a chilly fall morning. For months, it had stayed there, just short of literally burning a hole in her bag. She had taken it for herself, and she had known exactly what it was she was going to use it on, some day soon. It was a prize for her good deeds, one of the most tangible and real of many.

Touching the stone, she felt more grounded than she had all night, in her cloud of rage. This idea was crazy. This idea made no sense. This idea could go so wrong, in so many different ways. A pained howl from across the room punctuated these thoughts, and she thought of how Karma and kismet had guided their footsteps and kept them steady and safe, even in the eye of storms they never anticipated they could weather. Somehow they had made it across every region they’d stepped foot in and were home in Kanto, all because they listened more than fought when destiny gave them a clue. There was a growlithe writhing on the floor. There was a fire stone in Jessie’s hand.

She dragged her eyes past Jessebelle, onto the pokémon, but instead caught James’ gaze on the way. He knew.

He was looking directly at her with resolve steady in his expression, and she was struck in that moment with the absolute knowledge that he knew exactly what she had discovered. He knew exactly where her fingers traced, exactly what sleeping power rested in the palm of her hand. James, despite everything, did not feel hopeless in that moment. Jessie could see the fight left in his eyes, and she tightened her grip on the stone.

Jessie adored James, and if she knew one truth of the universe, it was that she would fight for him with all she was, until her soul left her body and long after that, lifetime after lifetime. She would bet all the wealth in the world she didn’t have on the idea that even after they passed on, her watch over him would be stored in the cosmos, intent on keeping him safe until the end of time. It was how they became friends, and how they stayed long after. In all her self-love, nothing healed Jessie’s tattered heart more than being at his side with sword in hand, shimmering in the sunlight as she tore through anyone who dared to hurt her friends.

As much as she wanted this, as much as she had been waiting for it, as much as she knew it would bring her serenity… this was not her battle.

_You’re one hell of a broad, Karma, _she fought the urge to roll her eyes. If her sense of sarcasm was
still present, things definitely weren’t as bleak as they seemed. The usual confident flair in her voice dazzled itself back to life, and it felt more like home to James than any of the walls surrounding them.

“Don’t waste your claws on this harlot, Meowth,” she was smiling. “I’ll take care of her myself.”

Meowth was astute, but her confidence might have smothered the conniving nature beneath her tone, and he whispered through his teeth at her, eyes to the side but head facing forward.

“Hey, are ya crazy?” he shot. “Ya don’t have any pokémon!”

“Perhaps not,” she said, under her breath. “But I do have something far better.”

Though James had wordlessly caught on, Meowth stayed in the dark, wondering what on earth could have remedied such a hopeless situation if not a means to defend themselves. What was she gonna do? Chuck a couple hundred dollars worth of liquid lipstick at Jessebelle?

“Think fast!”

In one swift moment, Jessie dropped to a lower position on the floor, practically doing a split as she unsheathed the evolutionary stone from her bag and underhanded it across the floor to where James was. Jessebelle hardly had time to process what it was she had thrown, and though James’ reflexes were impossibly poor in the wake of things, somehow hers were worse. She awkwardly stepped as she tried to follow the orange blur across the floor, unable to register the scene. James managed to grab a hold of the object, and immediately his eyes were on Growlie.

“I’m sorry if this isn’t what you want,” he choked out, despite their lack of time. “But everything I am and everything I know is telling me it’s the only way to—”

Growlie didn’t let him finish.

The pokémon mustered what little strength it had left in the wake of its paralysis to ram its head into the stone, so numb to pain that it didn’t even notice how hard of an impact it had made. Jessebelle stepped back in shock at the sight, searing blue brilliance setting the interior of the doghouse blindingly aflame. Growlie had erupted into a phoenixnest of resplendent light, leaving no corner of the room untouched by its radiance. The lightshow danced on its walls, on their faces—its form a silhouette almost impossible to look directly at as its legs grew longer and sturdier, as its fur went from a cropped coat to a brilliant mane, as flames licked its feet and fangs sharpened in its mouth and a defeated whine turned to a triumphant howl. Were Jessebelle weaker at heart, she would have dropped to her knees to grovel before the creature, lordly above her with her at its mercy.

Supernovas exploded in James’ eyes. He was struck with the realization that this magnificent being of light and protection was who Growlie had always been on the inside, heart too full and bursting with love and fire to contain itself. It looked so different. It looked exactly the same.

The evolutionary fire had seared the poison in its veins away in a phantasmal blaze, and the pokémon was in a stance with its newly sharpened fangs glistening in leaking starlight, head bowed and backside reared and ready to tear into anything that stood in its way.

Even with it towering in her wake, Jessebelle still tried.

“V-Vileplume, make work of this awful thing!”

The pokémon seemed unsure of itself, but let out a deluge of Stun Spore regardless. Effortlessly, Growlie remained where it was and bellowed out a brilliant plume of fire, utterly vaporizing the attack without a second thought. Jessebelle faltered, pushed further and further back into her corner,
so unacquainted with hopelessness that she wasn’t sure the emotions coursing through her were tangible or a trick of the mind.

Before she could call out a second attack, Growlie leapt forward, its teeth first turning black and rigid, then morphing as fiery cracks snaked their way up them. The dark outer splintered off of them to reveal their magmatic form beneath, and it lunged at Vileplume and bit into it hard, mouth alight with broiling basalt that scorched dark spots onto the flower pokémon’s massive petals. It went down in an instant, never standing a chance.

Her last line of defense fell, and Jessebelle stayed affixed where she was, a wicked queen dethroned. She looked with tortured eyes into Growlie’s incandescent gaze, searching its blazing wildfires for any glimmer of greenery or hope. She saw nothing but a charred wasteland, beckoning her to its abysmal depths.

Growlie turned in a swift movement, burying its teeth into James’ collar and throwing the man onto its back with far more ease than it ever did as a puppy. He regained himself, bitten-down fingernails clinging to its fur so hard they began to sting. The pokémon turned over its shoulder, casting James a cursory look. Brief, but laden with emotion—he could tell it was asking him something, and though he didn’t entirely comprehend what the question was word for word, his heart seemed to whisper an affirmation that Growlie understood. Ever connected, the two of them melded into one in the fires, and the arcanine at his reigns unleashed a powerful eruption of flames at the walls around them.

The velvet carpets caught fire, the mahogany furniture turned black, destructive clouds of orange crackled and spat around them and the doghouse began to die. From atop Growlie, James lost himself in the heatwaves, only stopping to keep his head low and escape the smoke.

On the other side of the divide, Jessie and Meowth were looking at the pair with expressions caught halfway between “what the hell are you doing?!” and “you’re the coolest person I’ve ever met.” Neither of them had time to settle on one before the pokémon at their friend’s behest practically teleported to their side and threw them on its back as well, valiantly dashing out of the blackening and burning doghouse as beams began to topple from its foundation, as Jessebelle wailed within its walls.

James couldn’t stop himself from peering at it over his shoulder, watching as it devolved from lavish to incinerated. Its structure crumbling was a bittersweet song—the destruction of a home and a prison all at once.

“James,” Jessie snapped him back as they tore down the massive driveway on the pokémon’s back. “James, I’m astounded, but this was definitely supposed to be a stealth mission.”

“Extenuating circumstances!” he argued.

“You think I don’t agree with you?!” she retorted.

“I t’ink what Jessie means is,” Meowth said. “We should get outta here. And fast .”

“I’m working on it,” James responded. “We’re on the back of one of the fastest pokémon alive!”

Growlie let out a half-confident, half-flattered howl.

“Still, the driveway?” Jessie said. “Should we cut into the woods, maybe?”

“I suppose we could…” the man considered, lost in potential alternatives. “There’s an easy path a little ways up ahead, one a few feet back if we make a turn, or…”
James wasn’t looking forward, but back at his friends as he spoke, and he noticed mid-thought that their faces had gone nearly white as they stared straight forward, past him. He quieted himself, and Growlie screeched to a halt, and though the man had a feeling what he was going to see if he looked over his shoulder, he wanted to run from it with all that he was. Rigidly, he craned his body back around, feeling his handle on his consciousness fade a bit as he peered into his parents’ silhouettes at the near-end of the driveway.

Fear gripped the man as he registered the sight. He had played scenario after scenario in his head over the years of him telling Jessebelle what for, practicing what hit the most, rehearsing for the day he would finally be able to gather himself and stand up to her. His parents were a different story.

He’d loved Jessebelle only for a fleeting moment before learning who she was, and spent the rest of his life terrified and traumatized at the mere thought of her. His parents, though—he was born loving them, their cruelty easier to forgive, their reign easier to bend under with little fight.

Slowly, not taking his eyes off them, he slid off of his pokémon’s back. Growlie cast him a side-glance as he stepped closer to them, nervous and ready to jump to action should they try anything.

“You’d better have a damn good explanation for this, son,” his father uttered in a voice that made him feel microscopic. James sucked in a shaky breath, going for the truth.

“I don’t—I don’t think…” he looked to his feet, then to them. “I don’t think I have anything more to say to you.”

“Trespassing, breaking and entering, destruction of property…” the man listed off the offenses, voice at a crescendo. “Is this the kind of work you’ve gotten up to since you’ve abandoned your poor, dying parents?”

Guilt stabbed at his insides, and he tried to remain firm. His mother’s voice was far softer, every word like a dagger coated in ice.

“We really tried with you, James dear,” she said, regretfully. “You’re so much more than this.”

I know, he wanted to scream. This isn’t me. I’m not a criminal. I’m not a bad person.

On Growlie’s back, his friends were silent. There was nothing they could say. There was little James himself could say.

“What I am,” he said, and something seemed to flash in her eyes. “...and what you want… are always going to be far apart, Mother.”

“Now why do you think that?” she stepped forward, hand thrown across her heart. “Time passes, people change.”

She was playing him like a fiddle, and it was growing hard to combat. He tried to think of retorts, of reason, of anything to escape back to freedom—but they had always had their claws in him far more than anyone else, rearing a child to rely on them only so he wouldn’t run far away in the wake of their cruelty. Somehow, he managed. He could manage this, too.

“If you really believe that to be the case,” he said. “Then allow me my own life, and I’ll repay my debts once I’m happy.”

“A son’s obligation is to his parents,” his father stepped in. “When are you going to grow up stop being so selfish?!”
James hadn’t noticed that his fists were balled, that his jaw was clamped tight, that he was likely fostering a headache in the furrow of his brow. He’d spent every day of his life since leaving home trying to give back to the world to make up for taking so much. Now, more than ever, he was more selfless than he’d ever been, and to sit there and be told the opposite by someone who both conceived and hardly knew him… it was a feeling of hopeless frustration incomparable to anything he’d known.

They’d had the nerve to raise a monster and then complain about what they themselves had created.

“After all we’ve done for you!” the older man continued. “You only return home to steal even more from us, to place another stain on our name!”

“I stole nothing,” James said, even-toned despite everything. “But if you disagree, father, then let Growlie decide who its master really is.”

James’ father grit his teeth and steeled himself, knowing he had been outsmarted, knowing that there truly was no way of piercing his child’s demeanour. Though James carried signs of weakness within him—holes in the exterior of his strength, easy to peer into—his shaking voice remained, his eyes didn’t gloss over. Something had happened to change him, something had brought the doused fire back to his soul. He’d seen it only for a moment the last time the man was home—a flare in James’ eye, the way he struggled and snapped back and fought for his life. Smoke billowed upward, far in the distance, behind the former Rocket. His green eyes were searing, acid-drenched and resolute.

His father had tried to raise a mareep. Instead, he’d raised a moltres.

The older man stormed forward toward his son, at his wit’s end with open palm raised, one last-ditch effort to beat some sense into him, to make him remember submission, remember who he was.

James flinched immediately, his fire flickering out before the action had even reached its apex. Jessie was half off Growlie, but ended up in an awkward stumble as the pokémon jerked itself forward, two unstoppable forces of protection who’d yet to know each other’s moves. The bold attacker neared James, who stood rooted to the spot bracing himself for it.

The hit never came. With his eyes closed, with his heart racing in fear, James didn’t see the ethereal blue light shining from the canopy of trees, didn’t hear the raspy call that followed it, didn’t know, until everything was over, what had happened. His friends watched as a flawlessly shaped star of water shot from the treetops, its precision and force sending the older man reeling back in pain, arm completely slack at his side, unusable. James exhaled sharply, looking around wildly before he locked in on the sight of Greninja, scarf-like tongue blowing elegantly in the wind, stance crisp and beautiful against the moonless sky.

“Greninja?” Meowth choked out, marveling at the pokémon.

“Nin,” it bowed swiftly in his direction, as if to confirm.

“Ya came all da way out here… ta help us…?”

The last thing James had felt before shutting his eyes to be beaten was guilt unlike anything else. Logically, a part of him knew that his parents were cruel and unfair to him. It’s what everyone had told him outside these walls, even though he had trouble believing it through their expensive gifts and doting words. It was easy to forget bruises on your arms when the people who gave them to you came home with sacks upon sacks of presents just for you, just because they felt it that day.

And he had abandoned them. The first in a long list of many he would. All they wanted was for their
name to prosper. It was no wonder they called him selfish—he was, he absolutely was. What else was there to say?

Greninja leapt with incredible grace from the trees, ethereal blade sparkling to life in its webbed fingers as it executed rigorous flips through the air. James stared transfixed at the pokémon’s weapon, the shining light of justice in the palm of the dark and stoic knight. This lawful, binary-minded beacon of integrity stood with sword pointing not toward him, but toward his opponent. Greninja, hero of the honest, feller of the unjust, stood hand-in-hand with him.

A bright-eyed boy had seen enough brilliance in this pokémon to take it into his family, and a fire-hearted girl had promised to bring it home. Despite everything, she had chosen them. She had believed, even if few else had. Even if maybe they hadn’t themselves.

Greninja believed too, now, James could see it in the way the pokémon looked over its shoulder to make sure he was unscathed. Greninja wasn’t just a saviour in a dark time because it had fought off the most obvious threat—it was living, breathing, tangible proof of how far they had come, and how far they still had to go.

Kalos seemed so long ago. They were still going strong, despite everything.

On his own, James and his friends had put countless amounts of good into the world, all on their own. He was staring his parents down, and he wondered what good they had done in comparison. All at once, it struck him that they only had power over him as long as he let them.

He was standing on grounds where, twenty years ago, shackles rattled around his feet. He slept with them, he ate with them, he bathed with them, he lived with them clanking around, chafing and bruising and rubbing his ankles raw. The scars remained, always—but the chains were nowhere to be found, rusted and abandoned somewhere far away.

“You’re a fool to not reconsider this,” his father barked out. “A fool to abandon such an esteemed bloodline!”

James held himself steady, infusing all he was and all he believed into his words.

“Esteemed or not, it ends with you,” he said, borrowing courage from his future self. “And I vow to grow roses from its dead soil.”

The older man charged him again, but Greninja steeled itself, easily moving its body in between the two of them. With the frog holding down the fort, James was able to leap back up on to Growlie’s back with ease, taking Jessie with him, wordless. The adrenaline rush was back, and all of them were feeling it as Greninja dove away from the humans and ran back into the forest, beckoning without beckoning the former Rockets to follow it to safety. With nothing more to say, James encouraged Growlie forward, and they disappeared into the trees while the flames of the burning doghouse continued to crackle, lighting up the moonless sky.

When the lot of them reached the fences that guarded the property, Greninja and Growlie both cleared them with a magnificent jump, and just like that, they were free.

It wasn’t until a few minutes into the run that it began to hit them all at once what had just transpired. James felt fire running through his veins—was that real? Was any of this real? There was wind whipping at his hair, and fur beneath his fingertips, and good friends at his side, and he was free, he was free, he was free. Somewhere along the way, as chemicals rushed from his brain to his heart and back again, he had started laughing hysterically, with reckless abandon, the uproarious tune of it echoing out into the quiet night.
Just as they had mere days before—only now, with Meowth beside them as well—the trio all dissolved into comfortable, bittersweet hysterics, at the mercy of the moment and the sudden rush from everything they’d seen and done that night. Crying and laughing and crying again, caught halfway between smiles and tears, unable to commit to just one. Trees blurred to nothing in the wake of Growlie’s speed, and they became lost in the swirling cauldron of watercolour earthtones as gales rang freedom bells around them. On the pokémon’s back, they clung to each other for dear life, unbelieving, unsteady, unbridled.

“Guys!” Meowth cheered. “Jimmy’s alive! We’s alive! Everyt’in’s okay!”

“Everything’s okay,” Jessie said, wrought with grateful tears. “Everything’s okay.”

Her voice shook in a way James had rarely heard, sapphire blues shining in a kind of stunned joy. He combed his memory, instinctively searching for when he had heard it last, what its cadence meant—it hit him after a beat, heavy and beautiful.

The two of them in a balloon that felt like a second home, jade basket worn with years of love and adventure. Twilit skies and endless orange sea around them, and the glow of her razor-high cheeks as she raised her head to meet his eyes from the dirt road below. That was the last time he’d heard her voice lilt in such a way—years ago in this exact city, as she breathed his name like a wish to the newborn stars above.

The sun was rising, this time, and the backlit blue that was beginning to soak the world painted Jessie with its promise of another day. Meowth was at her backside, tears still streaming down his face. She wasn’t looking at James like she needed answers—she was looking at him as though he was the answer.

Wordlessly, James pulled her tight into his arms, their profiles side-by-side, sharing warmth in the chilly morning air. When he pulled away from her, a single palm remained on her shoulder, and he shakily brought the other to her face, resting it there gingerly. Jessie leaned into the touch, an almost girlish head tilt to punctuate her curiosity. There was something in his eyes she couldn’t identify—a sort of serenity never present there before.

The man’s heart drowned out the sound of the wind in his ears, the pidgey awakening in the treetops, the way leaves fluttered down when Greninja would land hard on a branch, jump to another. Everything was silent with his eyes on hers, with his limbs still shaking from the rush of the night. His hands seemed to move on their own, discordant from his rational thought, uncaring to the consequence of what he was about to do. The future no longer scared him, for he knew that no force of nature could ever tear them from each others’ grasp.

James leaned forward—irises at rest, head dipping—and pressed his lips to hers.

He felt her suck in a nervous breath the second the gap closed, held back and just short of a surprised squeak. Jessie’s awe only lasted for a moment before she felt her whole body give and she melted herself easily into it. It had been so long since the two of them embraced like this, and it felt like coming home, but to a place she never knew home lay hidden.

This is a dream, she whispered to herself, the world feeling more and more like an ethereal blur of nothing around her.

This is a dream, James’ rational thought pushed to the forefront, and he swatted it away as though it were a simple pest.

Nothing made sense, anymore. It was a chaos they’d really, really missed.
The two of them broke free of each other, and when James saw that Jessie was practically the same color as her hair, reality set in and he quickly flushed just as red. The anxiety he was far more accustomed to returned, and his empath powers threw themselves into overdrive as they tried to pick up on any emotion Jessie might have been feeling to anticipate how to react to her. She just kept her quiet, awestruck gaze, staring into him wordlessly.

“Holy shit,” Meowth said, and James had literally forgotten him, oh my god. He was starting to sense a pattern about the various escapes from the grounds, over the years.

The cat was not miffed. He had paws bunched up at his face, looking absolutely ecstatic. Then his expression fell for a moment as he turned backward. Then he turned back to James, euphoric eyes back to shining.

Okay, so that was… James pondered, empathy powers actually able to read Meowth. ‘Holy shit I’m so happy for you two,’ followed by ‘Wobbuffet did you see—oh wait, you’re not here,’ followed by ‘Holy shit, I’m so happy for you two!’

That worked.

James’ eyes went back to Jessie, nervously debating whether or not he should say something.

“I—I’m—”

Her expression shifted to an almost restrained smile, eyes forced shut from the absolute mirth of it all. As if nothing had changed in the last few moments, she let herself become taken with laughter again, burying her tousled mane into James’ chest, laughing her heart out in absolute astonishment. Meowth followed soon after, knowing there were no words any of them really had. There was only the crooning winds, and the day breaking through the trees, and the everlasting promise of each other.

Maybe this meant something, and maybe it didn’t. Right now, all that mattered to any of them was that the three of them were together.

At some point, Greninja had dropped to the floor, slowing his sharpened run to a gradual halt as the clearing where they’d left their camp came into view. Their pokémon stirred at its presence, looking fearful when the frog returned alone, eyes wavering as they thought the worst. It only lasted for a moment, however, before the trio valiantly emerged from the bushes, Growlie’s dutiful face setting their hearts at ease.

They couldn’t see their trainers from behind the massive pokémon’s equally massive mane, and it wasn’t until Growlie leaned down to a sit that James came into view, dismounting himself and landing on the ground with a sturdy thud. Immediately, Chimecho lit up in such a way that put the breaking sun around them to shame, en route to James as though it had been shot out of a cannon. It tackled him to the ground with the force it hit him at, sobbing its name in quiet chimes as it wiggled its stubby arms up at him, tail curled around his neck. He held onto it with all he was, only breaking the embrace to pull Weezing into the hug when it too floated over, misty-eyed and incoherent with relief.

Chimecho composed itself for a moment, then looked curiously up at Growlie. The pokémon let out a happy whine, and suddenly the wind chime pokémon registered who this mysterious new stranger was. Its eyes widened excitedly, and it buried itself in Growlie’s mane, just as ecstatic to see the arcanine as it was to see its master safe and sound.

“Growlie, Growlie, Growlie!” it wept lovingly. “Growlie, I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again!”
“Of course you would,” the dog nuzzled it. “We have to protect him, don’t we?”

Jessie and Meowth had followed their cohort’s descent almost immediately, and when Wobbuffet and Arbok caught sight of their trainer, the pair were equally inclined to dissolve into relief-stricken bawling. Wobbuffet bolted first, but Arbok was far faster, its coil around Jessie absolutely unforgiving—half in joy, half as a sort of affectionately-delivered punishment for making the snake worry so excruciatingly. Wobbuffet stumbled and fell as he neared her, not helping the love-induced agony at all as he involuntarily rammed his head firmly into her already breathless chest.

“I—’m—so—rr—y!!” Jessie barely choked out as the life was squeezed out of her. She tried to flash back to Alolan seas and shady dens and a button-eyed demon covered in rose and ebony fluff who’s only mission in life was to murder her via affection. It worked, and Arbok’s hug hurt a little less.

Finally, it loosed her, and she slid to the grassy floor with jellied limbs, practically drinking in the oxygen around her. When the woman had managed to regain herself, she looked down to see Wobbuffet, still with his head dipped into her chest, still with his arms wrapped around her as he quietly cried.

Feigning more serenity than she had—despite everything—Jessie pulled him into her arms, resting her chin on the patient pokémon’s head. He shook a little with more muted sobs as she held him, heart bubbling over in a way that was far more restrained than she was used to from her friend, far more akin to the way he was when they’d first met. She pulled herself away from him, a little, moving one of her hands closer to his face. Wobbuffet looked up at her, squinted eyes sparkling with the remnants of their reunion.

“Hey,” she beckoned him. “See? I’m a woman of my word. I came back.”

He looked almost devastated as she finished saying it, as though he was furious with himself for ever doubting her resilience. The expression took his face for only a moment before he dissolved back into tears—louder this time, more like himself. Jessie decided she liked that a lot more.

“Where, there;” she whispered. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Oddish had been napping in a nest of sleeping bags within the balloon’s basket, and the lot of them had nearly forgotten all about the kid until it started making quiet wails, desperately jumping up in an attempt to clear the basket’s confines. Meowth was the first to notice this, scrambling over to it and pulling Oddish out so that it could see that James had returned safe and sound. The cat wondered, for a moment, if it was okay to present James with the pokémon in question after what he’d just been through—but when he looked across the divide he saw the man with eyes that clearly knew his inquiry, and encouraged it.

Meowth trotted over to them, his voice gentle as he held the weed pokémon toward James.

“Lookit dat, kiddo,” the cat uttered cheerfully. “Back safe ‘n’ sound!”

Oddish chirped its name happily, and wiggled itself out of Meowth’s paws and quickly toward James. He flinched almost immediately, but didn’t push the young pokémon away—instead, the man sucked in a shaky breath, gingerly ruffling its leaves.

Chimecho turned to him, inquiring without words whether or not he needed any help in calming himself. He placed his free hand up in a motion that signaled it not to, turning to look to his pokémon seconds after.

“I’ve got to work on this,” he nervously stated. “Little by little.”
The wind chime pokémon understood, heart swelling with pride as it nodded lovingly toward him, smile bright.

Oddish eased into James’ arms, and with his eyes closed, it was a lot easier for him to let it happen. The pokémon was serene at his fingertips, never moving too quickly or forcing their eyes on each other. It was survivable. Someday, it would be lovingly welcomed. If James could survive tonight, he knew he could survive this.

The sun grew warmer with each passing moment, and despite its rays, the group still found themselves drawing and closer together until they were one once more. Words petered out, heartbeats began to ease. Tears stopped, and exhaustion set in. The world was so warm, so alive, so present. They were tempted to fall asleep right then and there, where it was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended, linked together like a sturdy daisy chain.

James was the first to rise to his feet, mentally scolding himself for the rudeness he’d only just realized he’d been guilty of. In his wake, the others began to stir a bit—it seemed that some of them had genuinely been nodding off. He couldn’t blame them, and the thought was amusing, for sure. A motley crew of ex-criminals, all cuddled up with each other and ready to pass out as though not just one—but all of them—were tired meowth who had just located the perfect sunbeam for a nap.

He yanked off a glove and ran a hand through Growlie’s endless sea of fur, becoming lost in the feeling of it, the texture and how every inch of it filled the creases of his palm, completing him. Like the sound of bottle caps against each other, like the waxy leaves of a well-groomed grass type, like the moments where no one was watching and James could flap his hands rapturously around his face, envisioning glittering yellow dancing off them, the personification of the joy that spilled over his heart almost agonizingly. This, too, was one of the few joys he found at home, and now it was beneath his fingertips whenever he so desired.

Growlie let out another affectionate whine, turning to James and licking a slobbery line straight up the man’s face without a second thought. It started with a happy bark that turned into a triumphant howl, and James’ heart soared despite the sad state the pokémon had left his hair in.

Jessie yawned from nearer to the floor, hilariously nonchalant in her execution.

“We probably can’t sleep like this,” she deadpanned. “Also, the cops might be looking to arrest us for arson and possibly murder.”

“Probably,” James said. “I don’t know if they’ll try it, though. Mother and father might be a little estranged from Jenny Dearest after the last time they tried to call in a tip to bring me home.”

“God, I hate your parents,” the redhead yawned again, burying her face in Arbok’s hood.

He laughed nervously, and Meowth laughed nervously, and if Jessie hadn’t been half-dead, she might have as well. The reality of the situation was beginning to set in, and James tried to work out scenarios in his mind. Being a criminal on the run was something he was well accustomed to, he didn’t fear it, nor did he believe for a second that it could ever tear the family apart. It never did in the past, after all.

Spiritually, though, he had no sense of where he stood with Karma. This might have been one misstep over the line. But if every bad thing he ever did had its root in the powerlessness he felt as a child… it only made sense to stand up to patient zero, right?

He hoped. He wished.
“Well, before we conk out, I t’ink we owe everyone a little expositions,” Meowth reluctantly put forward.

“Oh, that’s right!” James perked back up. He’d gotten so lost in his moral crisis that he’d completely forgotten what he’d stood up to do.

Kanto’s skies had been tinged with grey when they broke ground, and had stayed that way as they foggily floated through the region, the overcast in the sky seeming to linger alongside the obscurity in their hearts. Now, sunbeams completely enveloped the sparse clouds that drifted by, a starting signal out of the shadows that had kept them freezing and secluded before. The gaggle of pokémon were peering into him, toeing the line between patience and pained curiosity.

The cycle of people in one's time on Earth could be a funny thing. James had known his parents all his life, only for him to reach a parting with them on his own terms. James had known Growlie all his life, too—and now, getting to oversee the meeting of his oldest and newest friends brought almost no greater joy to his already lifted heart.

“Everyone,” he said, giving his noble steed another doting headpat. A soft breeze shook the trees, welcome in the relative stillness of the clear blue skies. Pallet was on the horizon, and the worst of everything seemed as though it were finally over.

“This is Growlie.”

Chapter End Notes

GOD I WAITED SO LONG TO WRITE THIS CHAPTER. GODDDDDD. I'M SO GLAD ITS OUT. IM SO HAPPY.

holy shit it's been almost a year since i started writing this story. i think may 6th 2017 is DTE's birthday, which means DTE is a... taurus?? i think??

i gained another author along the way, and a ton of really amazing friends & readers! i really can't believe all this story has given me. i'm honestly so happy...

every time i got to write my authors notes, i forget everything i wanted to say. but i hope this chapter lived up to some of the hype. it's very near and dear to my heart, even if it is a hot mess.

i'll do the art for this one later--honestly, you guys have waited long enough, and to be honest I'm having trouble picking which scene i want to draw ^^-;

thanks for reading! i'll do my best!
There was a saving grace in that the sidewalks remained empty.

Tearing through the rain, the former Rockets didn’t have the minds nor the eyes to look where they were going. The world was being slowly washed away in the downpour, and everyone wiser than them (a large percentage, all things considered) had since cleared the way and sought shelter. The quartet remained in the thick of the sudden torrent, lone survivors in its onslaught.

“Did none of us think to purchase an umbrella?!” James shouted to the others, hat pulled tightly over his head, drenched.

“Bold of ya ta assume foresight’s our strong suit!” Meowth retorted, clutching a whimpering Oddish in his arms.

James sighed through chattering teeth, never having the heart to argue. He was certain Jessie was going to keep the complaint chain going, but Wobbuffet caught her attention before she could and pointed a straight line to the structure that was looming ahead. They were close enough to the building and blinded enough by rain that it was hard to tell exactly what it was, but what they did register was the massive awning hanging all around it, beckoning them to safety.

Trying not to slip over their own shoes in the polished and shining sidewalks, the group tore forward at twice the speed, desperate for some semblance of shelter. They could worry about finding more permanent residence later—when the street signs didn’t all blur together like paint, when there wasn’t rain and wind and the beginnings of thunder hanging around them threateningly.

Jessie hit the wall of the building with an open palm and heaved out a ragged breath of relief, taking a moment to compose herself as she leaned. The others followed, none of them speaking for a moment while they waited for their oxygen to return. Silence swam in the air around them while the deafening rainfall that had been pelting them seemed to turn to a steady hum from within the shelter of the awning. Ringing rain out of her hair, Jessie begged a question to the crying skies.

“Where are we?”
James sighed again, his back turned to her. “I don’t know. Somewhere in Cerulean.”

Meowth and Wobbuffet both couldn’t help but stay trained on the distance between the two of them, on how they refused to look in each other’s direction. As if to punctuate it, a shiver wracked both of the humans almost entirely in sync, and they remained where they were, trying to fight it off. In another storm, the two might have clung to each other for a warmth despite the dampness, but some days were just terrible for rain.

“Right, right,” Jessie rolled her eyes as she recomposed herself. “All this trouble so we can get our designated half hour to beg the forgiveness of that twerpy little redhead—”

“So you can beg for my what?”

The former Rockets snapped their heads around at a speed far past unnatural, where two acidic turquoise eyes met them. Misty was standing there—bone dry, as if to taunt them—with a hand on her hip and an eyebrow raised. They marveled up at her, looking pathetic as ever, begging for a brighter introduction than what this one was shaping up to be. She tapped a foot absentmindedly, waiting for their response.

“Where—how didya—ya just—” Meowth sputtered.

“Why are you here?” Jessie finished for him.

“I live here!” Misty said. “Are you dolts that out of it? You’ve tried to rob this building at least twice!”

Looking at the massive structure now, the decorative azure cobblestone that made up the walk surrounding was beginning to make sense. Shades of pink and yellow jagged upward into white brick, into aquarium glass. How did they not notice they were approaching the gym?

“In our defense,” James said. “That was quite some time ago.”

“Save it,” Misty ordered, crossing her arms. “What gives?”

“Like Jess said, kid,” Meowth said. “We was plannin’ on stoppin’ by. Just didn’t t’ink we’d get here so quickly.”

“...or that you would jump us like that,” Jessie added.

The girl grinned almost smugly, pointing a thumb behind past her back to the telltale bubble of a security camera.

“You guys have really lost your edge, huh?” Misty said.

“Something like that,” James ran a hand through his hair.

The malicious hint of grandeur that so normally lingered in the villains’ voices was noticeably gone. Misty’s stance loosened a little, and she inquired, softer.

“Whatever. To what do I owe this visit?”

“It’s kinda a long story,” Meowth piped back up. “But mostly we’s here ‘cause it’s da only cover from the rain for miles.”

Thunder boomed, and the lot of them jolted. With the static in the air came an additional tenseness, the space between Jessie and James where they should have clung to each other uneasing those close
to them. Standing there, they looked entirely different from the people Misty had known long ago. Their eyes seemed brighter, but there was a level of comfort that had disappeared, and it pulled at her heart more than she would’ve liked to admit.

“Wait…” she realized out loud, all at once. “Team Rocket… I nearly forgot that it was gone.”

A softness seemed to enter the quartet’s eyes. They found themselves forgetting sometimes, too.

“How’d you guys…?” Misty started, then diverted. “What have you been… you didn’t…?”

Another loud crash of electricity swimming in the clouds above shook the world around them, pulling the young girl out of her curious runthrough of all the questions that lingered in her head. She watched the drizzle pick up around her and the enemies she’d kept for years upon years, water shifting in puddles at their feet.

_Betrayed in my own element_, Misty reflected with a sigh.

“Why don’t you guys explain yourself inside the gym,” she said, resigned.

“…just like that?” Jessie peered into her.

“Do you want to get out of this storm or _not_?”

“We’d be delighted to,” James said. “Not quite the entrance we’d planned on making, but…”

“There’s still time to do your stupid motto, just get inside,” Misty shot back.

An urge lingered on Jessie’s lips like an old friend, and she swallowed it back as she began her stalwart walk toward the gym’s entrance.

“Don’t tempt me.”

As they made their way forward, at some point, Chimecho had emerged from its pokéball. James lagged behind, and the sound of the deluge completely drowned out the mechanical shimmer that normally rang out when a pokémon breached the air. His teammates didn’t notice—not until the pokémon protested when he whispered to it that he was fine, not until he held its ball back up to its temple and it quietly smacked the capsule away.

Jessie tried to keep the worry from her mind. Her steps sped up in time with her racing heart.

The serene glow of LEDs from the aquarium below beckoned them down the winding staircase, and the rain turned to static as the Gym Leader heaved the massive doors shut.

“You _burnt_ the thing down?!?”

“Well, when you put it like that, it’s—”

“Ya bet ya pretty orange head we did!” Meowth had his paws excitedly slammed on the table, coffee spilling out of the cup beside him. “Rode outta there in style wit’ flames at our feet and freedom in our hearts!”

“Some reform you guys have got, there,” Misty said, hand positioned on her temple. “Honestly, I don’t know what I was expecting, but…”

“Allow us this,” Jessie argued. “Our slate was spotless until then! Polished to pristine perfection!”
“We wasn’t da bad guys in dat story, anyways!” Meowth agreed. “C’mon, you was dere all dose years ago. You know what was at stake.”

The girl couldn’t say she didn’t agree with him. It had been ages, but of all the mansions she’d accidentally wandered into traveling with Ash, it was one of the more memorable ones. While the tales they had told were full of selfless deeds and teary reunions and acknowledged wrongdoing, this was one morally questionable deed they seemed committed to defending.

Well… most of them, at least.

“James, what’s your take?”

Misty locked in on the oddly quiet member of the team, and he jolted a little from his position on the loveseat, eyes trained on the water pokémon that swam in the walls around them. While Jessie and Meowth spoke with a conviction in their words that said with clarity that they would do everything again, their mild-mannered teammate stayed silent. It was curious, given that it was ultimately his story, given the heroic light they seemed to paint him in the entire time they told it.

“I, ah, well… there may very well have been… better ways to, um…”

His team were looking at him a little incredulously, suddenly feeling very self conscious about the confidence with which they’d bragged about their latest stint. This was starting to look more and more like a lie they hadn’t rehearsed particularly well.

James took a shaky inhale, trying to simplify his thoughts.

“Bad people deserve recompense for what they’ve done,” he said, plainly and with feeling.

Concise, effective, and true. That was all he needed. He didn’t need to undo the knot in his heart, attempt to pry apart the conflicting feelings and the reason why everything had only gotten worse since he rode out of that mansion. Why how now, when he was more free than he’d ever been in his life, he was suddenly a nightmare-wrought trainwreck who could barely hold himself together, raw with the pure energy of every awful thing that had ever happened to him. He tried not to focus in on Oddish, batting playfully with its leaves on the water pokémon behind the aquarium glass. There was a time and a place.

Similarly, Misty didn’t want to point out that the victim hadn’t bothered to point out who the bad people in this story were. For once, she bit her tongue. Chimecho tightened around its trainer.

“…so what are you doing now?” she said.

“More a’ da same, dat’s why we’s here,” Meowth said. “Figured it was da least we could do before we made our way ta…”

There was a beat while the direction of his logic registered, and Jessie finished it for him, matching his tone.

“…to Pallet.”

“Ash isn’t gonna be there, you know,” the girl told them. “He never stays home for more than a few hours.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, twerpette,” James piped up. “With utmost due respect, we’ve been traveling alongside him just a touch longer than you.”
“You can have him,” Misty grinned. “I sleep great now. Haven’t been forced into some apocalyptic hero scenario in months.”

The group chuckled at her words—the marvel of how easily adventure seemed to come to anyone hovering around the kid was definitely something. The humans’ laughter lasted for a moment before fading out almost unnaturally, a strange sort of quiet taking its place soon after.

Meowth and Wobbuffet didn’t follow their cues, their own laughs lasting far longer and far louder than the others. They stopped themselves abruptly when they noticed the synchronicity was off, sharing a look before diving for their coffee and burying their faces in it.

“Then what are you gonna do in Pallet?” Misty breached the awkward vibes, trying to move forward.

“Dere’s ot’er people dere we can help out, right?” Meowth said, simply. “Dat poetry guy, da starry-eyed artist dat’s always following ‘im around… maybe even his twerpy grandson…”

“In all honesty, we were planning on marching up to the Twerp’s house and begging his mother for forgiveness,” Jessie said, sounding mildly disgusted at the prospect, despite everything.

Misty laughed, genuinely. “Ha! Delia Ketchum? She’ll wave you off and invite you inside for dinner. Honestly, sometimes I wonder how someone like Ash was…”

“...raised by someone like her?”

Jessie and James snapped to finish the sentence on their own, almost eagerly, as though they’d been pondering it long before she brought it up. This interaction was typical of them—minds together, words in sync, phrasing not a beat off. Always part of a packaged deal, reciting rhymes back to back and running with heartbeats like synchronized watches. What wasn’t typical was how immediately after they stiffened a little, met each others’ eyes, and looked away, silent.

It was probably the fourth or fifth time they’d done something like that over the course of the few hours the lot of them had been talking, and Misty couldn’t wrap her head around it at all. She knew them as world-famous idiots, yes, but if there was one thing they had going for them, it was their finesse in coordination. The team worked like a dance troupe, feet rarely out of step, fumbles near-impossible. If they were defeated, it was because of incompetence, never because of a weak group core.

They spoke of this tale where Jessie would meet James’ eyes across the room with her hand on a stone sleeping in her bag, and he would know only by the quirk in her lip precisely what she was asking him. Something happened, between then and now, where they couldn’t even look at each other.

Instinctually, Misty turned to Meowth and Wobbuffet, who had seemed far more untouched by the weird air hanging over their team. They were the same as ever, only faltering when the other two did.

Desperate to wave away aforementioned air, Meowth diverted, at an octave far too nervous to do much to help.

“BOY, DIS IS GOOD COFFEE, RIGHT WOBBUFFET?”

“W-Wobb~a!”

Misty could see him trying. She really could.
“It’s Brock’s brew of choice,” she threw them a bone. “Though I suppose you’d know that, since you saw him not too long ago!”

The open-ended question was intended to draw some life out of the oddly restrained humans sitting opposite to her. It didn’t elicit much, beyond some sheepish nods and quiet acknowledgements, and Misty found herself sighing in sync with Meowth. In that moment, the cat found himself far more aligned with the twerptette next to him than the friends he’d spent half his nine lives beside—wherever they’d wandered blindly off to.

The Gym Leader tried an attempt at running more logical options in her head in the lingering quiet. Something was off about them. They weren’t her friends, not quite—she didn’t know an effective method for snuffing whatever demons plagued them out, nor did she feel particularly passionate about it, given their history. Misty didn’t view them with malice, but she found it really hard to put a finger on them when they seemed like a strange sort of shadow of the people she knew long ago.

Still, they had to be telling some semblance of truth. She found it hard to believe that anyone, no matter how creative or how devious, could come up with tales as tall as the ones they were spinning. She tried a different approach.

If Ash was the person who kickstarted all of this, then Ash found them when they were just as lost within themselves. That begged the question, the one she and so many others found themselves asking so often, and her heart answered it long before it even materialized in her head.

“Hey, why don’t we have a battle?” Misty said, almost comfortingly.

The group all perked up a little, surprised at the sudden turn in conversation. The setting sun was beginning to bleed in through the windows, a calming sepia against the cool tones of the gym.

“A… a battle?” James asked.

“Yeah, why not?” the girl said. “It’s been a while since I creamed you losers. It’ll be fun to see how good you’ve gotten since you stopped losing!”

Her words held a fire that reminded Jessie of someone else, and it awakened something quietly sleeping. For the first time all day, she looked directly at James.

“What do you say?” she said. “Feeling up to taking on a Gym Leader in an honest fight?”

If the man was being honest with himself, the answer was no. He wasn’t feeling up to much of anything, right now—living inside himself, terrified to make any move that might be a step over the line to any of the thousands of humans and pokémon that existed around him. Instinctively, he met Chimecho’s eyes, where he often sought comfort. The pokémon was peering into him in a way that asked consent, but James could tell what lay beneath—bubbling excitement and the hope that maybe, despite everything, he might say yes.

Honey-amber eyes sparkling up at him, James felt his wavering heart crumble. No part of him could say no to something that his pokémon wanted that badly. Whether he was feeling one-hundred percent or not, the redheads had a point—a pokémon battle had the chance of doing wonders on someone’s shattered psyche. Hope settled his heart.

“You know…” he uttered. “That sounds like a splendid idea.”

His eyes weren’t on his teammates, who all seemed to loosen a little at the sudden lilt in his voice. It was small, it was subtle, but it was present.
“You’re in for a real treat,” Misty said, grinning. “Wait ‘til you see what I’ve done with the place!”

The former Rockets hung their heads back, eyes incapable of taking in the utter girth of the open room. Clear glass hung around them, amplifying the twilight that was transitioning to stars outside. Rows upon rows of seats cascaded up the walls, and below, the aquarium slept soundly. The gym had gotten a full remodel since the last time they’d been inside its walls, all the childish paintings on its walls done away with for sleeker, more simplistic designs with colours that burned the eyes a little less. Misty had clearly taken advantage of her reign over the building, effectively undoing all the poor interior design her family had slapped across the place.

“How’s a double battle?” the Leader winked. “Two-on-two, four pokémon each?”

They were still mid way through marveling at the structure as she asked the question. Jessie was the first to snap back to it, balling her fist in determination.

“Sounds like a plan, twerpette!” she affirmed, as though she had any more than two pokémon at her behest.

“Oh, wait!” Misty stopped herself. “I’m such an airhead, we need a ref!”

“Leave dat to me-owth,” the cat jumped in. “I ain’t gettin’ my claws doihty, anysways.”

The girl raised an eyebrow. “You sure you can? Do you even know what a fair fight looks like?”

“Hey, cut a cat a little slack, kid!” he protested. “I seen plenty a’ real battles. Spent most o’ my nine lives tailin’ Twerp Classic!”

He had a point. There wasn’t a lot of room to cheat in a pokémon battle, anyways.

“Alright, fine,” Misty said, then sprinted over to the opposite end of the field. “You guys fine with this setup?”

She was gesturing toward the field as she said it, and that’s when James realized why the room seemed so vastly different now—wasn’t there a pool here, before?

“Wait,” he said. “Wouldn’t it benefit a water gym to have a water-based battlefield?”

“Oh, that,” she placed a hand on her hip, smiling. “My psyduck can’t swim! I had a second field installed for him.”

She said it so plainly that Jessie and James both couldn’t help but feel a weird level of respect. The idea of fleshing out that kind of money for a single pokémon was far too resonant, and they dreamed of a life where they could be the dutiful and doting monster parents their hearts hoped for.

An image flashed into James’ mind of a downy dog bed burning, and he swallowed thickly, blinking it away.

“Well, makes things easier for us!” Jessie said, striking a strong-armed pose. “Right, James?”

“Y… yes!” he snapped to it, his own pose lacking.

“Let’s get dis show on da road!” Meowth called from the sidelines.

Sensing it had been a while since any of them had gotten proper air, James threw not one, but several pokéballs upward, away from the battlefield. They all shimmered to life at once, greeting him with
utterances of their names and smiles ranging from gentle to nervous. Growlie came last, stumbling on its feet a little, and James gave it a doting head rub.

“Is the new ball doing you okay?” he asked it.

His pokémon growled affirmatively and gave him a chaste lick. He tried to focus on the feeling of its closeness rather than the doubt blossoming within him. Growlie’s luxury ball had been taken with the dog house, and in his haste he’d elected to replace it with a regular pokéball. The pokémon seemed fine with the downgrade, but it still had a grace period it was getting through.

“Chimecho and I are taking round one,” he informed his team. “But the rest of you are more than welcome to watch if you’d like!”

A chorus of cheers erupted from them, save for Greninja, who had slowly made its way over to the bleachers, and was sitting cross-legged, stoic expression betraying the eagerness in its heart. Growlie and Weezing stayed closer, practically hovering behind Meowth, who had passed Oddish off to the larger pokémon. It sat curiously atop the dog’s head, peering into the battlefield with crimson eyes.

“Alright, Chimecho!” James said, voice wavering slightly. “It’s all you!”

“Chiime!” it sung in anticipation, floating swiftly to the field.

“Finally,” Jessie said, then turned over her shoulder to meet Wobbuffet’s gaze. “You. Move those stubs.”

He obeyed, albeit with a head-tilt that looked curiously like a child rolling its eyes, were he the type to open them. Jessie fought the impulse to antagonistically shove her pokémon, ever the brat in the face of a battle.

“Two pure psychic types, huh?” Misty noted. “I like it! Let’s see how they hold up against my water pokémon!”

She punctuated her statement with a well-coordinated twirl and a pair of pokéballs being thrown into the air, and Psyduck and Corsola took form in the open air. Where Corsola landed with as much grace as a rock type could, Psyduck tumbled awkwardly to the ground, thousand-yard stare present as ever. Misty didn’t seem phased by it—she never did.

Psyduck zeroed in on Wobbuffet, and Wobbuffet zeroed in on him, form tensed at the sudden feeling of eyes on him. The pair stared deep into each other, hands balanced on their temples, waiting for the fiery redheads at their backs to motion them forward.

Looking at the two of them, Meowth stifled a chuckle, then turned to Weezing.

“Hey, you t’inkin’ what I’m t’inkin’ ‘bout dose four?”

“Spitting images?” Weezing said, simply.

“Surprised it took us dis long ta notice,” the cat said.

With all the pokémon on the field, Misty took little time to hesitate. She hardened her stance, smile bright, praying that for once in their life, the duo standing opposite to her weren’t just all talk. She’d ease into it.

“Psyduck, Water Gun! And Corsola, Spike Cannon!”
Without even calling out targets, the two of them eased into a rhythm, reading each other on instinct alone. Psyduck sent the attack straight at Wobbuffet, and Corsola leapt into the air, spinning with surprising aplomb as it fired off projectiles in Chimecho’s direction. An involuntary sort of battling spirit took James over, and he called the attack without thinking.

“Chimecho, counter it with Psychic!”

“Wobbuffet, you counter too!”

The patient pokémon lit up in iridescent, colours shining off his form, and the deluge bounced right off him and straight back at Psyduck, a direct and powerful hit that sent the duck pokémon skidding back on webbed toes. In sync, Chimecho unleashed a burst of psychic energy, meticulously suspending every single spike in mid-air before turning them back on Corsola in an angry barrage. The water types reeled, blinking their eyes back open.

“A defense and an offense all at once,” Misty said, observing. “Not bad, for a couple washed up ex-cons!”

“We’ll see who’s washed up after this, twerpette!” Jessie fired back, without any offense to back it up.

A beat followed the threat, and the absence of action pierced her calm. This was the part where her partner was supposed to pick up on her inability to attack, and fire off an attack of his own.

“James!” she called, without much explanation, and he snapped to it.

“Right!” the man yelped. “Let’s go Chimecho! Extrasensory on Corsola!”

The wind chime pokémon’s eyes lit up—a shade of luminous yellow far brighter than their usual amber—and it fired a beam of pristine gold from its mouth, bell ringing wildly with the force of the attack.

“Corsola, Mirror Coat!” Misty called.

Jessie and James reeled in sync, their eyes wide. “What?!?”

The coral pokémon cast itself vibrantly aglow, and the bout of energy went straight back to Chimecho, knocking it out of the air as it weakly cried out. It was back up after a moment, head spinning from the hit, chiming its name out to signal its resilience. Misty gave a wink.

“What, you think you’re the only one who knows that little trick?” she smiled. “Two can play at that game!”

Jessie grit her teeth, feeling unreasonably bitter—as though her gimmick had been infringed upon. Reading her thoughts, Wobbuffet turned over his shoulder to face her, his tail pointed toward the starstruck sky. If he had any qualms about battling, now they had all vanished. Peering into him, she swore that flames would start crackling off him at any moment.

“Psyduck, time to get serious!” Misty called while the pair was distracted in their rage. “Aqua Tail on Wobbuffet!”

The duck pokémon tended to move at a slowbro’s pace, nearly stationary—but Wobbuffet couldn’t do much else, his own speed nothing to write home about. There was no point in dodging attacks, anyway—a fire doesn’t dare dodge the kindling thrown into it. Psyduck’s tail lit up and extended, cascades of water swimming around it, and without Jessie’s command, Wobbuffet readied his
“Corsola, Spike Cannon on Wobbuffet!”

James tensed, realizing her angle. With both a physical and a special attack being sent at the patient pokémon, there was no way it would be able to counter both. Misty intended to take the tank out first.

“No you don’t!” James said. “Chimecho, Double Edge on Corsola!”

The wind chime pokémon tore forward, ramming into Corsola with reckless abandon and sending it tumbling to the floor before it could fire off its attack. Both pokémon cried out in pain, and James tried not to guilt himself at using such a dangerous attack so early on in battle. Confused in the onslaught, Wobbuffet wasn’t able to counter in time, and took Psyduck’s hit head on.

He was sent backward, but quickly pulled himself to his knees, unphased. He’d seen battles far fiercer than this one, and he intended to prove it.

“Corsola, are you alright?” Misty leaned as she called out to her pokémon, who gave a quiet utterance of its name. “That’s okay! Go ahead and use Recover!”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jessie seethed, and the coral pokémon lit up a sparkling ivory as the life returned to it, Chimecho’s sacrifice nulled.

A thought formed in Misty’s head, and she followed it.

“Psyduck, time to get serious!” she called. “Use Zen Headbutt!”

Psyduck cried out his name, his temple cloaked in searing blue. He rammed hard into Wobbuffet, and at the sound of Jessie’s command, the receiving pokémon lit up an opposing red and sent him flying, landing on his back.

“You’re still going for the offense, really?” Jessie observed. “Come now. You’re a smart girl, you should know my wobbuffet’s just going to send every attack back twice as hard!”

“Wobbuffet!” the pokémon cried affirmatively with a proud salute.

“That’s what I’m banking on!” Misty responded. “Psyduck, again!”

Jessie quirked her brow, unsure of what the Leader was getting at as she watched Psyduck ram its skull right back into Wobbuffet. She seemed focused in on the action, her defenses practically open while Corsola recovered more and more health in the corner. Jessie turned to James, annoyed that she had to prompt him.

“That Corsola is wide open, you know!”

“So it is!” he jumped in the wake of her voice, a space traveler lost in spanning galaxies. “Ah, Chimecho… u-use Psychic on the both of them!”

There was little use in covering Wobbuffet—that much was true. Still, even if it did turn those attacks back, the patient pokémon was taking plenty of damage himself. It was a battle of wills, and if James could prolong the life of Wobbuffet even a little, he was going to take the chance.

Crying out its name, Chimecho lifted both the water types into the air, where they remained powerless to stop it. They writhed and protested, but there wasn’t much they could do before the
wind chime pokémon angled its body in a fierce downward motion, slamming the both of them headfirst into the ground.

Misty’s lip quivered upwards into a smirk—subtle, but present. She wasted no time, unperturbed.

“Corsola, Bubblebeam on Chimecho! Psyduck, Zen Headbutt!”

“This again?” Jessie taunted. “When are you going to learn?”

Strangely quiet, Misty didn’t fire back her usual snark. She watched with giggles bubbling in her lungs as Psyduck flew straight into Wobbuffet, and Wobbuffet countered, as he did.

“Chimecho, Extrasensory!” James called, and Chimecho fired the attack off, where it battled with Corsola’s bubbly deluge before exploding into a cascade of gold-dappled seafoam, knocking Wobbuffet and Psyduck off course with the radius of its blast. The patient pokémon fell backwards, and the water-type wildly struggled in all manner to gain footing in the air before his temple made contact with the hard rock below.

A gripe ripped at Jessie’s throat, begging to be set free—she turned to James to scold him for not taking into account the close proximity they were in, the combined power of attacks and what it could do. The woman found herself silenced, however, by the building crescendo that Psyduck was emitting from across the battlefield, a pained roar that unsettled her heart.

“Jackpot!” Misty cheered. “Psyduck, Confusion!”

Memories suddenly flooded back to Jessie—of a fierce battle for the sake of a little girl’s toys, of a gimmick that she had long forgotten. Psyduck’s eyes shot open, cast in blazing blue, and he lifted Wobbuffet before he could counter, slamming the psychic-type hard into the outcropping of rock that jutted out on the battlefield.

“Chimecho, take note!” James called in the moment in between. “Psychic on Corsola!”

The wind chime pokémon went to fire off the attack, but Misty was well-prepared, her eyes on every inch of the field, far more present with one mind than they were with two.

“Mirror Coat!”

The psywaves bounced right off Corsola, sending Chimecho falling from its hover with the force of its own power. Across the battlefield, Psyduck still had Wobbuffet in his psychic chokehold, where the patient pokémon remained powerless to counter. James grit his teeth. That dopey, far-eyed thing was the biggest threat on the field.

“Chimecho, one more Psychic! This time, save Wobbuffet!”

It looked back at him, as if to confirm, before unleashing its energy again in an attempt to wrest Jessie’s pokémon from Psyduck’s grip. Wobbuffet angled himself awkwardly as the two espers pulled at either side of him, trying to resist the urge to scream out in pain at the weird sensation of it all. Whispers ate at his head. His tail was becoming restless.

“James, you’re not helping!” Jessie said, and he tensed, considering his other options.

As if to punctuate, Psyduck overpowered Chimecho, sending Wobbuffet back to the floor, where he struggled to his feet.

“Fine, then!” James called, masking his desperation with confidence. “Chimecho, let’s finish this!
Double-Edge on Psyduck!

“No you don’t!” Misty stopped him. “Corsola, Spike Cannon!”

“Power through, Chimecho! We’ve got to take that thing down!”

Corsola leapt up and unleashed another maelstrom of knifelike projectiles, and with its superior speed, Chimecho dove and weaved around as many of them as it could. With every one it couldn’t avoid, it felt its grip on consciousness weakening, and it elected to put all it had into this hit. Charging forward, Chimecho crashed Psyduck hard into one of the makeshift cliffs that decorated the field.

Blurry eyed, the wind chime pokémon pulled away in a shaky float, blinking its amber gaze open in a desperate attempt to see the damage it had done.

Psyduck stood.

Misty was grinning across the battlefield, unperturbed by the fierceness of the hit. She stood proud as she taunted them.

“Psyduck does best the harder the fight, y’know! Every blow you land is only gonna make his psychic powers stronger!”

Every blow we land… if we can’t knock him out… James lost himself in his thoughts, only snapped back to reality when he saw that Chimecho was slowly falling to the floor, too weak to maintain its hover in the air. He looked to it, then to Wobbuffet—both of them worse for wear while Misty’s pokémon were either at phenomenal health or unleashing powerful attacks in the wake of their lack of it.

It hit him all at once.

“Chimecho, Heal Bell—”

Misty interrupted him. “That desperate? Anything you heal, we’re just gonna undo—”

“—on Psyduck!”

“ What now?!”

With its final, minuscule ounce of strength, as it tumbled to the floor with tail aflutter in the breeze of the descent, Chimecho rang its bell across the arena. The sound traveled to the duck pokémon’s ears, and the former Rockets watched the searing blue fade from his eyes as his headache dissipated to nothing. Misty marveled in respectful awe as her pokémon blinked a few times, as though he had disappeared for the last few minutes and only just returned. Psyduck tilted his head, staring across the battlefield.

The gentle sound vanished, and Chimecho hit the ground.

Meowth peered over the divide, wishing he was unsure but knowing the call was to be made minutes before it happened.

“Chimecho’s unable t’ battle!” he announced, placing a paw in the air.

James got on one knee, cradling the wind chime pokémon in his arms. It smiled up at him with grateful eyes, tail limp and arms hung.
“Was it everything you hoped?” he asked it.

“Chii~iime,” it hummed, and he smiled genuinely before pressing the ball to its temple.

“It’s on us to finish round one, Wobbuffet!” Jessie said. “Let’s do this!”

“Wobbu~ffet!” he cheered, feeling revitalized, intent to avenge his friend.

“Not if we finish it first!” Misty called. “Corsola, Bubblebeam! Psyduck, Water Gun!”

“You can take it, Wobbuffet!”

His trainer’s impassioned shout ran like fire through him, and he dug his stubby feet hard into the dirt, arms thrown out and whole body present, shining rainbow. The attacks barely phased Wobbuffet, water sloshing off him and straight back at the pokémon opposite. Corsola struggled to its feet, Psyduck remained steady.

When the coral pokémon had gained some semblance of balance, Misty addressed it first.

“Corsola, jump!”

It propelled itself upward and onto one of the rocks, and Jessie and Wobbuffet watched it with curious expressions wondering what necessitated higher ground. The pair didn’t have much time to shoot it down.

“Psyduck, let’s do another Water Gun!”

The pokémon released a second powerful spurt, and while Wobbuffet began to ready his Mirror Coat, James interrupted from beside them.

“Jessie, Corsola’s still up there!”

Her head snapped to the coral pokémon. Misty was mid-way through calling the attack.

“Wobbuffet, dodge that Water Gun and counter that Corsola!”

The patient pokémon scrambled to the side, its body changing from a prism to a solid red as it countered the Spike Cannon that Corsola unleashed upon the field. Jagged rocks went flying back at it, twice sharpened in the wake of Wobbuffet’s power. Hit after hit pelted Corsola, and it lost its balance and crashed to the floor below, unmoving.

Meowth shifted back, a little surprised when the coral pokémon did not scramble back to its feet.

“Corsola’s unable t’ battle!” the cat called.

Misty gave her pokémon a gentle stroke before she returned it, whispering quiet thank yous. It was one on one now, two thousand-yard stares locked firmly on each other.

“Dis is intense,” Meowth said, quietly addressing the pokémon surrounding him. “Two pairs a mirror image of each uddah… who can say who’ll take it?”

On the field, a strange sort of rivalry began to materialize between the two left over, scalding psywaves like whips tangling and snapping in the empty space betwixt. Anyone could take it now, both of them down to the finish and neither intent on losing.

“Aqua Tail, Psyduck!”
“Wobbuffet, send it right back!”

Misty seemed to be going for brute force rather than strategy to bring Wobbuffet down, and it was beginning to perplex Jessie. If Wobbuffet was taking damage, Psyduck was taking twice as much—how that worked out in the girl’s favour was anyone’s guess.

The patient pokémon and the duck pokémon collided once more, both sent backward in an explosion of sunlit showers. Jessie stood with eyes on the field, pawing for some sort of method to Misty’s manner of attack—Gym Leaders, even twerpy ones, had more to them than just launching attacks, right?

She noticed the girl wasn’t looking at the field, but at Psyduck, eyes giving him a dutiful once-over that was far too meticulous to be nothing. Every time he took an attack, she stayed on him before calling out her next. It hit Jessie, then—Misty was taking in his status, assessing how much further he could push himself. For a pokémon that required pain to unleash his true power, it would make sense that the trainer had to be acutely aware of every inch on that scale, every single vital sign.

Try as she might not to let it bleed into her own battle style, Jessie found herself subconsciously checking Wobbuffet. Tenacious in battle and everywhere else, it was no secret that his heart beat in sync with hers. In all their differences, they were mirror images of each other, heels dug into the ground and facing the sharpness of the universe head on.

As if sensing her eyes on his back, the patient pokémon turned to face her. There was a waver in the motion she didn’t detect beforehand, and she grit her teeth in the wake of the subtleties that lined his expression. He was at his limit, and she kicked herself for not realizing sooner—Misty knew the threat a pokémon like him posed, and she was intent on outlasting it.

Trainer and pokémon shared a look, and a thought cropped up in her head. It was different, it was still new, and it was unsure—but it was fresh. Jessie would be lying if she said she understood anything about how her star pokémon battled, but she did understand his heart. Looking at her, he seemed to intuit exactly what it was she was thinking. Looking at him, she had a feeling he was willing to try.

“This ends here!” Misty said as seconds ticked down, as thoughts raced through Jessie’s head.

“Psyduck, finish them off with Zen Headbutt!”

Jessie balled a fist, unmoving. The sight of it put Misty in a place where her confidence faltered for a moment—she knew Jessie to some extent, and silence from the woman was a little unsettling, especially in a fight. The former Rocket waited until Psyduck was barrelling toward Wobbuffet, until the attack was inches from making contact, to call her counter.

“Destiny Bond!”

The beginnings of it were flames that crackled off Wobbuffet’s skin long before his trainer had opened her mouth. When Psyduck neared, the patient pokémon took the hit fully, grasping onto the duck pokémon’s temple with shaking hands, name a near-roar on his breath as he used the force of the hit to swivel around on his feet. With a fierce jerk downward, Wobbuffet lit the two of them in phantasmal light and pulled Psyduck ghostlike into the floor, shrouding the entire gym in inky black.

Oddish was half-buried in Growlie’s mane, red eyes like pinpoints as they peered into the darkness. Though its feet trembled, there was an itch building under its skin that it was finding difficult to ignore, even with the rest of its friends just as uneased around it.

“When did Wobbuffet…” Weezing trailed off, and Meowth answered anyways.
“Apparently he’s known how ta do dat from da beginnin’,” Meowth said, rolling shining eyes. “Lazy oaf.”

When the pair resurfaced and the gym lights came back unobscured, the cat knew what to expect—both of them motionless in the throes of the double knockout, rendering the match a tie.

“Psyduck and Wobbuffet are unable ta battle!” Meowth called. “Round one ends in a draw!”

Misty blinked a little on her end of the arena. To say she was shocked at the strategy of the move would be an understatement—of course, when she looked across the divide, Jessie seemed just as surprised that her idea had worked.

*It’s always dumb luck with them,* she thought quietly to herself, but couldn’t help but be impressed regardless.

The redheads met in the middle, returning their star battlers with gentle words before meeting each other’s eyes. Misty held out her hand in an inviting manner, not wavering an inch when she asked—

“Still up for another round?”

Jessie looked over her shoulder, where James’ muted demeanour seemed to blink back into existence. She wasn’t sure he’d heard the question, so she repeated it.

“Well, space cadet?” Jessie asked her partner. “Prepared for trouble?”

As she said it, she pawed Arbok’s pokéball and held it up with a confident smirk, and like always, it bled right into him. Despite the pressing need to keep his distance from her that had been lingering as of late, she still found ways to breach that gap, ever-present in his heart.

James looked to Growlie, on the sidelines and a little farther back than the others—no doubt in an attempt to keep its fur dry. He’d not battled with it in a fair fight since he was a boy, stealing spats outside the greenhouse over at the Saffron estate. Its eyes met his, and he braved his worries.

“Make it double.”

There was an impulse on Misty’s lips to sigh, *tired*, and it was immediately snuffed out when she realized she was exasperated because Team Rocket were acting like themselves. Whether or not that was a good thing was anyone’s guess—but to the girl, personally, it was a routine she was far more comfortable to than whatever weird vibes were passing between them before.

“Alright, losers!” Misty angled her stance, confident. “Get ready to lose!”

She ran back to her position at one end of the field, star-shaped platforms sturdy at her feet. There was a knowing lilt to her voice as she called out to them across the field, some sort of device grasped tightly in her hand.

“If I were you, I’d stand back, Team Rocket!”

The pair blinked a little, unsure what she meant, before nodding and taking positions that mirrored her own. She hit the button atop her control with a wink, and the former Rockets watched as the battlefield sunk into the depths below and water started cascading from the vents within the resulting aperture. Waterfalls of it overtook the arena where Psyduck and Wobbuffet had been battling moments before, leaving only the jagged and winding rock structures that towered above, exposed like mountains in its wake.
“We’re doing this one on the water field!”

**Lovely, James thought, green eyes affixed on the settling seas below. As if Growlie won’t be at enough of a disadvantage.**

“Fine by us!” Jessie shouted over his thoughts, throwing her ball across the field. “Arbok, you’re not afraid of a little water!”

The snake hissed a proud ‘chaar!’ as it landed on a crag that was towering over the crystal blue and all the stars that swam in its reflective surface. Water wasn’t even close to a threat—if there was one underrated talent Arbok could boast about, it was its high-speed swimming.

“Eager to get creamed, I see!” Misty threw her own pokéballs upward. “Let’s go, my darlings!”

A shower of sparkles burst from the shells, and the former Rockets’ eyes widened when they noticed their radius was not dissipating. That was concerning—and they weren’t exactly thrilled to find out why.

Roaring reverberated around the gym, its cadence so earsplitting the patrons within were surprised the glass above them did not shatter. Misty, as per usual, was completely unflinching as her gyarados took form in the water, its bulky body sending cascades to the artificial shores and threatening to douse everyone on its fringes. Atop its crest, Azumarill landed on one foot, looking delighted and eager to battle.

James looked up into its fanged maw, not noticing the tremble that had made its way to him in the wake of the beast. Nervously, his eyes traveled to Growlie, who was standing and meeting his gaze from across the field, unperturbed in the wake of the giant water-type. This was how it was supposed to go, of course—Jessie and James, both with their starter pokémon, taking down Misty’s biggest threat.

Growlie opened its mouth to bark an affirmation at what James was saying to it without words. Midway, though, Oddish leapt from the dog’s head, tiny feet scrambling their way over to James. The field seemed to stand still in the wake of the sudden outburst, the tiny pokémon crying out its name in protest the entire time it made its way over.

The shake in James’ legs intensified as it drew near, and he forced himself steady, pushing down resurfacing memories and replacing them with signs of the present. Oddish was at his feet, now, its tiny eyes burning pinprick holes forward, brow knitted in determination.

“Oddish!” it cried, facing him head on, trying with all it had to communicate despite their shaky bond. “Odd~odd!”

“What…” James pawed for meaning. “What is it you’re saying?”

Meowth flicked an ear and leaned into the sounds as the pokémon continued to feverishly chatter. Jessie had looked to the cat with the hopes that he’d be doing exactly that, and her heart dropped a little when she noticed his eyes go wide.

“Uh…” Meowth started, more than a little caught off guard, then raised his voice across the divide. “I dunno how ta tell ya dis, James, but Oddish… says it wants t’ battle.”

James looked to the cat, then back to his feet, then to the field, and followed that motion a couple times while Oddish waited in silence. The look of utter resolve refused to leave the pokémon’s face, even in James’ obvious panic. There was a towering serpent with fangs bared resting in the water, at the behest of a skilled Gym Leader. The odds were already stacked. The baby of the group wanted
to throw down with it.

“You want to battle?!” James said, incredulously, his fear lost somewhere in his confusion.

Oddish nodded, undisturbed.

“With me?” the man continued, then pointed to Gyarados in an exaggerated motion. “With THAT?!” On cue, the atrocious pokémon let out another unearthly cry, practically knocking all of them off their feet as it shook the floor and rippled waves across the pool.

“Odd!” the pokémon affirmed.

James gaped at it, lost in utter disbelief. In his head, he counted reason upon reason why this was a bad idea, why if they were going to start somewhere, it shouldn’t be here. First of all, Oddish didn’t have a trainer—it was merely traveling with them informally, more like Meowth than any of their own pokémon. It didn’t even possess a ball to rest in, yet here it was, expecting James and itself to be perfectly in-sync when he couldn’t even be in sync with his lifelong… best friend? Partner? What were they, now?

His restless thoughts nearly carried him out of the moment, and he snapped back to it, staring at Oddish. He pulled his index out of his pocket, typing in the pokémon’s name and what he was luckily certain was its level, in all his knowledge of grass types and their development. Its moves would be… interesting to work with, to say the least.

This was such a dreadful idea.

“This is such a dreadful idea,” Jessie said when she realized he was seriously considering it.

James let out a shaky breath, looking to her without meeting her eyes directly. “I’m positive we’ve followed worse impulses though, right?”

She didn’t know if he was being general or referring to something in particular, and her lack of a cipher in the wake of it didn’t sit well. Jessie crossed her arms and turned to the battlefield, where Misty and her pokémon were being surprisingly patient. Arbok was looking at Oddish with tears streaming from its eyes, quietly whimpering its name.

“Arbok, pull yourself together!” Jessie called, and watched it snap back into itself, a little. “There comes a time in every poké-parent’s life where they have to let the little one make their own mistakes. We don’t need you distracted during this battle, eh?”

It considered her words, looking uncomfortable for a moment, then swallowing thickly the impulse to cry harder. This was already shaping up to be a disaster, and round two hadn’t even begun.

Though she’d said it for Arbok, it resonated with James, too. His mind had been left back in that burning mansion, surrounded in walls that stifled him long ago. Hands on his hands and restraints pressing down, choked by spores and unable to claw his way to cleaner air. If a pokémon within his care desired its own freedom to choose, he didn’t have the heart to tell it who it was. He’d already broken Chimecho’s heart once before—the universe had given him a chance to start over, even if it wore the face of his fears.

“My second pokémon is Oddish here!” he announced across the divide to Misty, and her eyes went wide before her expression melted into something more curious than confused. These weirdos were full of surprises, that much always rang true.

“Sounds like a plan,” she affirmed once it had fully registered, then turned to Meowth. “Ref, if I
were you, I’d back up a little from the splash zone.”

The cat looked to her, then fearfully to the water sloshing below with Gyarados’ every small movement. Growlie was already ten feet back, far wiser than Meowth would ever be in foresight. This was going to be one hell of a fight, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about watching Oddish—who was by no means a baby anymore, but still quite young—fight that thing.

Meowth only hoped that Misty would go easy on the kid.

“A… awright…” Meowth said, nervously raising a hand. “Round two! Start!”

Misty elected to let them make the first move, curious how they were going to handle this. She watched as James nervously eyed Jessie, seconding the girl’s thoughts in assuming she’d take the lead. Like clockwork, she did.

“Arbok, let’s show that slithering sea serpent what a real pair of teeth looks like!” she called.

“Crunch on Gyarados!”

“Gyarados, Hydro Pump!” Misty called. “Azumarill, use Bubblebeam on Oddish!”

Arbok lunged at Gyarados to take a bite out of the bigger pokémon, but was thrown back almost immediately by the powerful jet of water that shot from its mouth. There was no chance of the snake resisting it with how large the deluge was, and Jessie watched as it was thrown back, Gyarados standing without a scratch in the water. At their side, Azumarill leapt off its head and fired a soapy spray down at Oddish. James panicked, sputtering out a command.

“Oddish, dodge that!”

The pokémon went for a dive to the side, but the sight of the water swirling below uneased it, and it was unable to move quick enough before it was hit head on. It fell back across the small island, whimpering a little in pain, and James and Arbok’s hearts both lurched. Already, the two of them were having second thoughts.

“Tch, pulling out the big guns already, are we?” Jessie said, disregarding their panicked looks. “Fine then, Arbok! Show Gyarados a Gunk Shot attack!”

“Oddish, are you alright?” James called, and the pokémon shook its body a little, blinking water from its eyes. It cried its name in affirmation, clearly undaunted.

“Alright then, let’s get some of that strength back!” he continued. “Use Absorb on Azumarill!”

Arbok snapped back to it and unleashed an outcry that lit its fangs a toxic purple, where waves of searing sludge poured from its mouth and went straight toward Gyarados. Adjacent, Oddish took shaky aim at Azumarill, firing off an angry red beam at the aqua rabbit pokémon that hit quick and lit it up, sapping its energy away.

As Oddish glowed green and felt its wounds slowly melt to nothing, Misty called a second Hydro Pump that collided in the air with Arbok’s own attack. It was overpowered by the deadly fumes—only by a hair, exploding closer to Gyarados’ side, hot droplets of poison barely singing the larger serpent in a dazzling, glittering shower of ominous purple and crystal blue.

It was a small dent in Misty’s defenses—but a dent, nonetheless. She didn’t let the grace period last, however—calling her next attack almost as soon as she was able.

“Gyarados, tie Arbok up with a Crunch attack of your own!”
Were Jessie not in the presence of children, she might have spat a curse to the unforgiving seas below. Instead, a simple “Again?!” fell off her lips, ever irked that her the girl opposite seemed to excel in cramping each other’s style.

She wasn’t able to think quick enough in the wake of it to call out a dodge, and Gyarados tore through the water with a world-ending roar, waves firing off of it on all sides. When it neared Arbok, it coiled the snake in its own long and sturdy body, biting deep into the lower end of its hood and causing it to reel back with a cry.

“Arbok, steady yourself!” Jessie called without thinking, teeth grit. “This is your chance! You use Crunch too!”

She watched as her pokémon blinked its eyes shut tight, finding its center in the wake of teeth at its skin. With all it was, Arbok stutteringly pulled itself upward, and took Gyarados in its own fangs with one powerful lunge. The two of them hooked deep into each other, turning it to an outright battle of wills.

James tried not to cringe as he watched the serpents wrestle. It was true, close combat was proving difficult with Misty’s defensive offense, but in a match of brutality he wasn’t as certain as Jessie was that Arbok could outlast. An impulse hit him, and he followed it.

“Oddish, use Sweet Scent!”

Before anyone could blink, the weed pokémon leapt high as its little legs could muster, twirling a little in the humid air. Barely-visible bursts of rose-coloured air bloomed from the tips of its leafy crown, falling across the entire room in gentle waves. With the calming scent in their lungs, every human and pokémon in the vicinity felt themselves relax a little, and James watched as Arbok and Gyarados lost their grip on each other and tumbled downward into the water.

In both a literal and a figurative sense, the sight of the move was incredibly calming. James tried to focus in on those feelings, melting into to why exactly they lingered. The sight of Oddish sending the entire arena into a forgiving sort of serenity was nice. Filling.

“Azumarill, hit it with another Bubblebeam!”

The aqua rabbit tried for another attack, but its feet swam a little as perfumey vibes danced around its head. Its attack was ever so slightly off target, and James sensed the opportunity.

“Oddish, dodge it and go for another Absorb!”

With the extra leeway from Azumarill’s dazed state, it managed to fire off the attack without a hitch, fully regaining whatever damage it had taken from the previous hit. Beside them, Jessie took in the scope of the arena, snapping Arbok to its senses. It was a little quicker than the other two, toxic blood giving it an advantage over any and all things floral.

“Arbok, let’s use Haze on the water’s surface!”

Before the snake hit, a spew of fog cascaded from the back of its throat, a translucent cloud that all but completely blanketed the waters below, obscuring them in murky mist. Soon as it left her pokémon, Jessie called out again.

“Now dive!”

Anticipating this, Arbok angled itself in mid-air as it fell, head pointed toward the unperceivable brightness of the fauxcean. Barely missing a step, its tail trailed behind it like a noxious purple
Streamer as it plummeted straight into the depths. With the haze that lingered over the open waters, it was undetectable below.

“Gyarados, go in after it!”

A water type was going to have the upper hand underwater, but Arbok’s swimming certainly wasn’t something to take lightly. The haze didn’t extend below the water’s surface, but the extra camouflage did give it a headstart on getting the jump on Gyarados. The atrocious pokémon scanned the depths, ears fine-tuned for every upset in the water, every swish of the crag and coral below.

Above ground, not wasting a moment, Misty called her second attack.

“Azumarill, show Oddish a Rollout attack!”

The pokémon ducked into itself as it jumped high, angling itself into a spin as it made a beeline to Oddish. James was able to call out a half-hearted dodge, and Oddish managed to follow it, barely anticipating the aqua rabbit pokémon’s speed. It swerved on the rocky island, unraveling itself only for a moment before curling right back up, intent to make contact.

That’s right, Rollout is a relentless attack when used properly, James realized, scanning his options. There were holes wide open in his defenses, Oddish’s moves not offering much in ways of power or protection. Below the surface, Gyarados and Arbok eluded each other.

The weed pokémon stumbled a little, not much time for a recovery with the momentum of its last dodge and the striking speed with which Azumarill was flying towards it. James shut his eyes tight, seeing no option other than for Oddish to take the hit. The sooner a pokémon took a Rollout, the better—it only got worse as time persisted.

“Arbok, now!”

Hearing its trainer’s voice, the snake leapt from the depths, blindsiding Gyarados as it did so. It tore through the fog that still lingered like icing atop the field, breathing in fully and loosing a proud hiss from its lungs. Jessie didn’t waste any time, James’ rational mind when usually the case was opposite.

“Cover Oddish!”

With lightning speed, Arbok swerved to where the smaller pokémon was, placing its big body in between Oddish and its attacker. The snake faced Oddish with its back to Azumarill, expression knit tight in pain as the water-type rammed hard into the back of its hood, a shadow over the weed pokémon like a beautiful, toxic shield.

Oddish peered up at it, trying to remember the battle but feeling needlessly guilty as Arbok reeled from the hit. Without command, the grass-type closed its eyes, leaves unfurling as they channelled up a healing, emerald-coloured beam that fired at Arbok as it stood, steady.

“Using Growth on Arbok…” James took in the sight, heart wavering. “That’s wonderful, Oddish!”

The pokémon turned to face him, cheering its name happily at the praise. Arbok’s strength seemed to return with a vengeance, and Jessie smiled a devious smile as she watched its power grow. The lingering feeling of gold against ribbon in her hand pushed her spirit forward.

“Give Azumarill a Glare!”

The snake flipped swiftly around, eyes narrowed and fangs dripping venom, pattern on its hood
paradoxically darkened and glowing an eerie neon. Azumarill had landed on the island just opposite, no time at all to avert its eyes. In the soft mist over the swirling pool that was beginning to dissipate, it saw nothing but the wicked face Arbok wore, chilling it to the bone and gluing its legs to the ground below.

Jessie let out a triumphant laugh, applause ringing in her ears as she watched Azumarill tremble in fear, unmoving.

“Ahahaha! The Haze/Glare combo never fails to do wonders!”

In all her confidence, she hadn’t noticed Gyarados’ shadow about to breach the water, and when it came back with an ear-piercing roar, Misty added her own call to the cacophony.

“Rain Dance, Gyarados!”

It let out a second cry to the heavens, where slate clouds materialized from nothing, booming with thunder as they cracked open and unleashed the drizzle onto the arena.

*Things are getting real, now, Misty peered into the field. Maybe I might get to show them, after all…*

A shining stone dangled off her hair tie, and she fought the urge to palm it.

“Azumarill, you can stay right where you are!” Misty said in reassurance. “Let’s fix those wounds up! Aqua Ring!”

“Quickly, Oddish!” James countered. “Try an Acid attack!”

In the wake of the paralysis, Oddish was far quicker than Azumarill, blocking its attempt with a spurt of searing poison that hit the offending pokémon head-on. It cried out a little louder than James was anticipating, and pieces fell into place in his head, almost painful in how obvious they were.

“Jessie,” he turned to face her. “Azumarill’s a fairy-type!”

“What? So?” she said.

“It’s weak to poison!” he smiled, excitedly. “Come now, we’ve got this in the bag!”

Her eyes went wide, and the smile returned to her face.

“Oh, James, I love it when you talk sense!” she cheered. “Together, then!”

“Oddish,” he said, turning back to the field. “Acid!”

“Arbok, Gunk Shot!”

In near perfect sync, the two poison-types reeled back, firing all manner of toxicity toward Azumarill. Stuck where it was, the aqua rabbit could do nothing. Still tingling with the boost Oddish had given it, the heat in Arbok’s gut burned twice as hot, lingered twice as hard. Azumarill took the hit head on, super-effective and wailing in pain as it fell backwards in a deadly purple shower and didn’t get back up.

Meowth, trying to remain impartial, was fighting a smile from his face, tears staining his eyes.

“A-Azumarill is unable t’ battle!” he called, wiping at his face. He turned to the side, burying himself in Growlie’s mane. “Ohhh, baby’s first knockout! Dis is da proudest I ever been in my nine lives!”
With a few whispered words of thanks, Misty returned Azumarill to its rest. Admittedly, she wasn’t expecting it to go down so fast, even with the double type advantage. The pair in front of her were disjointed, that much was true—but, thankfully, it seemed they were closer to themselves, now.

*This might just get interesting,* she grinned, and didn’t hesitate for a second.

“Gyarados, Hurricane!”

With another violent roar, the atrocious pokémon reeled back and sang its incantation to the upset heavens, an all-out warcry. The false skies hanging above echoed the pokémon’s call with another booming sound, swirling into an unforgiving storm that took siege of the whole arena, its gales an eerie whistle against the thunder above.

“We have to think fast,” James said out loud, knowing Oddish couldn’t take a super-effective hit like that, but knowing its defenses weren’t at all primed to fight it off.

“Arbok, grab Oddish and dive!”

Acting on impulse—same as ever—Jessie called out the command, and her pokémon was out of incredulous looks to give her, at that point.

*“Hold your breath,”* it whispered to the child, and Oddish nodded, unflinching. In one swift motion, Arbok grabbed its leaves in its mouth and shot down into the depths, obscured in the wake of the storm.

Oddish held steady as the force of Arbok’s swimming kept him strapped against its hood, looking like a baby meowth being carried by its scruff. The force of the storms pervaded entirely the surface, but below the waves, there was less to their power, less to overcome. Arbok trained its eyes on the filtered and wobbling window to the world that dwelled above—the storm passed over, its eye directly overhead.

The snake tore forth from the water, flipping Oddish up onto its head mid-ascent while rain pattered inexorably down on the pair. In the midst of the cyclone, their trainers could still see them—desperately fighting to gain upward movement against the merciless monsoon.

“Oddish! Jump, if you can!”

The pokémon heard his call, bending its minuscule knees in an attempt to launch itself further. Sensing this, Arbok lowered its head, preparing itself to fling the smaller pokémon up, where it would sit above the storm.

James trained his eyes on the shifting and moving winds, trying to keep himself on Oddish. He saw the crown of its leaves barely peak out through the hurricane, and seized the opportunity, knowing it would be his only chance.

“Now use Sweet Scent!”

“Arbok, bust through with Gunk Shot!”

Uniform in the eye of the storm, Oddish cried out its name as it unleashed the attack, and Arbok did the same in beautiful sync. Toxins rocketed through the winds and rain and hit Gyarados head on, and the serpent cried out and reeled back toward Misty, mixing its roar with the thundering skies. Where Arbok’s attack hit, Oddish’s dissolved entirely, refusing to materialize against everything, even as the cyclone dissipated to nothing, even as the rains quieted themselves a decibel.
Oddish lost itself in the air, tumbling downward, and Arbok had already fallen back to the waters below—far more still in the now dead air, but still shifting and splashing as the rain fell around it. It peered upward nervously as the younger pokémon struggled for footing, aiming to catch it when it hit the water’s surface.

“A trick like that isn’t gonna work,” Misty announced, droplets hanging from her ponytail. “Pretty hard to mess with the air when the rain susses it out right away!”

James balled a fist, knowing she was right. As long as the rain fell, there was absolutely no chance of them landing an attack like that. He’d have to stick to his offensive tactics.

“Think fast!” Misty said, not giving them even a moment. “Gyarados, hit Oddish with a Hydro Pump!”

Even after taking the powerful hit, the sea serpent had some fight left in it. It angled back as moisture pooled in its open maw, intent to make the hit. A powerful beam of water jetted from its mouth and hit Oddish at a point blank range, and from the center of the water below, Arbok watched in horror as the smaller pokémon cried out in pain and tumbled down to the island directly under.

Blinded in rage and protective fervor, Arbok shot down into the depths, spinning itself to gain momentum and firing itself out of the pool like a cannonball. Jessie saw the look in its eye—intent to protect its young—and read the whims of its heart.

“Arbok, take a bite out of that Gyarados!”

The snake was on it in moments, and Gyarados was hardly expecting the hit. Arbok bit down hard, with all it was, dead set on dealing Gyarados even a fraction of the pain it had inflicted upon Oddish. Wild in the eyes,Jessie’s pokémon persisted, despite Gyarados’ feeble attempts to shake it off.

“Oddish, are you alright?”

The weed pokémon whimpered a little, and Meowth peered nervously into it as it struggled to regain its footing. Despite everything, after only a moment, it stood.

“While it’s distracted, then!” James said. “Absorb!”

Oddish fired its crimson tirade off at Gyarados, genuinely surprised when it made the hit despite the larger pokémon’s violent thrashing. As it hit, the serpent nearly froze, loosing a pained cry while Oddish felt its strength returning, even if only a little. There was still time. They could still take this.

“Gyarados, just focus on the feeling of the rain against your scales!” Misty said, sensing its pain escalating. “It’s nice, right? And it’ll only make your water attacks stronger!”

Her pokémon seemed to steel itself, eyes shut tight but shifting from pained to fighting, fighting to find its center in the wake of the onslaught. The rain fell, water on water on water.

“Let’s finish this, Gyarados! Give it all you got and show Arbok a real Hydro Pump!”

Effortlessly despite everything, the serpent was able to calm itself, fight through the striking pain of fangs at its midsection, and fire off a powerful deluge of vapor at the pokémon assaulting it. In all its swiftness, Arbok could not dodge at such a close range, and it was torn from Gyarados with utmost force, wailing its name as it crashed back down into the water, unmoving.

Soon as it came, the clouds cleared and the rain petered out into nothing. Arbok lay motionless with hood pointed to the sky as the final drops fell to the waters below.
“...A-Arbok is… unable t’ battle!” Meowth said, nervously.

Worried it might sink to the unforgiving depths, Jessie drew her pokéball like a weapon, returning Arbok to its rest swiftly. In the absence of words, she pressed painted lips to the capsule’s surface before minimizing it and returning it to her jean pocket. She eyed James, unsure.

The man carried the stance of someone who was steady in the eye of the storm, but Jessie knew him well enough to see the telltale tremble in his clenched fists. Gyarados stared down Oddish on the field, a war-scarred beast burning its eyes into a child carrying a toy sword. The absence of the rain left a maddening silence in the room, where James could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

*I can’t let this little one hurt,* his thoughts raced. *Haven’t I done enough damage, absent when it needs me and ruled by my own irrational fears?*

“Gyarados, let’s finish this!” Misty said. “Crunch!”

The serpent dove for Oddish, and James realized there was no place to be lost in his thoughts, and no way of shaking them, either. His words tangled in his throat before they came out, shaky and stuttered.

“Dodge it, Oddish!”

The smaller pokémon leapt in the air, and Gyarados got a big mouthful of rock that hindered it for long enough that James could focus in on Oddish as it ascended in its jump. The green of its crown shining in the starlight, bright with dutiful care. His heart quivered, a little, a kinder nostalgia fighting the anxiety that crept like ugly vines around his ribcage.

“Oddish!” he called, more at ease, now. “The rain is no more! If we can get at their defenses, this match is ours!”

Oddish twirled a little in the air, ready for his command.

“Sweet Scent!”

The move felt lovely on his lips, so right, so kind, like the final puzzle piece he’d been searching for since time immemorial. Waiting to call it was nigh agonizing, and he realized finally it was because at its core, it was exemplary of what grass-types stood for.

Grass types, the healers of the universe, the flower-dappled forest-dwellers that wore the green of fields like a welcome banner and drew life from the same sun that kept the world lush and alive. With aromatherapy and herb and medicine at their behest, with the ability to grow flora from the dead soil below. Nurturing, healing, growing.

James loved grass types. He loved them with all his heart, with all he was. The world had elected to make him allergic to half of them and traumatized by one, but his heart refused to change its mind. Despite everything, flowers bloomed around it, infusing his universe with pristine air.

He leaned into it mentally, when Oddish cast the move toward the towering goliath that ruled the seas below—waiting for the quiet breeze, the pinkened air, the scent of honey and muted lavender.

When James opened his eyes, he registered the scene in slow, stuttering points. First, the look of genuine surprise on Oddish’s face as it fell from the powerful blast of air it had loosed from its crown. Then, Gyarados reeling back in agony, a pain that was far too gruesome-looking to make sense. Finally, the way the gentle aroma never came, and how in its place, ugly golden spores melted to nothing as they coloured the water below.
The presence of sound seemed to fade from the room, turning to a foggy sort of base in James’ ears. He didn’t hear Misty’s exclamation of surprise, or Meowth’s uneasy tone, or Jessie’s panicked questions—

“No way…!”

“You’ve got to be—” Jessie whipped her head around wildly, facing her feline companion. “Meowth, that wasn’t right! What’s going on?!”

“I…” the cat stared on, dead-eyed at the battle field. “I t’ink Oddish just learned Stun Spore.”

James took a shaky step back, the feeling of his vision blurring around the edges sending him tumbling to his knees. There wasn’t time for him to focus on the breath in his lungs, the ground beneath his feet—even when his palms hit the slippery pavement, even when water stained his slacks. Saffron starlight swirled in the depths and immediately they were no more, only the colour that they contained. Yellow, yellow, yellow like a golden ring burning a brand into your finger, yellow like the bells that ring over its stain, yellow like foreboding rulers balanced above your shaking hands, yellow like the absence of air in your lungs. The last colour you see before you’re down, the last colour you see before the pain. The cruelest colour, a warning to run.

When he tried to focus in on the world around him, the Cerulean Gym was long gone. All that remained in its place were stifling estate walls and the click of stilettos on polished marble, spores glittering down like meteors en route to the yielding earth below.

“The battle’s off!” Jessie shouted across the waters, and Misty’s heart sped at the urgency in her tone. She nodded without words, calling back her pokémon.

“Meowth, what do we—?!”

“We, uh…” Meowth looked at his back paws, the realization creeping over him. “We went and let Chimecho faint.”

“I know that, fur-for-brains!” she shouted, voice quivering. “What did we do before Chimecho?!”

“He was never dis bad before den!”

In the heat of their anxious bickering, neither of them registered Growlie’s quick movements. Soon as Gyarados had left the field, the dog snatched Oddish up and brought it back to the water’s edge, ignoring its confused protests as it set it down. Once the weed pokémon was practically out of sight, the fire-type was a blur on its way to James.

While Misty nervously asked what was up and the more temperamental half of the team continued to argue, Growlie kneeled in front of James. The man was digging his nails white-knuckle into the linoleum, breathing in shaky bursts that didn’t do much of anything for the cotton stuffed in his head and bursting behind his eyes. He didn’t speak, or scream, or cry—he remained dead-eyed, green on the ground, paralyzed.

Almost methodically, as though it had done this before, Growlie softly pawed at the ground in front of its trainer. When he didn’t respond, the pokémon did it again, more swiftly this time, more present. James flinched a little, stutteringly bringing his eyes up to Growlie’s torso, vision unfocused still.

It gave a low sort of whine—not pained or distressed, more to cement itself as non-threatening. The others had since noticed that this was happening, and Jessie and Meowth had since gotten closer to the scene, watching carefully. Their third stayed frozen for only a moment more, and when Growlie lowered its head to nudge him a little, he seemed to soften.
The pokémon butted at his shoulder, and in a delayed response, James brought himself upward, knees folded. Growlie stayed there, with its head on his, giving another quiet cry. James’ team watched as he gained lucidity, brought a trembling hand to the pokémon’s muzzle, and buried his face deep into its mane, holding tight.

The mansion burned, flames glistening in the gold that lined the estate. A fire that cleansed cursed land and brought new life to the charred earth below. Growlie was there, steady and brave, bigger than any threat but still willing to take on any giant were they willing to show. James sucked in another laboured breath, zeroing in on fur at his fingertips, so often his salvation as he fought for air and bit back tears. Growlie had never let him down before. He was safe.

_I’m safe_, he reminded himself, finally regaining his mind. _I’m safer than I’ve ever been._

Pulling himself away from his pokémon, he finally registered his team—a shaky paw at his backside, a finely manicured hand nervously hovering at his shoulder, unsure if it’s allowed there. Protective, nurturing, adoring.

_I’m safe_, James repeated in his head, and he watched relief fill Jessie’s eyes when she realized he knew it was her and not someone else.

So why am I also more on edge than I’ve ever been?

When the sun was gone and the gym stayed quiet, Oddish kept its eyes open and waited patiently for the humans to settle. Its feet itched to wander in the silence of the night, an urge it was never able to follow without being scooped back up and shushed into bed by Meowth, his senses far more keen to the world around them. To its surprise, Meowth did stir that night—an ear flick in the darkness and a lazy trill as he awakened—but his words were far less authoritative than usual.

“Where ya plannin’ on goin’ tonight, kiddo?” he whispered.

“_I dunno_,” Oddish said back. “_I just go._”

“Fair enough,” Meowth said, stifling a yawn. “Hold up. Let’s liven da place up a little.”

Oddish watched curiously as the cat went for the humans’ bags, pulling out their pokéballs and giving them all a few gentle taps. The whole team materialized—including Greninja—making for a rather cramped room. Meowth addressed them directly, rubbing sleep from his eyes.

“Who’s up for a midnight jaunt?”

Arbok and Weezing nodded easily, the former of the two giving Wobbuffet a shove when he shouted a little too loudly his affirmation to the darkness. Growlie and Greninja were equally enthusiastic, the only hesitant one of the bunch Chimecho, who cast a lingering glance at its trainer’s sleeping form.

“I don’t think I should leave him after today,” it said, and Growlie gave a quiet reassurance, towering in the low light.

“If something’s wrong, I’ll tell you,” it growled, nudging the wind chime pokémon a little. “_Got the best ears this side of Kanto, remember?_”

Chimecho looked to it, then back to James, nervous.
“You promise?”

Growlie nuzzled it further. “I wouldn’t dare lie to you.”

With reluctance fading, Chimecho hovered upwards, making its way out the door with the rest of them. Jessie shut her eyes tighter in the darkness, desperate to pretend she was asleep.

Meowth allowed Oddish to take the lead, its tiny feet pulling them down to lower levels. Fairly early on in the excursion, Greninja lagged behind a little, his eyes peering up toward the battlefield, still sunken and glittering in starlight. The cat noticed, and the party halted for only a moment.

“You good, Greninja?”

The taller pokémon was silent for a moment, pensively staring up at the higher levels.

“It is quite the lavish aquarium,” it said.

“...yeah, no kiddin’,” Meowth agreed.

Another pause. “...are we to believe we’re welcome as guests to—”

“Go play in da pool, Croaker.”

Almost immediately, the ninja gave a swift bow, turning runs to hops as it ascended, and its party descended. Down the staircase a blue glow shone against the walls, and one by one the pokémon made their way down it, taking in the brilliance of the levels below.

There were countless areas in the Cerulean Gym to observe the wellspring of water pokémon that lived there, but the one they’d wandered into was by far the biggest and most cozy. It was more of a lounging room than anything, its deep blue carpets decorated with oceanic patterns, its soft walls colourful to match. Comfortable chairs and couches lined every corner of it, and in its center, facing the window into the pool, was an inviting circular pit decked out in pillows.

In its view, corsola slept quietly on the sandy floors, octillery dreamt from within the holes between sunken rocks. The poliwag played closer to the water’s surface, smiling bright smiles as the moon woke them up. They intermingled with the marill and the wooper, breaching the surface only to dive right back in with tails tangled. Greninja gave a quiet wave from one side of the glass before jetting back off to another corner of the pool, where a huntail was trailing like an angry windsock through the depths. Azure swam reflectively on the painted walls around them, casting the room alight as stars above stone down through it.

Meowth settled down in the pit, head balanced on his arms as he watched the pokémon behind the glass go by. Oddish elected to sit closer, its face practically pressed against the watery wall, eyes sparkling with curiosity. As Arbok and Weezing settled down next to Meowth, and Wobbuffet soon followed, Chimecho took a perch atop Growlie’s head, and the dog folded its paws up to rest next to Oddish.

“Down in front!” Meowth shouted sarcastically, and Growlie gave a half-hearted huff, inching itself a few feet to the left to un-obscure the view.

A quiet fell over them, and Greninja floated to the surface to recline, its body a shadow against the filtered starlight.

“Plan for tonight?” Weezing inquired, and Meowth shrugged half-heartedly.
“Ain’t got one,” he said. “Da kid wanted ta wander. I say dey’s old enough dat we should let ‘em.”

“Well,” Growlie said, turning to face the pokémon in question. “*How are you enjoying traveling with everyone so far?*”

Oddish thought for a moment, finally taking its eyes from the glass.

“*Hm… it’s nice!*” it said, simply.

“*Isn’t it!*” Chimecho added. “*I love being with Master!*”

“*Yeah!*” Oddish continued. “*But… there’s a lot of you. Sometimes it’s scary.*”

Meowth leaned his head on a paw, absentmindedly throwing in his two cents.

“Ain’t not’in’ ta be scared of here, pally,” he said. “We’s a family. A big one… but dat ain’t a bad t’ing.”

“*Family…*” the weed pokémon echoed. “*What is family?*”

“*Loaded question,*” Meowth said. “*I s’pose it’s just… da people ya love, who love ya back.*”

“*Love?*” Oddish tilted itself.

“Geez, kiddo, I wasn’t exactly prepped ‘t’be gettin’ all philosophical-like tonight, ‘least let me grab my guitar…” he trailed off, trying to articulate himself. “Y’know, when ya go to snuggle up t’ Jimmy. What yer feelin’ right den is love. Or when he picks ya up off da ground and holds ya close, dat’s love. Get it?”

“*I think so,*” it said. “*You love me?*”

“What?” Meowth blushed a little, unprepared for the question. “*Course I do. Ya prob’ly don’t remember it, but I raised ya wit’ my own two paws.*”

Oddish smiled, swaying happily as it watched the nocturnals swim. It turned back around to face the pit, then nudged to some of the wooper as they tussled.

“*Family?*” the grass-type said, gesturing.

“*Yes!*” Wobbuffet announced, happily gazing at the friendly play-fight the pair was having. Looking at their fervor, he smiled warmly.

“*They look the same,*” Oddish noted.

“*They do!*” Chimecho said. “*But families can look different, too.*”

On cue, one of the wooper drifted off, riding atop the crest of the singular huntail, who was more than happy to ferry it—despite its intimidating appearance. Oddish watched as they sailed around the enclosure, close as could be.

“*You can have more than one?*” Oddish asked.

“*You can,*” Arbok told it.

“*Do you all?*” Oddish asked, to anyone who had an answer. The group was pensive, reflecting on their pasts. Chimecho, in comparison, was eager to answer.
“Mhm!” it chimed. “My family on the mountain, they were all just like me! Then my family at the carnival, I always came down to say hello! Then Master caught me, and I had a family with him too until he had to go away for a while. But it was okay, cause he left me with the biggest family ever! And they all looked up to me a lot, and then Master came back!”

“Wow,” Oddish said, the scope of it all not entirely registering to such a new thing.

“Family here big,” Arbok said, gesturing with its tail to the room. “But seen far bigger.”

“Much bigger,” Weezing added.

Oddish looked at its feet, feeling a little out of place.

“I only know this family,” it said.

“That’s okay, too,” Growlie peered down at it. “So do I.”

The grass-type grew a couple more galaxies in its eyes, staring at the towering mass of fluff and fur in astonishment.

“But you’re big!”

“I was small just like you, once,” it barked gently. “Still, all I’ve ever known is Master.”

Oddish dropped its gaze back to where its roots were, looking lost. It swiveled again, so that its body was facing the glass, and finally sat back down.

“How come I don’t have a master?”

The elder pokémon exchanged some heartsick looks, knowing what the young pokémon was really asking.

“A pokémon wit’ a master is just a pokémon wit’ good luck,” Meowth said, sounding a little callous. “I ain’t got one eit’er, an’ frankly I ain’t want one. Chin up.”

“What he means is…” Chimecho rolled its eyes. “You don’t need a master to be complete! That’s just one way to be family.”

“I…” Oddish took a moment to formulate its thoughts. “I want one. I want him to be my master, with the pretty soft hair and the nice green eyes.”

More crushed looks. They’d all skirted around the topic, but they knew the conversation was probably going to get there eventually. Before anyone could say anything, Oddish spoke again.

“I don’t think he likes me.”

“Hey now, kid, dat ain’t tr—”

“Jessie didn’t like me!” Wobbuffet proclaimed, shutting the whole room up with the sheer volume of the statement.

Oddish swiveled to face the patient pokémon, but was surprised to see he had unearthed himself from the pit and was walking over to sit beside his younger friend.

“Jessie is… your master?” Oddish asked.
“Yeah! She was mad!” he saluted. “She yelled and yelled and yelled at me!”

This puzzled the smaller pokémon. “But she hugs you a lot now and calls you sweet names.”

“Exactly!” Wobbuffet said.

“What did you do to make her like you?”

“Nothing!” he announced proudly. “I was just patient.”

The weed pokémon wasn’t sure it quite understood. Behind them, Meowth stifled a laugh as he buried his face into his paw, never failing to find amusement in the way Wobbuffet led his life, how he always seemed to know what to say while being completely inarticulate all at once.

“I still… wanna know why I made him upset,” Oddish said, solemn.

Growlie had been sitting with its thoughts for long enough now that it felt confident in the words that rested at its throat. Gingerly, with all the warmth of a fire-type, the dog unearthed a paw from its wild mane and drew Oddish closer to itself, as comforting as gesture as it could muster. The grass-type was no larger than Growlie’s palm, and it leaned into the touch, surprised to find that tears had been pooling in its eyes. Soon as the larger pokémon made contact, it began to cry a little, overwhelmed by the tenderness, overwhelmed by a loneliness it couldn’t yet comprehend.

“My Master has been through a lot of pain,” Growlie told it, holding it closer. “He still needs time to heal.”

“He’s only upset when I come around,” Oddish said, sniffling. “He likes you all.”

Growlie meditated on its words, wondering how much it should say, wondering if what it said could be parsed by Oddish at all.

“Look at the poliwag and the wooper up there,” Growlie said, angling its head as if to point. “You see them?”

“Yes,” Oddish answered. “They’re family. Having a good time.”

“They are,” Growlie said. “I’m gonna tell you a story. Think you can follow along?”

“That sounds nice!”

“It starts like this,” the dog began, and the others peered into it, unsure what angle it was taking. “Once upon a time, there was a wooper. One day, the wooper’s master said: this is my new pokémon. She’s a poliwag, and you have to be friends!”

“Friends are nice,” the grass-type noted.

“They are, but Poliwag didn’t act very friendly to Wooper in this story,” Growlie said. “She was very mean to him all the time. She always pushed him around and called him names. She would tell him that he would be cuter if he was a special pink wooper, instead of a normal blue one. In double battles, she would even attack him instead of the other pokémon.”

“That’s not nice…” Oddish said. “Wooper told his master though, right?”

“He did, but his master didn’t listen,” Growlie shook its head. “He kept saying that maybe Poliwag was right—maybe Wooper did need to change, to learn to be stronger. He wasn’t a very good master, just like Poliwag wasn’t a very good friend. So, heartbroken, Wooper left his ball behind and
ran away, back into the wild and far away from the mean people who hurt him.”

“Is this story happy?” Oddish asked, sounding anxious.

“Yes,” the dog told it.

“I don’t feel happy,” the grass-type said.

“Sometimes, a bit of sadness makes a story happier when it ends,” Growlie said.

“I don’t get it.”

“You will. Should I continue?” it asked, and the smaller pokémon nodded. “Things were very tough for Wooper in the wild. But eventually, he found some friends. Friends who weren’t mean to him, friends who didn’t beat him up or try to change him or make him cry. And they were all very happy, and they all loved each other very much.

“But one day, a new friend wanted to join them. She was very sweet, and very kind, and she had her eye on Wooper, she wanted to be friends with him more than anything. But it was very hard for Wooper to be friends with her, even though she was very nice.”

“Why?” Oddish asked.

“Because she was a poliwhirl.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Every time Wooper looked at her, all he could think about was the poliwhirl from long ago who was mean to him,” Growlie said. “He would fight and fight and fight with himself, he’d say ‘Look here, Wooper! That’s a completely different poliwhirl. She didn’t do anything to hurt you, and she’s very nice!’ but it didn’t always work. A lot of the time, Wooper would take one look at her and freeze up, and his heart would hurt so much he couldn’t even breathe.”

“He couldn’t just fight it harder?”

“He was fighting as hard as he could,” the dog said. “After all, no one wants to feel that scared, do they?”

“I guess not,” Oddish said.

“So even though Wooper and Poliwhirl were both nice pokémon with gentle hearts who had never done anything mean to each other, they had a lot of trouble being friends in the beginning, because Wooper had been hurt a lot, and he needed time to get better. Do you understand?”

“Maybe…” the younger pokémon thought hard. “But I don’t get what that has to do with me.”

“Wooper’s story is Master’s story,” Growlie said, simply. “And you, little guy, are that second poliwhirl, the one who was sweet and kind but came just a little too early.”

Oddish let what it was saying sink in, staring up at the water types as they danced in the filtered moonlight, their tails fluttering behind them gently.

“You said it was happy,” the grass-type chided, a waver in its voice.

“It has a happy ending,” Growlie informed.
“What’s the end?”

“Eventually, Wooper got over his fears after a lot of hard work, and him and Poliwag became best friends forever, and he never cried when he saw a poliwag again. All he saw from then on out was the face of the person he adored most.”

The towering fire-type angled its fur-clad head upwards to the waters as they rippled softly around, muzzle pointed to the sea-dwellers in question as they sunk into laughter, tails coiled in an affectionate sort of handshake. Oddish melted into the sight of blue on blue, dreamt of the sight of green on green.

“...did Poliwag have to wait a long time?”

“Not as long as you might think,” the dog told it, genuinely.

The lot of them sat there in silence, leaning into the feeling of each other’s company and the bittersweet idea of things left unsolved. Meowth buried his face further into folded arms, trying to reconcile the cynicism that lined his bleeding heart. There was a hope he’d held onto that when everything was said and done, his team could all shake hands with their demons, because they were incredible. Whoever they were—super villains, super heroes, super nobodies—they were super, regardless.

It was only in moments like this where he realized exactly how tall an order it was to fill. The cat swatted it away, blinking his eyes shut and trying to focus in on moonlight at his lids. If anyone could do it, it was them.

Wobbuffet wrapped his arm back around Oddish, and Oddish leaned into Growlie, and Growlie shut its eyes while Chimecho buried itself deeper into the dog’s brilliant coat. Behind them, Meowth and the poison types drew closer to each other, a nostalgic formation that felt like a time when everything hurt less.

Not a single piece looked out of place in the humid night.

Pulling herself out of bed, Jessie cast a bitter glance at the seashell-dappled clock as it ticked away methodically on the wall. The room was dreadfully empty with all the Pokémon gone, and the silence it left didn’t help her racing mind.

The redhead dropped her eyes to James, sleeping soundly despite everything. The jealous part of her—so often the only one present—was snuffed out almost immediately by a force that set her at ease. His dreams were not fitful. There was far more to be thankful for than resentful of.

The feeling of it skipped her heart a beat, and she shook the colour from her cheeks like an etch-a-sketch. These interactions were growing tired, far too confusing and leaving her foggy-headed and with a different kind of anxiety swimming under her skin. She certainly wasn’t fond of it, but it wasn’t unwelcome, either.

Jessie walked down the gym halls, footsteps sounding like thunder even without wedge heels and the confidence of a woman running on eight hours of sleep with nothing to lose. She made her way back up to the battlefield, where the bottom of the pool had been opened, leaving a door into the aquarium below. Eyeing the ‘no running’ sign, a reactionary impulse in her heart told her to sprint along its edges with the wind in her hair. Instead, Jessie positioned herself on the edge of the water, dipping bare feet into the reflected stars and leaning back on her palms with a deep exhale.

Pallet Town was barely a few days’ travel away. In no time at all, they would be at its gates, their
journey backward all but complete. Jessie had never been more certain about her good karma—with all she had bled and all she had seen, she knew that even in all their missteps, her and her team were kinder in the universe’s watchful eyes than ever before. Her conscience felt light, and everything else felt heavy.

The woman went back—to burning flames and pounding pulses and green on blue and skin on skin. She wanted the image gone, her and James kissing like that. As if the stakes hadn’t made themselves higher than they’d ever been the second they set foot on Kanto soil, now she was having new feelings for someone she’d known for ages without much trouble.

It wasn’t a big deal, she attempted to tell herself. You’ve kissed him countless times before. You’ve gone full-on PDA with him for disguises. You literally made out with him in a broom closet after training! What makes this so different?

Jessie and James were one entity, in so many ways. At times, it seemed as though if they stopped touching, they would stop breathing. The more she thought on it, the less sense it made. What changed?

She ran events in her head, trying to form a coherent timeline, but no single event seemed to click as a turning point. Maybe it was the night they spilled their lives to each other by the thunderous waterfalls, but that made no sense—it was the same static rattling around her heart that made her run after him in the first place. It had always been present, it had just gotten louder, and she wasn’t sure how she felt about that and all it implied.

It was that kiss, though, that made everything awkward and stuttery and wrong. That was the hardest part to reconcile—every time she thought back on the feeling of their lips against each other, nothing about it felt anything other than right.

For far too long now, in succession with it all, she’d found James’ problems slowly overtaking her own in her heart. So often, she worried about him rather than herself, and it wasn’t anything she was equipped to deal with. She’d foolishly assumed that after what had happened on the estate, James’ wounds would have healed a little with the closure. Instead, he’d only gotten worse with time.

It was easy to control her own destiny, to beat back her over-sensitive heart and replace her fears with fire and drive, replace despair with action. Taking hold of someone else’s fate to soothe their pain was harder, and that was under the assumption that it was her place to do so at all.

Jessie opened her eyes again, staring into the still cosmos below. She followed the ripples on the water to the center of the pool, where staryu had floated to the surface with glowing cores pointed toward the stars, blinking morse code hellos to distant relatives. They shone steady and scarlet, and she watched enraptured, willing her heart to slow itself and beat in calming sync with theirs.

“They’re just gorgeous, huh?” Misty’s voice came from behind her, pulling her out of her feverish ponderings. The girl was standing with her arms hooked behind her back, eyes on the skylight-dappled water as she spoke. Jessie turned her head to meet her, and the girl kept on, walking forward toward the enclosure.

“Y’know, they say that billions of years ago, when stars exploded in the sky, the stardust fell down into the oceans and grew into staryu,” Misty continued. “Every night, if you go out on the water, you can find them floating along the surface with their centers blinking up at the sky like that. Almost like they’re phoning home.”

Misty sat, not bothering to ask if she could. It was her gym, after all. A foot or two from Jessie, but still beside her, trying to breach the surface of the waters that raged inside the woman.
“Lemme guess,” the Leader said. “Can’t sleep?”

Jessie looked back to the rippling stars, too tired to build walls. “There’s a sizeable amount on my mind right now.”

Misty toed at the water, trying to figure a way to gracefully navigate the conversation. Again, she searched her own past, unable to shake the image of raven hair and honey-brown eyes. Memories that might have been romantic on anyone else, but were more like comfort food than anything, to her.

“Boys’ll really do a number on themselves and on you in the process, huh?” she said, and Jessie sighed in agreement.

“How on earth did I get to a place where day in and day out I’m emotionally spent worrying about the wellbeing of someone other than my gorgeous self?” she lamented.

“Some of us are just unlucky,” Misty said. “I mean, you’d think watching some idiot almost die would lose its impact after a while, but there I was, still losing my cool over it every time.”

“That’s a dose of perspective,” Jessie noted, oddly serene for a moment. “Perhaps my troubles aren’t quiet as dire as I think. I cannot imagine the ever-present stress of being in close camaraderie with the Twerp.”

“Self-sacrifice gained a sentient personification,” the girl agreed. “And its name is Ash Ketchum.”

“Hear hear, or whatever,” Jessie said, raising an invisible glass to the sparkling heavens.

Misty looked back down to the waters, a fumbling transition as she persisted.

“Not all boys are the same, though,” she said. “I can… Well, I can tell that the issues bothering James are a far cry from what bothered Ash.”

“It’s strange to suddenly be privy to those issues, I think,” Jessie said.

“...were you not before?”

“God, no,” the woman admitted, and Misty looked genuinely surprised.

“But you guys are so close!” she said. “You really never talked about your feelings?”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, twerpette, but none of us do the whole ‘feelings’ thing particularly well,” Jessie rolled her eyes. “I know. Shocking that we’re not all beings of pure finesse, what with how good we are at everything else.”

“Right, right,” Misty waved her off. “So you really went all this time without knowing about James’ life before Team Rocket? What about that time you literally marched him up to his estate and tried to marry him off for cash?”

Jessie blushed, more out of anger than anything. Knowing what she knew now, she was deeply ashamed of everything that had gone down that day—of binding him, of taking away his autonomy, of waving off his fears and warnings, of running as soon as they saw the dungeon. She was not at all a woman accustomed to self-hatred, but it was one of the single solitary moments where she wanted to pull herself from the timeline and ring her own neck.

“I…” she fought for articulation, knowing anything she said would make her sound stupid or like
someone looking for an excuse. “I simply didn’t understand. I thought it must have been a joke. Some kind of upper-society way of life a starving whelp like me could never comprehend. Questions don’t do much for making you sound more intelligent.”

“Wow…” Misty said, considering if she believed it. “That’s weird. Before you guys seemed so close, but you actually didn’t really know anything about each other. And now you’re closer than ever, but on the outside…”

She stopped, catching the words as they fell from her mouth. The girl had only been pondering aloud, not thinking about what she was and wasn’t allowed to say. Jessie eyed her, not intent on letting the slip go unended.

“…on the outside… what?”

“Um, I just…” Misty was caught, so she elected to be truthful. “You guys are different now. Like, you don’t finish each other’s sentences anymore. You’re not… always touching all the time, like you used to be. And that battle earlier, you seemed so out of sync, up until the very end. It’s been bugging me all day… it’s like seeing someone from your past who you missed a lot, but they got a really bad haircut and never told you.”

“Can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’d rather chance the haircut,” Jessie sighed again. “Far better than to be caught halfway between gratitude that I understand my best friend better… and this resentful feeling that ignorance truly was bliss.”

The younger girl looked to her, remembering the day’s events. “Maybe you can reason it out. I mean, do you know why he freaked out today?”

“It’s that Oddish of ours,” she said. “It’s such a darling little thing, but James’ wretched cesspit of an ex-fiancé took pleasure in rendering him catatonic with the same species of pokémon. Usually he’s fine, but the Stun Spore must have taken him back to a less pleasant time.”

“Oh…” Misty said, giant petals and cloudy golden spores fading back from buried memories. “That makes sense. So he’s saddled with a pokémon he’s got some issues with because of a bad experience?”

“I’d put it more at ten or twenty experiences, knowing her,” Jessie spat. “It sounds ridiculous on paper. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“No, it… it doesn’t sound ridiculous at all,” the girl attested, her fingertips shakily tracing the keystone that hung ornamental from her hair.

“In any case, it feels entirely like my problem now,” Jessie said. “I already feel things far too strongly. Do I really need his feelings too?”

“That’s kinda what you sign up for when you really care about someone, much as it hurts,” Misty said, like Jessie didn’t know already. “But I mean, if anyone can handle it, it’s probably you.”

“Oh, flattery,” Jessie sighed dreamily. “I forgot how healing you were.”

“Is this a good time, then?” Misty said, with a grin. “To tell you how much I hated that I kinda looked up to you in the past?”

“Compliments with side notes of sass,” the woman noted. “Colour me curious, twerpette!”

“Well, you were kinda the worst, I don’t know if you remember,” Misty said.
“I don’t! Fancy that.”

“...but even still, you were this force of confidence who was super pretty and didn’t let anyone tell her what to do, and I was always a little jealous of that,” she traced the waters below with her foot, pink on her cheeks. “Every time I tried to be like that, people just thought I was nothing but nasty, they’d call me a boy ‘cause I guess only boys can speak their minds. But you were a criminal, and you still found a way to make it look... fashionable?”

Jessie laughed—a singular, discordant laugh. “People absolutely think I’m nasty, and perhaps I am. The key difference here is I couldn’t care less what they think.”

“I know, but like... you’re nasty in glitter and pink, the way you want to be seen,” Misty said. “I had to work twice as hard to be a... normal girl as my sisters did, and still it feels like everything I do is under constant watch. Like if I do anything even a little ‘boyish’... whatever that means… I’ll lose what I fought so hard to be.”

“You had to work twice as...” Jessie trailed, trying to make sense of the words, noticing the way Misty looked at the water, not at her. “Oh. I suppose I never knew.”

“Good,” the girl said, trying not to smile. “The point is, I wish I could loud like you without everyone attributing it to something they thought I was in the past. Keeping my boldness in check when I needed it most is the reason there’s still so much I need to say.”

“You seemed boundlessly bold a brat to me,” Jessie assured her. “Always the one with the loudest mouth, at least.”

“Never when it mattered!” Misty retorted. “Ugh, I spent like two hours rehearsing in the PokéCenter mirror what I was gonna say to Ash when I said goodbye to him that first time, and I just froze up! And every time I saw him after, I just wondered if things woulda felt less heavy if I had just spit it out.”

“...spit what out, exactly?”

“That I had a hopeless crush on him!” Misty near yelled, red-faced. “I mean, come on, don’t play dumb, you knew!”

Jessie stifled a laugh, trying not to tempt the girl’s temper she’d worked so hard to assuage over time. “In your defense, I think all his friends are just a touch enamoured with him. Certainly the Kalosian twerps. And the blue-haired one. Not bandanna twerpette, her taste in close relationships could not be worse…”

“Of course they are, he’s an unattainable goofball with a heart made of absolute gold and his stupid coffee-grind eyes could make anyone weak,” Misty said, bitterly lovestruck.

“I don’t know where you’re getting this idea that you’re far from me, twerpette,” Jessie noted. “You sound exactly like my wretched internal voice trying to process romantic feelings.”

“Because something tells me you would march up to that voice and deck it in the nose,” the girl answered. “But me, I stayed frozen to the spot because Ash and Brock and I were this wonderful triad, perfectly balanced. If I told Ash I liked him, there was the chance it could make everything between us completely awkward. And weird as it sounds, I liked us as a trio more than I ever would have liked us as a pair.”

The more words fell from her, the more a creeping feeling began to take hold of Jessie. She peered into Misty—a savage redhead with a romantic heart who was spilling her worries to the night,
enamoured with this hopelessly self-sacrificial boy and his golden garden of a soul—and tried to ignore the thoughts that permeated all she was, their faces up against each other looking like a mirror image in her mind’s eye.

“...and you regret that?” Jessie inquired.

“Yes!” Misty said. “What a stupid, self-centered way of thinking. Real friendships don’t just crumble like that! Maybe it woulda been weird for a bit, but we would have broken down and talked through it eventually. Or Brock would have forced us into group therapy and had Onix bolt the door. Either way, it’s dumb that I thought our bond was so fragile it’d be ruined by something as silly as a crush.”

“A… ahahaha… right…!” Jessie laughed, a little nervously. She dropped her gaze from the girl to the water, looking almost frightened. “Dumb as can be...”

“So what I was *saying* before I got all up in my own feelings was,” Misty continued. “You’re a force of nature. You know what you want and you take it. If that was you in my position, you woulda marched right up to the love of your life and proposed to them then and there. And whatever troubles have you and your terrifying trio on edge, they’re gonna disappear in time. Because as much as my younger self would hate to hear me say it, you kinda kick ass, Jessie.”

“Potty mouth,” the woman noted, swimming in her own ego and trying to drown the other implications of Misty’s commentary.

“Is the ex-con gonna tattle on me? Hope you’re patient, ‘cause my sisters won’t be home for another seven months.”

“Touché,” Jessie relented, pushing her thoughts back down. “I suppose you’re right, though. I’ve survived far worse than the sudden and irritating acquisition of human empathy.”

“Arguably the most stereotypically villainous thing you’ve ever said,” Misty pointed out.

“Look at that! And I only had to stop being a villain to say it.”

Jessie stood with a stretch, placing a hand on her hip as she stared out at the waters again. The staryu drifted, knocking into each other like paper lanterns, glowing just the same. Misty watched the woman’s gaze follow them, bringing her own along. There was a brief silence before the girl spoke, sensing that Jessie was done talking for tonight.

“Staryu are resilient, too,” she picked up where she left off before sitting down. “If you cut one of their arms off, they’ll grow it back in a matter of days, sometimes twice as strong. The only way to knock them down is to destroy their cores, and even then, they’re hard as steel.”

Jessie smiled a little, knowing where the girl was going. She closed her eyes.

“Violet always used to mention that, and she’d tell me that in order for a star to be born, a nebula had to crumble to nothing. Whenever I was sad, especially when I fell apart, I’d just think about how it was only an origin story.”

Waterlogged footsteps on the tile below quietly echoed as Jessie opened her eyes back up and walked away. She disliked the narrative that pain was necessary to make a person stronger—but in her case, there was some truth to it. If callous and prideful and walled-in was stronger, at the very least.

In any case, Misty wasn’t entirely wrong. Just when the caterpie thought its world had ended, it became a butterfree.
“It’s been nice talking, Jessie,” Misty waved, still by the water. “Here’s hoping sleep is nicer to you this time.”

As Jessie neared the bedroom, she found herself getting more riled up, the compliments dissolving, everything else that had been said taking their place. Her head hit the pillow, and she pulled covers over her face, suffocating in her own frustration, wishing she could scream into a pillow without stirring James.

*What is that twerpy little redhead even talking about, comparing her and twerp classic to me and James,* she writhed, ignoring the fact that Misty hadn’t said anything like that. *For starters, we’ve got far more class than a bunch of children! Not even noting the fact that I’m not hopelessly and embarrassingly in love with him—he’s James!*

She turned, pouting like a child as she came up for air, eyes peering bitterly out of the blankets.

*I’ve been in love countless times, the adoration I have for my most dear friend and partner is hardly romantic,* Jessie fought, to no one but herself. *Sure, I don’t exactly blame anyone who sees it that way! I am always concerned with his well being, and time apart from him for too long can weigh heavy more than I’d like to admit, and maybe every time I picture my future he’s beside me despite all odds, but I hardly think that’s grounds for—*

Jessie stopped herself. Slowly, she pulled covers from her nose, eyes growing wide despite her best efforts to keep them from filling with galaxies. Agonizingly sluggish, she turned to face James.

On the bed opposite, he was still peacefully dreaming, lavender tresses decorating his cheek, tantalizingly soft. She watched intently as he shifted a little in his sleep, memorizing the way his grass-stained nails gingerly held the sheets beneath. Tank top falling off one shoulder, his chest rose and fell steadily, perfectly rhythmic, like a staryu’s doppling core. Jessie’s heart lurched forward, painting her face a foreboding red.

She whipped her head back around, intent on staring at the cutesy nautical wallpaper until she perished right then and there.

*Oh my god,* she laid there, sleepless, mortified.

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“I’m going to be sick.

“Pallet next, then?”

“Eesh. Don’t say it, kid.”

Parting with Misty wasn’t something the former Rockets figured would be as hard as it was proving to be. Of all the twerps they’d known, she was by far one of the most abrasive and difficult. In her age, though, there was a certain peace that she’d seemed to gain in time, still waters after the typhoon blew over. It was calming, to say the least.

“You’ll do great!” she said with a smile, hands behind her back. “Tell Tracey I said hi, okay?”

“Who?” Jessie whispered, and Meowth elbowed her leg, eliciting a pained grunt and a threat through fangs.
“We’ll be sure t’ tell da art twoihp you’s sendin’ love from sleepy Cerulean City,” he boasted, moving Oddish out of the way so he could use his free paw to place it over his heart like a sigil.

“If you want my advice, go to Delia first,” Misty suggested. “She’ll scoop you up and invite you in, and once she’s sweet on you, she’ll fight anyone in town who dares say otherwise.”

“... her?” James arched an eyebrow.

“It’s always the kind ones,” Misty said, and the trio shared a look before nodding sagely in quiet agreement.

They took off mid-day, when the rain had started and stopped again but the overcast still lingered, painting the city grey. Almost as soon as they hit the air, they saw it—turning their heads one by one, a brilliant rainbow that nearly looked within reaching distance as they soared through the sky. The sight of it filled the lot of them with a sort of nostalgic serenity—that of four people momentarily stuck in their childhoods, where every little uplifting sign when you were sad meant the universe was sending you signals that everything was going to be okay in the end.

Instinctively, Jessie slowly grabbed James’ hand, finger by finger. It was the first time they’d made contact in days, every little touch he wanted to lean into pervaded with the unpleasant thought—what if everything’s different now? Am I overstepping? Does she know I love her now? And am I allowed?

Every empty space between the two of them stained with anxieties that ran uncomfortably through her head—has he finally gotten sick of me? Is it going to be this way forever?

Misty was right about far more things than she had the right to be correct about for someone so young. One, Jessie was the baddest bitch in the room—seizer of her own destiny, personification of iron and fire. Two, there were insurmountable similarities in not only them, but in their circumstances, whether Jessie was ready to admit that or not. And, lastly, most importantly, despite all that ran against it—

“James? Meowth? Wobbuffet?” Jessie said, almost too quiet to hear, her eyes on the sky ahead, the sprawling emerald hills of Pallet on the horizon.

James’ heart soothed itself at her hand in his. “Yes?”

“What’s up, Jess?”

“I have this wonderful feeling we’re going to be okay.”

Below them, tan and umber ducked into a shaded alleyway, eyes looking to the colour-stricken sky before they dissolved quietly back into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

sorry that i wrote a 9k battle. i really didn't think it would be that long, but then the muse took me.
next chapter is pallet! haha, what the fuck.

from that point on, the rest of the story will more or less take place in pallet, with some exceptions where they venture outside. there is a lot waiting there for them, whether they realize it or not, and i am very excited to write it all!

a lot of things went unresolved in this chapter, and a lot of things will until the very end. but they're getting closer, and i am so excited.

thank u for reading and for being so patient with me and my horrendously slow updates OTL

as always, i will do my best!
Staring up at the muted sky blue finish of the humble dwellings, the former Rockets wondered how such an inviting colour could look so imposing against the green of Pallet’s endless fields. Generally, one expects the finish line to feel like a breath of relief. The four of them hadn’t anticipated the idea that when they’d reached it, they’d stand on the strip frozen, trapped in its black and white finish as though they were caged.

Behind them, an orange mailbox stood sturdy, the name Ketchum emblazoned in gold cursive finish. Above them, clouds drifted. The town remained quiet, and they continued dead-eyed from beneath the house’s awning, eyes on the door.

“You knock,” Jessie uttered, nudging Meowth with her heel, and the cat pushed back, tone pointed.

“Like hell!” he spat. “Jimmy knocks!”

James shook out of his semi-dissociative stupor, childishly calling the first excuse that came to mind in retaliation.

“Nose goes!”

“Dat’s dirty!” Meowth countered. “Wobbuffet and I ain’t got noses!”

Despite the protest, he had a paw at his face lightning fast, bested only by the humans opposite. Wobbuffet had been standing quietly with Oddish balanced on his head, registering the moment only a second too late. In his panic, he watched as the devious grin his trainer wore so well overtook her, and she looked him dead in the face.

“Fair’s fair, darling,” Jessie said, nudging him forward. “Go on now.”

The patient pokémon gave her a near-incredulous look before the internal debate with himself started — why wasn’t he used to this by now? Resigned, he waddled forward, makeshift hand raised in a nervous hover over the faded wood of the door. Before he could make another movement, it creaked open swiftly, replaced by dark warm greys and tufts of brilliant orange fur.

In front of them, an incineroar proudly towered in the doorway, and the humans were caught somewhere, wondering if they’d somehow gotten the wrong house. Meowth was opposite, his eyes sparkling with something undetectable as he peered up at the taller pokémon.

“It can’t be…” he whispered, pride like sunbeams off his words.
“Litty, dear,” Delia’s voice came from the other room. “Is someone out there?”

At its singsongy cadence, the group immediately straightened, their backs like wood planks pointed toward the sky. Vocal chords tangled, composure going as soon as it had come, they watched as she pushed past Incineroar, her pastel-decorated watering can in hand.

“Well, hello!” she greeted, pushing past her curiosity. “What can I do for you?”

Hospitable a woman as ever, they found Delia’s kindness infinitely intimidating. Envisioning it vanishing in an instant was easy—whether or not that was because it was preferable was up for debate.

“Pardon da intrusion, ma’am,” Meowth said, oddly polite. “Ya see, we’s actually... acquaintances... of ya son’s.”

“Oh, what a surprise!” Delia smiled warmly, free palm pressed to her cheek. “You’ll have to forgive me for not recognizing you, that boy picks up friends faster than I can keep up with.”

She doesn’t recognize us, their hivemind seemed to melt into. That complicated things. Undoing the tangle of wires that was this conversation was hard enough—none of them had really thought about introducing themselves, self-centered as they were.

Oh, hello there Miss Ketchum. You see, we stalked your only child for most of his independent life with the ultimate end goal of ripping his best friend and soulmate out of his hands so we could sell it for a quick buck...

A heavy sigh, in sync and typical of them as they gathered their thoughts. Delia tilted her head a little, not sure why they were so gloomy all at once.

“You must’ve heard he’s bound for home, soon,” she pressed on. “I’ll admit, despite cleaning all morning, I wasn’t entirely prepared for guests!”

Jessie’s eyebrow twitched a little, and she steeled herself in its wake. Not everything was a sign from the universe. Delia kept talking, their silence paving the way for her.

“...but you’re welcome to stay in Pallet while you wait for Ash to come home! After you went through all the trouble of getting out here...”

Old habits not only died hard, but refused to die in any way that didn’t involve fireworks and a spectacular blaze of glory.

Jessie hardened her stance, eyes fluttered shut and painted lips crested with a smile, as she threw off her sunhat and unspooled her hair in a beautiful, fluid, dramatic motion.

“Trouble we’re long prepared for, you’ve heard our names!”

Her partner was back to back with her instantly, reading the subtleties in her body language and snapping into place like a sturdy lock. He removed his shades with a jolted flash of lavender. This was infinitely easier.

“Hers is Jessie and mine is James!”

“The terrible trio, reborn in a blazing light!”

“Friend to all who lend softened hearts to our plight!”
They’d been striking poses within the confines of the doorstep, intent on working with what the universe had given them. Meowth leapt to land on their arms outstretched, a sturdy bridge beneath his paw pads.

“Me-owth! Dat’s right!”

“Wob~buffet!”

“Oddodd!”

To their surprise, Delia’s face actually lit up mid-way through, and she responded to their motto with a quiet sort of clap that a mother would give in delighted enthusiasm for her kid’s talent show performance. Incineroar looked tired. Mimey had been hovering a few feet behind her like a curious child, equally tired.

“Oh, I recognize you now!” she chimed, joy fading into genuine curiosity. “What are you three troublemakers doing on my doorstep?”

“We’ve come to…” Jessie started, grasping for words. “Well, you see—”

The sentence stuck to her tongue, chalky and unpalatable. Unable to follow her lead, James dropped to hands and knees, a position tried and true. His teammates got the memo and quickly followed, their heads dutifully bowed at the feet of Delia and her small surrounding of Pokémon. Oddish stood at the sidelines, peering into them.

“Please forgive us!” the lot of them barked in perfect unison, palms on the warm concrete as the sun swam above. It was James who raised his head first, once more, espousing the tale to her.

“There’s nowhere to begin with the trials we’ve put that twerp of yours through!” he admitted, shamefully. “It’s been a long, long journey with a thumbtacked road… but we’ve finally reached our destination.”

“Here,” Jessie affirmed, not meeting Delia’s eyes. “...in the origin of our longest criminal pursuit of all.”

“I know askin’ fer fahgiveness must sound real rich of us…” Meowth added. “But if ya can find it in dat heart o’ yours… we’d spend da rest of our days here fixin’ ta make it up to da both o’ yous.”

They bowed their heads again, a collective tremble reignited in their forms. Delia stood an angel of judgment above them, embroidered slippers at their temples as they forced themselves to the lowest they could possibly get. The level they laid at didn’t feel like enough—the group wanted nothing more than to crawl beneath the concrete, resign themselves to the earth below.

A long silence. The woman shifted, a little. Her voice was light and airy when it came.

“Oh, you mean all those little games you played with Ash?” she smiled. “Well, you certainly seem to have finally learned your lesson about picking on him!”

The former Rockets’ heads snapped upward, step one in a long line of disbelieving gestures.

“What exactly,” Meowth started. “Are ya sayin’?”

“No need to apologize to me!” she waved them off, cheery as ever. “What, you think he didn’t tell me you might stop by?”
They were on their feet in an instant, sharing incredulous looks with each other. All the tension of the moment had vanished in the wake of her sunny disposition, and in its place piercing questions remained. The Twerp had told her? He had anticipated that very moment, them on their hands and knees on his mother’s doorstep?

There’s no way the lad has that kind of foresight, James thought quietly to himself.

...which means, it was all blind faith he kept in us and our promise.

He didn’t notice that he’d been overcome with the sentiment, swelling in his heart—not until he felt the beginnings of tears line his eyes, not until he looked to his friends and saw them all equally touched. They’d reached the conclusion without words, as a team—like they so often did.

Ash Ketchum never said anything aloud he didn’t believe with all his heart. They stood there at his origin, its presence all around them—Pallet’s air swirling the grass like ocean waves, its vast open fields unending green, its windmill towering like a brilliant sentinel, watching. Ash was not here, but they felt him like the kindest spirit, arms outstretched.

“Well?” the wind seemed to whisper, its voice sounding a mirror to his. “How do you feel, knowing it’s finally over?”

Goosebumps crawled on their skin. Delia saw the intricacies of their expressions as they processed her comment and all it implied. She softened, placing a free hand on James’ shoulder, looking from him to the others one by one.

“You all must have traveled such a long way to get here,” she said. “So! Let’s all go inside and have some of my home cooking.”

Her pokémon were making faces at each other in the background, clearly wary of the idea. Mimey chattered something to Incineroar, and the bigger pokémon crossed its arms indignantly.

“M… Miss Ketchum—” James stammed out, and she stopped him immediately.

“Delia,” she corrected, brightly. “And it wasn’t a question!”

With that, she turned swiftly and strolled back toward the kitchen, leaving her door open and the former Rockets framed by it, looking like an awkward family photo through the sunlight shining in.

Another breeze blew past them, singing through the trees. The boys looked to Jessie, her subtly awed gaze stuck on Delia as she went.

“...d’ya t’ink it’s really dat simple?”

Meowth’s voice snapped her out of it, and she took a moment to recompose herself. James peered into her, wanting to paw at her arm tenderly but still feeling sheepish about touches that used to be so easy.

“Jess?” he gave instead, his voice lilting her heart in that annoying way it did. She turned to him with stars in her eyes, fighting it with all she was.

“A meal’s a meal, team!”

Jessie grabbed James’ hand with an almost ferocity, practically dragging him inside as she went. As of late, every touch seemed laced with absolute passion, every embrace almost aggressive in its adoration, willing itself to be made known. It was a far cry from the casual James was used to—he
wondered if maybe he’d fallen so hard, he couldn’t help but notice, now. There was comfort in her rough and calloused hands gripping his tight, in her chipped manicure girlishly entwining with his shaking own. Every detail of her burned itself into him, only now it felt like her own doing, purposeful.

His heart shot forward, one instance in a long line of lapses in sentience that James knew he was going to have to confront soon. He’d missed this, though—oh, how he’d missed this—so for now, he was enjoying its comfort.

The man let his feet give way, following his partner’s lead. Behind them, the pokémon trailed, their eyes stuck on how the rift that had been cataclysmic between the two was slowly but surely vanishing from sight.

James was cursing himself, currently, for his dull wit failing to notice that he was gripped tight in the abode of a woman who aligned herself with a fairy-type partner. He’d heard tales of the fae, spoken in hushed whispers—of the good times they promised, of the safe havens they provided. Most of all, he heard of their food, so enticing and ambrosial that a single taste would keep you bound to their playground forever, insatiable. He was certain they were true now, casting another glance at Delia. From the wispy, inviting way she moved to the gentle touches she seemed to give like charity to the absolutely addicting allure of her cooking. Perhaps there was still time for him to escape her charms, but Jessie was far gone, looking at the older woman like she was a golden goddess.

The afternoon sun was beating down on the back porch where the group was sitting, trying to pull themselves back from the dizzying stupor that a full stomach and a lowered guard brought on. Around them, their pokémon pranced through the yard, caught in all manner of rest and play. James took another long swig of his soda, glass on foggy glass as he set it back on the outdoor table, fidgeted with its cap across his fingers.

He hadn’t been talking much—now, and as of late, in general—lost in his own thoughts. The thunderclouds that towered above his heart had begun to clear little by little, but the softer storms that replaced them still came with their own caveats. The nightmares had loosened up, time didn’t disappear in chunks, he was slowly but surely spending less time wondering what year it was and where he currently resided.

In contrast, it seemed to have happened overnight, Jessie becoming a little brighter. Talking with her affection, her hands never leaving his, far more physical than they’d ever been before. She shone with a sort of loving brutality, one he was easily able to pinpoint—it was the sort of ambition and drive she only took on when the universe told her in some way that she was not in control of her own destiny.

James combed his mental index, trying to figure out what it was that would have inspired that pushback from her, but came up short. He’d been so lost within himself, there wasn’t much time to index much of anything.

From the chair adjacent, Delia leaned forward, enraptured by the tales Jessie and Meowth were spinning. A hand on her knee, another on her cheek, not even noticing that Incineroar had stopped rearranging the furniture inside to bring her a drink refill. It gave a quiet rumble, and she turned to face it, almost bashful.

“Thank you, Litty,” she smiled, taking the offering and giving it a doting chin scratch. Meowth could see it trying to resist, but its knees easily gave way, leaning into the touch like it wasn’t a part of the everyday routine.
“Can’t believe it,” Meowth said. “It really is you…”

“Oh, do you know this one?” Delia said, gears turning in her head. “It’s one of Ash’s, so I suppose that makes sense. You’re not so different—it has quite the storied past, too.”

“Trust me, I know,” Meowth regarded it, trying to ward painful empathy from his bursting heart. He swear he saw the bigger cat’s eye catch his for only a moment, searching for something. Delia moved on, looking at the pokémon as they ran through the yard and napped in the sunlight.

“To be honest, if I had any doubts about the three of you, they would’ve gone away when I saw the little family you’re touting,” she tucked a loose lock of auburn behind her ear, taking in the scene. “Just look at how close they all are. There’s so much to be said about one’s character by looking to their pokémon.”

“Well, that’s hardly a new thing,” James noted. “We’re all old friends, you see. The only real newcomer is…”

His breath stuttered a little as he turned to Oddish, half-buried in an empty patch of loose dirt and out like a light. Its leaves twitched peacefully as it dreamed, serene as ever. “…that one,” he finished.

“And look at how easily it fits in,” Delia said, her gaze fixated on how Chimecho and Wobbuffet were passed out and comfortable right beside it, paradoxically peaceful and vigilant at once. Her words sunk in, and James realized just how much truth there was to them—Oddish didn’t look like an outsider. It was right where it belonged.

Their family was large, and closely woven together, roots beneath the soil crisscrossed and braided and impossible to untangle with even the sharpest of tools. There was an empty spot that was lingering, though, and the words fell off James’ lips before he had the chance to filter them.

“Delia, by any chance might you have a phone I could use?”

She tilted her head a little, perplexed but willing to roll with the sudden inquiry. “I do,” was her answer. “But why?”

“Well, it’s easier than walking to a pokémon center, isn’t it?” he feigned a smile, hoping it would smother the nervousness blossoming in his heart. “There’s someone I need to call.”

Sensing the resolve in his voice, she directed him to where the video phone sat in the humble little corner of the home. His back was turned, but he could discern what went on behind it by foot shuffles and experience—Jessie stood up, intent to follow, her confidence still spilling over. Meowth silently pawed at her, and she looked to her feet, registering his sentiment that maybe they should let their friend take the reins on this one.

He did. James sat, hands tightly balled on his thighs as he closed his eyes, breathed slow and deep. There wasn’t anything terrifying about this, per se—he had no ugly truths to confront, no baggage left behind. Still, anxiety fluttered in his heart, making problems where none existed prior. Testing his memory and surprised to find he knew the number by heart, he slowly typed it in and tried not to dissolve to nothing in the static of the ring.

Seconds that lasted hours. Crackles in the artificial sounds. There was nothing to worry about—their cadence only meant that with every moment he was a step closer to something lovely.
“Eterna Gym!” Gardenia announced, as professionally as she was capable of. “What can I do for—”

She opened her eyes mid-way through the cheery greeting, and it took her a moment before she registered James. When she did, her gaze filled with a swirl of cosmos, voice at its usual fever pitch, distorting the speakers in all their shoddy quality.

“James!” she shrieked, delighted beyond all belief. Just as quick as she’d materialized on the screen, she disappeared, the only thing taking her place an unending sea of green. James’ heart stopped racing, slowed to a comfortable and soothing quiet at the sight. Cacturne had its face pushed up against the camera, trying to hug him from miles away.

“Turne!” it practically chirped, shining eyes pressed tight in rapture.

There was never anything but this—pure, uncondensed love—waiting for him on the other end. Why he feared these calls eluded him entirely.

“Cacturne, I’m happy to see him too, but we’ve been over this!” Gardenia said, pulling the pokémon away from the receiver like an oversized doll. “You’re gonna scratch my video screen up, you big goof!”

It didn’t at all seem perturbed by being scolded, a smile for every day of the week stuck on its face.

“It’s so nice to see you!” James said, emotional already. “I’m sorry it’s been so long since I’ve called, things have been rather… complicated, as of late.”

“Hey, I don’t think Cacturne minds,” Gardenia assured him. “Do you?”

She turned to the pokémon, who cheered out a little fragment of its name, completely unbothered.

“That’s quite the relief,” he continued. “In any case, I feel bad these conversations rely on me calling. Though, now that we’ve reached the end, I’m… unsure how long that may be the case.”

“Woah, is that why you’ve been gone so long?” Gardenia pried. “Are you for real in Kanto?”

“The one and only,” James nodded. “We’re all the way in Pallet.”

“Pallet?!” she marveled. “That hick joint?! What kinda business do you have in—”

From one hundred words a minute to utter silence, as though the wind was completely knocked out of her. Both James and Cacturne peered into Gardenia, watching gears slowly turn in her head.

“James,” she finally said, then repeated it with a gleeful tone that signaled a fast crescendo. “James!”

“Uh… yes?”

“You’re in Pallet!”

He looked to his surroundings, as if to confirm. “So I am.”

The simplicity of his statements were questions, really. Thankfully, Gardenia had answers even when she wasn’t asked.

“You know Professor Oak’s there, right?” she pried. “Like, the Professor Oak?”

James nodded, simply. “We’re acquainted.”
“You—You’re—” Gardenia tried to process. “You already know him?”

“In the criminal sense,” he said. “I may have tried to rob his lab once or twice, it was awfully long ago, though—”

“Right! His lab!” she sped forward. “He’s a Pokémon Professor! That means he’s probably got, like, a huuuge enclosure full of pokémon that trainers under his watch have sent him to care for! That means, that like any Professor…”

James found himself leaning into her elated tone, unsure where she was going with this.

“...he has transfer machines.”

The man felt his heart race a moment, unsure if it was filling in hopeful blanks where none were meant to be.

“What is it you’re implying?”

“If you really do end up staying there for awhile,” she said. “I could send Cacturne over so the two of you could spend some time together!”

Both his and his former pokémon’s eyes grew wide, and James found himself having trouble perceiving the statement as tangible.

“Just… like that…?” he probed, and Cacturne looked on the verge of tears from the other end, nettled paws up against a jack-o-lantern’s smile.

“Well, sure, why not?” she beamed. “Big guy could use a vacation. I got other pokémon I can battle with while it takes some time off, right?”

James looked incredulously to her, then back to his former pokémon. There wasn’t a trace of protest in Cacturne. He could see it running in place excitedly, expending energy it absolutely shouldn’t have had that early in the day. The little thing was same as ever, bursting with multitudes of love and joy it couldn’t bear to contain.

“It does all depend on if you’re staying, though,” Gardenia said before he could move on. “Obviously, I might be a little nervous if I can’t call you two up and check on ya!”

“No, that goes without saying…” James said, resting his chin on his free hand, thoughtfully. “...there is also the possibility that the good professor might not be keen on an ex con begging for use of his facilities.”

“Eh, I guess!” she said, not seeming to take his worries to heart. “Oak’s got a bit of a reputation, though. I think if anyone would, it’d be him!”

James wasn’t entirely sure what to say to that—if her optimism was always so blind, or if she really did know what she was talking about. Gardenia was never an easy read, always one who seemed to forge her own path if the universe refused her, blissfully unaware of the signals it was sending her. He wasn’t sure if he resented it because he disliked it, or because he envied it.

“...in any case, give us another ring whenever you get an answer, okay?” she continued. “Your kid really misses you, ya hear?”

As she said the last part, she shoved Cacturne playfully, and it responded in kind with an almost sheepish smile as it lowered its head, glowing amber peeking out lovingly from beyond its shady
dwelling. James brought his free hand to the screen, the closest thing he had now to the bittersweet feeling of needles on his skin. He spoke to his friend, voice low and adoring.

“I miss you too, Cacturne,” he said. “I’ll do everything in my power to make this happen.”

Slowly and gingerly, it mirrored his gesture, and Gardenia didn’t have the heart this time to lecture it for risking her video screen.

“Cac-turne,” it uttered, with a simple nod that marked absolute understanding. The gesture was not grand, but James found infinite solace within it despite everything.

“I’ll talk to ya soon, James!” Gardenia chimed, cheery as ever, but not at all jarring.

He nodded, heart wading. “Take care, both of you.”

The call snapped off, static swimming on the screen’s near-obsolete surface, and James let out a breath he was unaware he was holding.

He sat in silence for a long moment, what ifs and maybes circling like hungry mandibuzz around his oddly quiet head.

When James found his footing back to the yard, it was during a slight dip in the conversation. Still coming back to earth, it took a moment for the empath that ruled his heart to get a reading on the conversation. If he had to hazard a guess, he’d say that Delia had just suggested something with a smile, and Jessie and Meowth were so taken aback in the hospitality of it that they were currently pawing for an answer. Currently, he’d thrown a wrench in that emotional processing by walking through the sliding door, looking a little lost.

“Welcome back, Jimmy,” Meowth greeted with a casual wave, blinking a little as he found himself equally lost.

“Hello,” James regarded the scene. “Did I miss something?”

“Only a ludicrous proposal we absolutely don’t have the resources to pay off,” Jessie said, a hint of sarcasm in her tone.

“You don’t have to pay a cent, you jokesters!” Delia said, waving her off. “Come now, I wouldn’t suggest it without room and board included!”

Jessie and Meowth’s heads snapped to her, their eyes dinner plates. James took a seat, interrupting.

“Is anyone going to tell me what on earth we’re talking about?”

“Well, I make most of my living running Pallet House,” Delia explained. “It’s a family diner passed down my mother’s line! And it also happens to double as an inn, so I was just figuring that if you had some time to kill while you waited for Ash to get here… why not stay there?”

That was all it took to match James’ expression with his team’s. He made a small noise of blessed confusion, unsure of if he was dreaming or not.

“I figure the house might get a little stuffy with a family this big…” she kept on. “Not that I wouldn’t have you! But if you’d like, all I’d ask is that you work for me along the way… do any of you have
any experience handling food?”

Meowth snapped out of his trance, a paw held proudly in the air.

“Dere’s not’in’ we’s better at, lady!” he beamed. “Yous can work Me-owth silly if ya want! If dat’s da only price I gotta pay, I’ll take it wit’ a smile!”

Jessie was the next to come back to the waking world, a fire lit beneath her. Fists balled, she piled on.

“Count me in!” she said. “Stable housing and a warm bed in a diner with food this delectable? Manual labour is a small price to pay! James?!?”

She turned to him almost ferociously, a contradictory lilt in her voice when she got to his name. Unsurprisingly, it was punctuated with her grabbing his hands in her own, and he tried not to become lost in the way she was… blushing, despite the resolve in her voice?

“Well?”

“S… Sounds like a dream, Jess,” he said, swallowing an odd feeling he couldn’t place. He turned to Delia. “I’m in!”

The older woman clapped her hands together, eyes closed in a bright smile that captured their hearts.

“Well, if that’s the case, why don’t I give you the tour while the day is still new?” Delia said. “And you can bring Wobbles, and Chimey, and Oddy…”

James chuckled a bit dryly, feeling as though she was his doting and embarrassing mother while she rattled off more nicknames for their pokémon. She stood up as she continued to improvise them, walking toward the back gate and intent to lead them right to the diner.

“...those really aren’t their names,” James said, smiling despite it.

“But they could be!” Delia said, unperturbed.

Jessie looked off to the side as she stood up after Delia, exhaling shakily and desperate to make her breath sound less like thunder. Her confidence was utterly snuffed out by tender touches and honey brown eyes and boundless charity, and she felt as though every single person in the room could see it waving like a banner in the colour on her face.

“What, don’t you think they’re cute?” Delia pressed on, teasing James’ refined sensibilities.

Can’t say, Jessie thought, despite her best efforts. But someone else here sure is.

A brilliant wooden finish covered every inch of the diner, from floor to tabletop, wall-to-wall—as though the trees had fallen down in perfect formation, as though Pallet House was born where they collapsed. Its beauty was overwhelming, but not artificial—nothing of luxury, nothing so grand, and yet, it was more inviting than any upper class establishment they’d ever set foot in.

Stairs on one end and an elevator on the other led up to ten or twenty rooms, and below them sprawled booths and tables where countless warm memories had been born. The former Rockets felt a wave of something unidentifiable the moment the stepped within its walls, a muggy, saccharine sort of scent that filled them with a nostalgia impossible to place. As though the walls of the diner had seen so much of importance to their universe, contained multitudes—as though they were living
through another key point in its lifetime.

Delia was rattling off little facts about the place—how her great grandma hand-knitted so many of the decorations, how the corkboard had filled to the brim with photos of her favourite customers and she’d had to buy a second—and Jessie fought back the rapidash stampeding around her heart. The older woman practically glowed when she spoke, and it was awfully hard not to lean into that shining warmth when you’d been cold for an awfully long time.

Falling for James was irritatingly inopportune, and Jessie was determined to beat whatever bug she’d come down with that made it happen. The universe wanted to turn her to a blushing mess at every subtle touch of their hands? Fine, she’d lean into those embraces twice as hard until she’d steeled herself to whatever reaction they caused. Boys were boys and they were nothing compared to the force of nature that was Jessie, she’d gotten over hundreds of them and she’d get over James, too.

Delia’s presence was complicating things, though. Looking at the woman, she wasn’t at all Jessie’s type—no competitive fire, no sharp tongue—just a soft brunette flower decorated in pastels, doting and maternal. She wasn’t certain if she was flustered because of the open, unconditional affection, or because she’d tripped and fallen face first into one of her embarrassingly passionate quick-onset crushes. Women never stole her quick wit like men did—but here she was, high-voiced and shaken up like a soda bottle.

One inconvenient bout of feelings was easy to combat. Two annoyingly cute roses blooming adoringly on either side of her made her wish she’d brought stronger shears.

Desperate to take her mind off everything, she let her eyes travel to every place Delia ignored in her passionate narrative. At the far end of the diner was a bit of raised ground, and Jessie peered curiously into its strange lack of presence there. Curtains were pulled over what she assumed was a sizeable amount of something, drawn and lumpy and dusty with a lack of use. She wandered quietly to it, feeling an otherworldly sort of pull, and the group stopped as they noticed her, silently enraptured.

“Jess?” James called, and she kept on toward it, fascinated.

“T’ink we finally lost ‘er,” Meowth noted, and Wobbuffet agreed with a tearful arm across his heart.

“Delia,” Jessie finally said, turning back around across the divide. “What’s this?”

“Oh, that! Well…” she started, trying to find a way to make it sound the least bit interesting. “See, way back when Pallet Oak won the league, obviously the town was in a constant state of celebration. We had to have been, to have renamed it after him…”

Jessie turned back to the structure as she spoke, never recalling learning the bit of history. It had always been Pallet to her—out of the way, forgettable.

“…it really upped tourism, with how incredible that final battle was. Obviously I wasn’t around back then, but the story goes we used to always have performers passing through town, so we built the stage and made Pallet House a venue to bring in more people!”

There was a bittersweet sort of longing in Delia’s voice, a teenager who could hear the music and see the balloons, but wasn’t invited to the party. Jessie ran a finger across the thick layer of dust atop the stage, letting it collect in the grooves of her fingerprint.

“…but that all ended pretty quickly,” she said. “Nowadays, we don’t get many people besides the regulars. It’s… more of a storage unit, than anything.”
Jessie stared up at the stage, registering it in its entirety, now—curtains resigned to a lowly tarp, broken high chairs and empty bus tubs piled like garbage beneath them. The ashes of a space that once held promise, that once shone with the talent atop it, proud and passionate, the heart of the diner. The redhead didn’t notice she was trembling with a sort of anticipation as images flashed through her head—of them heaving what couldn’t be salvaged of the trash heap into the dumpster, of her mopping the worn wood finish head to toe. Of curtains drawn and with their luster returned, the warmth of stage lights the miniature sun she so greatly preferred to the real thing—

“I’ve heard it really was incredible in its day,” Delia continued. “Musicians, comedians, coordinators…”

Her feet were moving on their own, her hands on Delia’s hands, their eyes on each others, sky on bark.

“Delia, my dear,” Jessie said, voice resolute. “Have you ever heard of a residency show?”

She blinked a little, eyes starlit. “You perform?”

It was a question she adored answering, an opportunity to remind the world exactly who she was. Her voice climbed in delight, and she held Delia’s palms tighter.

“Oh, that’s like asking the sun if it shines!”

Delia laughed genuinely, its cadence shattering Jessie’s bulletproof composure. “Oh, dear, I doubt that old stage is in any shape for something that serious… assuming you can even find it under all that mess.”

“I’ll renovate it myself if I have to!” was the response she got. “It’s crying for me, can’t you hear it?”

“You don’t have to humour her,” James whispered to Delia, suddenly present.

“Dat’s what we’s here for,” Meowth added.

“Wobbu~ffet,” Wobbuffet agreed.

“I’m inspired, not deaf!” Jessie broke the embrace to shoot at them, and they shrunk noticeably.

“You know,” Delia said. “I suppose there’s really no harm in it… after all, it is overdue for a cleaning…”

She laughed again, this time a little embarrassed. It was the one section of the diner that went overlooked, out of sight and a problem for her future self. The woman supposed she could only outrun the passage of time for so long.

“It’s certainly something we can work on,” Delia smiled warmly. “But until then, this is where I’ll need you most—”

She’d kept up the steady pace as she spoke, and Jessie found herself reluctantly pulled away from dreams of what would soon be. As the brunette directed them, she threw the doors to the kitchen open with an exuberance that didn’t seem to phase the small amount of staff already working there.

They dissolved into a chorus of greetings through their work, intermingled with quiet questions about what Delia was doing there on her one day off that week, wasn’t her son coming home soon? The former Rockets were left feeling only a little awkward as the friendly repertoire happened in adjacency to them, unsure where they fit in even when Delia introduced them as new blood and told
everyone to treat them good in their time there. Meowth’s eyes traveled wall to wall, stovetop to stovetop, where he tried to envision himself as a vital cog in the machine that dwelled there. It wasn’t until he saw the deep pots resting on the far corner that his heart leapt forward with familiarity, the scent of steam and broth a humid hug around him.

He pawed at his friends’ arms, and they read his line of sight, syncing up like they so often did. Perhaps it was silly—to find home at the bottom of a ramen bowl—but when home was a place one was never truly sure they’d known, it came in fragments, intangible but hardly unimportant.

They were taken back, then, to that feeling of belonging, long ago, in Christopher’s dive. Maybe it was their minds playing tricks on them, but they felt it here, too.

“So,” Delia said, and they hardly noticed she’d gone back to addressing them.

“What do you think?”

Meowth lazily pulled himself out of his nest of blankets and couch pillows, blearily opening his eyes when it was clear the battle to fall back asleep had been lost. The humans were fussing over themselves in the bathroom, because it was before noon and that was all they were capable of in the early reaches of the morning. The cat raised his head, took in his surroundings. Surrounded in steady wooden walls, Wobbuffet was on the unmade bed, playing peekaboo with Oddish. Beyond that, the room was more or less still, routine finally setting in.

“‘N’ just how is it dat you’s up before me?” Meowth said, still half asleep.

“Nocturnal,” Wobbuffet reminded him.

“Please, ya ain’t got a sleep cycle,” the cat stretched, back arched downward. “Ya eit’er sleep a full twenty-four or never.”

“I know what I’m about!” he saluted proudly.


“I’m good!” Oddish said, answering for him. “Sleepy.”

“Yous can be lazy all ya want, kiddo,” the cat said. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

He leapt off the adjacent bed, back paws-first to the beady carpet. Meowth had rarely known the luxury of a full, person-sized bed all to himself, but that night he’d finally taken the plunge and slept sprawled out on it like a king, tired of watching it go unused. Naturally, Delia had been generous to give them a room with two beds, and naturally, after the first night sleeping separate, the lot of them were such a unit that they all ended up clinging to each other in one.

It always ended up that way when they were given the opportunity to spend time alone and apart—they’d end up crammed into the bathroom together doing their makeup, or at the same place in town having a spa day that was not at all planned. Trying to disconnect was near impossible, this long into their lives together.

Presently, Jessie and James were the former, half-dressed and caught in some comparatively gentle early-morning debate.
“—so why don’t you just ask her for another uniform instead of always swiping mine, you thief?”

“Have a heart, Jess! I’ve always asked your permission!”

“And my generosity is wearing thin! What’s wrong with the cute diner boy look that you have to reject it entirely?”

“Absolutely nothing at all. I’m just feeling the skirt today.”

“Today, yesterday…”

“Tomorrow it’s yours. Please?”

“Fine. But just so you know, those adorable growlithe-puppy eyes are going to stop working one of these days.”

James pulled her into a hug, so elated on the joy of getting his way that he’d momentarily forgotten confidence hadn’t been his strong suit, lately or ever.

“I’ll make it up to you!” he cheered.

“You absolutely will!” Jessie said through gritted teeth, trying to fight the colour from her face at the sudden and unapologetic amount of affection. Meowth flicked an ear, finally announcing his presence.

“Glad yous got dat sorted,” he said, nonchalantly. “Ya gonna let someone else use da mirror now?”

They broke apart with a strange sort of flustered ferocity, one the never would have fallen into before everything got weird, and Meowth rolled his eyes and let out a heavy sigh as he jumped up on the countertop, paying it no mind.

He liked it better when they just shut up and kissed.

Delia had been strangely authoritative that morning, insisting the three of them stay back in the kitchen and take orders while everyone else waited the tables. Jessie was a ball of contained energy, fidgeting every chance she got and just a touch restless at the thought of not getting to be on stage that night. Things were really starting to settle, and as the days blurred together, it was hard to find traces of any other life in the familiarity of the diner's walls.

For Meowth, it was in the way the other chefs seemed to look up to him in only a week’s time, their years of experience there quickly deflating in the wake of such a natural. For James, it was how he and Delia rose bright and early to tend to the gardens out back, sprawling and lush with their hard work. And for Jessie, it was in the rapture she felt when she’d be out and about shopping for supplies and hear two strangers gossiping about the incredibly talented woman who’s started doing shows at that kitschy local inn.

From behind the stoves, they could only see the guests balanced on the barstools directly in front of them. She was there again—that woman in the thick red-rimmed glasses, carrying around a strangely quiet phantump and looking contemplative alongside her order—a single black cup of coffee, same as always.
Another order came in—omurice with the usual greens on hold—and Meowth recklessly tossed an onion toward James with a barked order to get chopping. The three of them were completely in the zone, getting to that point in the day where the place moved so quickly it was hard to break trance and still get any work done. The cat pawed the nicer ketchup sitting across the counter, wondering why the cheaper stuff was even back here. There was an art to preparing every dish, and Meowth was a firm believer that shortcuts were for people afraid of a good challenge.

They finished the dish, sent it out, took the next one, rinse, repeat. Normally, that kind of droning mechanical static in manual labour drove the lot of them up the wall—a glance at the clock, that must’ve been an hour, what do you mean it was only five minutes?—here, though, something was different. Pallet House was not the agonizing rhythm of minute hands ticking away, it was the steady crackle of a fire, soothing and warm.

Restless as she was, Jessie still somehow felt more serene here than anywhere she’d been in a long while. Applause in her ears and a roof over her head and food in her stomach, the universe finally felt as though it was big enough to contain a person with ambitions as big as hers. Strange how something so humble made all of them feel so utterly luxurious.

“Quit working so hard!” Delia popped in to say, and they were slowly brought back to the conscious realm at the sound of her voice, playful and loving as ever.

“Is that really how you run a business?” James quipped right back.

“I hardly have the cash to pay all three of you overtime,” she said, pointing to the clock hanging in the corner with a clear signal that they were off ten minutes ago.

“Oh,” Meowth said, blinking. “Fancy dat.”

“For ex-cons, you certainly are the over-achieving type,” she kept on as they crawled out of their aprons and moved toward the kitchen’s exit.

“It’s never the ones you’re expecting,” Jessie said right back, sly-eyed. “Where’s the drama in that?”

“Oh! Speaking of drama,” Delia said, and James felt an anxious pang despite her cheery tone. “You have a customer here who would like a word with you!”

They didn’t bother to look out the doors before Meowth dissolved into hysterics, taking the entire team down with him.

“I know da rice was over-fried!” he nearly wept. “It was Jimmy, I swear!”

“Traitor!” James snapped back. “Jessie was the one cracking jokes back there! It’s her fault I got distracted!”

“The nerve of you!” Jessie piled on. “You have the audacity to turn on me when I was kind enough to lend you one of the cutest work uniforms I’ve ever worn?!”

“Oh, they’d planned this, of course they had. Delia demanded they stay in the kitchen so one Twerp...
Classic could saunter in unnoticed and surprise them as if they were old friends reuniting. As if they were children playing good-spirited pranks on each other.

The cycle of emotions they were put through in that moment was hard even for them to track. First utter shock—sure, they’d been told he’d be there in about a week, but they’d almost forgotten as soon as the inn’s walls had wrapped them up like swaddled babes and declared them its children. Then an attempt to reason—isn’t that the only thing you can do when you’re utterly lost? A sick sense of humour, of course Delia and Ash had to do it this way, anything else really wouldn’t be typical of them. Finally, an inability to process any of the things they wanted to say, their thoughts vaporized in the brilliant shower of light that burst from James’ bag in a way that it never had before.

Ash didn’t notice his hand hovering over his pocket, a residual reaction that meant nothing with half his pokémon at Oak’s and the only exception euphorically devouring tomato-logged eggs in a diner booth ten feet away. His mental processing power was equally slow in the wake of the light—had Team Rocket just pulled a fast one on him? The longest con imaginable? Was his presence their undoing, the point where they finally broke?

He found his answer in the awe on their faces, watched it slowly morph into a sort of stunned realization he couldn’t comprehend on his own. The light materialized in front of him, now, too eager to remain ethereal any longer. Webbed feet shuddered forward, eyes unable to commit to a single shape.

Whether or not the trio would admit it, they had been genuinely excited at the thought of seeing Ash once more. So excited, in fact, they’d forgotten he existed to people other than themselves.

“Greninja…?”

Ash said it with an outstretched hand and an incredulous smile, convinced he was living some sort of strange dream, despite all he’d seen and known. He had questions—so many of them, he hardly knew where to start. The whole process seemed complicated and not at all his style, if he was being honest with himself.

Greninja was equally lost within its own emotional state, the ninja’s composure faltering in the face of its single weakness. It had turned over phrase after phrase in its head, spent more nights than it could count anticipating this single moment, expertly rehearsing all it would express to its one and only trainer when they finally met each others eyes once more. Every word dissolved, snuffed out by the sunlight in Ash’s smile.

Time apart hadn’t done anything to separate their spirits from each other. In the absence of words, the two of them melted into a fierce, adoring hug. Faces up against each others, the pair could hear as their heartbeats aligned, just as they had so long ago. Looking at the two of them, James swore he saw a flash of black and red at Greninja’s crown.

Ash pulled away and wiped forgivingly at his eyes, not at all ashamed to have gotten so emotional so fast. Team Rocket was still blindsiding him all these years later, it seemed.

“You guys really meant it,” the boy said, looking brightly up at the trio as Greninja took its rightful place by his side. “I always believed you could, but…”

Jessie peered down at him, a hand on her hip. “But what?”

“I mean, I was kinda worried you didn’t really believe in yourselves.”

“Ha! Your observational skills are at an all time low, Twerp,” she immediately retorted, shattering
the sweetness of the moment.

“You should know by now that horribly misplaced self-confidence is something we excel at!” James added.

In the midst of all this, Pikachu had finally exhausted the entire ketchup bottle, and his better instincts were telling him that Delia probably wouldn’t be entirely happy with him quietly table-hopping until he’d devoured every tomato-based product in the entire joint. Mustering all his self control, he shook out of the food-induced stupor and let the air catch his nose, trotting over to Ash on his hind legs and giving his claws a few cursory licks.

When he saw Greninja again, the mouse broke into a fast run, squeaking his name excitedly up at it. The frog had nearly forgotten, in all its excited anxieties about seeing Ash, that it had so many more friends waiting here for it. It placed a hand atop Pikachu’s head, silent, and Pikachu leaned into it adoringly.

One other person noticed him, amongst the chatter going on between their trainer and former enemies—Meowth caught his eyes, and they held for a second that lasted an eternity before turning away. There was a noticeable bitter taste in the swiftness with which Pikachu snapped his eyes away, and it hit Meowth straight in the most tender spot he knew.

“Oh, that’s right, Pikachu was the one who wanted to say thanks to the chefs, mom,” Ash said. “He really liked the omurice, didn’t you, buddy?”

Mid-sentence, the boy had picked Pikachu up, and the pokémon snapped back into his cheery role fairly quickly as he crawled up Ash’s arm and onto his shoulder where he belonged. The mouse gave a doting chirp of his name as his trainer scratched his chin, happily affirmative.

“I’ve never seen him eat that fast! Whichever one of you made it really knows their stuff!”

“Dat was all Meowth!” the cat announced proudly. “Dese two was busy gossipin’ ovah da cuttin’ board.”

The humans had some choice words to say to that, but Meowth tuned out to them as soon as he saw Pikachu’s expression fall. Clear as day in his mind’s eye, he could see it—the smaller pokémon with stars exploding in his gaze, burying his face in Meowth’s heartfelt cooking. It blew away as soon as the cat revealed himself to be its artist.

Ash kept on with his praise, and Meowth didn’t have the focus to bathe in it like he so easily did in all other regards. With every word of it that fell from the boy’s mouth, Pikachu seemed to recede into himself more, a rare moment where the boy’s brightness did not lift his pokémon up the same.

The two pokémon, unbeknownst to the humans around them, were quietly lost in their lack of ability to meet each other’s eyes. Meowth’s feet seemed to move in a softer sort of dissociative stupor as Ash and his friends were catching up at lightning speeds, words cutting into words and radiating an excitement that couldn’t be confined to the net of a normal conversation.

It wasn’t until Ash was confusedly high-fiving an insistent James that his ears cared to come back to the universe, and he noticed they were all scrunched up into a diner booth, smiles painted on their faces, while the TV in the corner quietly drolled on. Meowth stared down at the table, worn and with the initials of teenagers carved into sloppy squared-out hearts. The joyous cadence all around them took him back, and its sentiment hit him all at once.

Once upon a time, they were stuck to the vinyl seats of a diner booth alongside the same exact twerp,
down on themselves while everyone around them carried on in high spirits, eyes on the future. The cat looked to the fluorescent lights above, buzzing with a warm light that was so different from the searing sort of judgment he felt under the ones back at their origin. They were apart of the optimistic chorus now, and everything was different, and everything was exactly the same.

“Ah, hold on!” Ash said, skidding the entire conversation to a halt. “We’re gonna have time to catch up, but there’s something I gotta show you guys first.”

Were it not for the excitement in his voice, the statement might have been anxiety-inducing. He was shining with pride, though, despite how vague his statements remained, and it was clear whatever he had in store for them was something he’d been waiting on for a long while.

“Mom?” Ash said, turning to face her without elaborating. Delia mirrored his knowing smile with a wink that pulled the group even further into a curious sort of excitement.

“Jessie, James, Meowth,” she said, turning to each of them as she addressed them. “You might want to head upstairs and gather the rest of your friends!”

The trio shared a couple nervous glances, almost wincing in the light of Delia and Ash’s combined brightness. They were grinning like kids who couldn’t hide a surprise party from their mutual friend, endearing beyond all belief.

It’s all over, James thought, defeated.

The fae have us.

“That the last one?”

“Bulba-saur!”

Ash let out a shaky breath, too excited for what was to come to contain himself. Delia, Oak, and Tracey were standing watch a ways off, not as outwardly emotive as Ash was but feeling the need to be apart of this, regardless. With a dutiful nod to its trainer, Bulbasaur trotted off to the Professor’s side, keen on watching from a distance.

Jessie, James, Meowth, and all of their pokémon were standing with their backs turned. Ash had dragged them out into the middle of the pastures and whispered a favour in his bulbasaur’s ear. What on earth he could have been asking the rough-and-tumble little thing for, they had no idea—but Ash was firm in letting them know that they weren’t to turn around until he said so.

Being at his mercy was putting a bit of a damper on the reunion, and the blazing sun above wasn’t doing much to help it. He assured them that Bulbasaur was a master at the work it did, a veteran of the space, and that it would be over as soon as it began and entirely worth the wait. Oddish was the most restless of all, and Arbok had remedied the situation by allowing its whole body to be used as a slide for the weed pokémon to entertain itself with.

Finally, though, he said the words they all so longed to hear.

“All right! All of you!” Ash beamed. “You can turn around now!”

“Piika-pika!” Pikachu translated, for the ears not accustomed to the boy’s cadence.
Apathetic to be playing such a children’s game, they did so with a lackadaisical sort of swivel, and James was immediately enveloped in forces too fast for the human eye to register.

There was no comprehensible way for his teammates to make sense of what they were seeing, as the attack happened far too fast. It was only when he was knocked skidding backward, grass and dirt flying up with the sheer weight of it, that they were able to get their eyes on him. Registering the shapes, taking in the sight—it didn’t help to make any more sense of the situation. There was nothing about what they saw there that didn’t seem dreamlike, where reality blurred with unreality but you found yourself unable to question it for too long without waking.

Carnivine was the quickest—wrapping acres of vines around James, gnawing lovingly on his arm. Mareanie was easily the second most swift, the ugly purple tint across his cheeks spelled that out pretty clearly. Inkay was far less violent, but it was clinging to his other arm alongside the brutal star so tightly that his teammates were unsure if that arm was purple from the venom or from the lack of circulation.

Miraculously, James was still standing. Until Mime Jr. hopped up on his head at the very end, and he lost his balance and fell backwards, utterly defeated.

“Always wondered what’d happen if we did dat,” Meowth said, staring at the trainwreck. The implication of the pokémon’s presence started to sink in, and he brought his gaze to the divide they’d all just cleared, then to Jessie, who had fallen to her knees, arms outstretched.

“What’s going on…?” she said, ungrounded, vision blurring through tears as she looked at… her seviper?

It slithered over to her, offering a quiet trill when it noticed her tears. From behind her, Arbok observed it curiously—flicking its tongue furiously, to which Seviper responded in kind. The two of them awkwardly periscoped around each other for a moment in a strange sort of serpentine greeting, and it wasn’t until Mimikyu almost fell off of the larger snake and crackled a curse-ridden complaint that they stopped.

The ugly noise snapped Jessie out of her trance, and she peered up at Mimikyu, more tears building in her throat. A soft vibration reverberated at her temple, and she felt insectoid legs come down on it like the universe’s strangest, kindest massage. When another round of incredulous tears slipped down her cheeks, a wispy, armlike, ethereal clump of hair wiped them away.

“Gourgeist…?” she whispered, turning to meet the specter’s eyes, then looking upward. “Yanmega…?”

Unable to contain everything she was, Jessie pulled as many of them as she possibly could into a crushing hug, crying far more quietly than she had when she’d seen Arbok again, this time with a smile. Back then, it felt like something she rightfully deserved, waiting on forever, impatient to get to. This, however, seemed like the universe’s kindness for her had spilled over, excessive and beautiful and not at all what she was used to.

Wobbuffet and Arbok had easily joined in, the former of the two equally emotional at seeing so many of his old friends all in one place.

“Jimmy!” Meowth was adjacent, jostling his friend by his collar. “Jimmy, speak t’ me, ya sleepy oaf!”

“I always knew this was how I’d perish from this mortal coil,” James said, bleary-eyed with poison in his veins and bite marks everywhere he couldn’t feel. “You know, it’s been a wonderful life…”
The cat dropped him on the ground, to which he let out a defeated yelp and continued laying there while his pokémon affectionately snuggled up to him, a little softer this time.

“Alright, he’s got enough energy to be a drama queen,” Meowth announced. “We ain’t gotta drive da guy to a hospital yet.”

Growlie was squinting at Meowth, utterly and completely lost, unsure whether or not it trusted the cat’s judgment anymore. It looked to Chimecho for some kind of explanation or guidance as to why everyone was so nonchalant about its master being assaulted, but the wind chime pokémon was just staring on, smile same as ever.

“Sorry, is this normal?” Growlie asked, incredulous.

“Yeah!” Chimecho said cheerfully. “They sure do love him!”

The elaboration didn’t do much to assuage its protective instincts. Oddish was equally fired up, about ready to charge forward and start throwing leaves with the attackers in question, until James flawlessly shook off the poison and seemed to regain his vitality all at once, standing back up and pulling his pokémon into a hug.

“Who are they?” Oddish asked the other three, and only Chimecho had the answer.

“Old friends of Master’s!” it said. “I remember the little one. It was really nice to him!”

Oddish looked on, feeling a little twisted up inside. They all looked so happy, even through pain. All beside the same master, all one big family. Curiously, Growlie and Chimecho stayed put beside the weed pokémon while Weezing wandered over to make itself a part of the reunion. As if they were tagging out, Mime Jr. trotted over to say hello to Chimecho.

“You’re all better!” it said.

“I am!” Chimecho confirmed. “Did you take good care of him?”

“I hope so!” Mime Jr. told it. “He sure took care of me.”

“What are you lot all doing over there?” James called over to the small gathering. “Come now, we’re a family!”

Not having much protest to that, Growlie and Chimecho shared a look, and the group joined the adoring pile, fur against skin against leaves. Eventually, Jessie’s dissolved right into James’, and they became one big, breathing entity, inseparable from each other in who was joyous over who, a sprawling kinship that had seen decades.

Jessie managed to pull herself out of the euphoric embrace, rising to her feet and regarding Ash with an undeniable curiosity. Her makeup was completely ruined, but she carried herself with the same confidence as ever, completely impervious to the flood of emotion overtaking her. Jessie’s pokémon peered on as she addressed him, observing the hardness in her stance.

“Alright, Twerp, What did you do?” she said, vaguely.

Ash blinked a little, his empathetic smile faltering. “Whaddya mean?”

“This,” she gestured to all their pokémon, inexplicably present. “How on earth did you accomplish this?”
“Ha!” The boy laughed, heartily and with his compassion angling itself back around to meet her. “Well, y’see…”

“Have you been watching the news?”

Delia blinked, a little surprised that he’d started his answer with another question. Since when did he watch the news? The boy was always moving from place to place, hardly a moment for the world to catch up to him…

“Well, Mimey and Litty and I have been working on getting the place ready for you all morning,” she informed. “If I’m being honest, I haven’t had much time to myself at all!”

“Turn on the TV. If I’m getting it all the way out here, then… well, Kanto’s probably worse.”

Neither Ash nor Pikachu seemed to be in any sort of distress beyond their initial hesitance, but Delia’s maternal instincts were firing off at the nervousness in the boy’s normally boastful voice. Pensively, she nodded to him, grabbing the remote off its place on the glass countertop and flicking the television on.

The channel it was tuned to was ablaze with ticker tape and frantic coverage, replayed footage over and over of hundreds of pokéballs being wheeled out of a towering, unlabeled building somewhere near Viridian. In a bout of curiosity, she changed the channel, only to see the same footage at different timestamps. Delia kept on flicking channel to channel, wondering if a single one existed without urgency and an eerie sort of relief painted on it. The situation felt so historical, she had trouble focusing on the words as they were zooming across the screen.

“Ash Ketchum,” she said, voice with an undertone of seriousness. “How involved in this are you?”

Delia found her relief in how he dissolved into a quiet laugh at her response. He supposed it was fair, with all the world-ending trouble he’d seemed to have gotten into over the years.

“Not at all, I promise,” he said, hands up in earnest. “I’m far from Kanto, mom. I’m safe.”

She breathed a quiet sigh of relief, eyes shut. “So that old, rotten organization is really gone for good…”

Ash nodded. “Kinda sounded like a joke when I heard about it. And everyone’s celebrating it, ‘cause why wouldn’t they?”

He looked off to the side, as if he wasn’t entirely confident in what he was about to say next. Pikachu peered over his shoulder, wondering if there was anything he could offer but coming up short.

“But, well…” Ash moved his eyes back to her. “T’be honest, I don’t really feel ready to, yet.”

“And why not, sweetie?”

“Can’t believe I’m saying this…” he began. “But there’s some longtime… friends of mine… who I need to help out.”

Pikachu gave him a look that wasn’t necessarily incredulous, more on the side of deadpan disbelief. “Pi-ka?” he shot.

“C’mon Pikachu, do ya have a better word?” Ash said, begging his pokémon for a break in the wake of everything. Pikachu just sighed, letting the boy press on.
“Their pokémon were at Rocket HQ,” Ash said. “And there’s… no way they’re gonna be able to get ‘em back if someone else doesn’t come through for ‘em.”

Delia peered into him, confused. “Why’s that?”

“Well, uh…” Ash ran a hand across his raven mess of hair. “Probably ‘cause they were in Team Rocket themselves.”

He watched as his mom’s eyes got wider, taking in the weight of the statement. She had questions, but which to start with was leaving her tongue stuck. Thankfully, Ash always had a lot to say in their absence.

“I know it’s weird, but you remember those three weirdos who are always trying to take Pikachu?” he said, and their faces were in Delia’s head instantly.

“How could I forget?” she said. “They weren’t very good at it, all things considered.”

“No kiddin’. But they sure were determined, and so…” he said. “Well, they pretty much always follow me region to region, so it was only a matter of time before I ran into them, and…”

Delia listened carefully as her son spoke, taking quiet note of the way that he humbled himself to explain his reasoning to her. All things considered, this was an inquiry Ash could answer on his own—in the past, it might have been one he did without a word. He wasn’t asking her for approval, or permission—he was asking her for help. Her fierce and independent fire of a boy was asking her directly for a hand to hold while he acted on impulse, a favour for the last people deserving of it. There was so much faith in the way he spoke of his former enemies, one that even Pikachu was clearly not on the same wavelength about. Right then, the boy must’ve been feeling unparsable doubt in if what he was doing was right.

In that moment, Ash needed someone in his corner to remind him that even if this thought turned out bad, there was no such thing as a good deed undeserving. That Karma stored good deeds in the cosmos, recycled them for when the kind needed them most.

“When are you landing?” she said, firm.

Ash blinked a little, surprised at her instant resolve. “Tomorrow morning, I think.”

“Get some sleep on the plane,” Delia ordered. “You’re going to need it.”

News broadcasts and PSAs had been running on every channel nonstop since the bust: If you have ever had your pokémon stolen by Team Rocket, please report to the nearest station immediately…

Pikachu had been quietly fidgeting with his paws the entire time they were waiting in line, and Ash was there in clutch with head scratches as they neared its front. There was nothing to be nervous about, all things considered. Some things could go less than favourable, true, but he was certain that at this point he knew his enemies like the back of his hand.

Finally, the boys and Delia were next in the queue, and Jenny was jovial as ever despite being in the eye of the storm. Viridian was the nearest location to them, only by circumstance—honestly, Ash was surprised everyone so directly involved wasn’t more on edge here.
“My goodness, is that Ash Ketchum and Pikachu?” Jenny said, leaning over a bit to meet his eyes. “It feels like forever since I’ve seen you two!”

The duo brightened a bit, and Delia sighed, defeated. “Of course you’re well-acquainted with the police.”

“Mom!” he protested, unable to produce much else.

“Oh, he’s a good boy, really!” Jenny clarified. “Y’know, we could actually use him on the force! With how good you’ve been at toppling Team Rocket before we could.”

“Man, that’s right…” Ash said, regaining his composure. “I was stuck here dealing with them the first day of my pokémon journey, too…”

The boy and his mouse angled their heads, staring down the Pokémon Center that towered off in the distance, recalling long ago how smoke billowed from it in the dying darkness of the dawn.

“Sorry you couldn’t get away unscathed, it seems,” Jenny said, wistful. “They got some of your pokémon too, huh?”

Ash’s chest tightened a little. He liked to think of himself as a jack of all trades—he could pick up pretty much anything, if he really put his mind to it. Lying, however, never came easily to him.

“Y-Yeah, uh—”

“Friends of his, actually!” Delia stepped in, as though it were nothing. “Oh, it’s all just so tragic. They’re off on vacation and couldn’t make it themselves. So brave little Ash here decided to take it upon himself!”

“I’m fourteen, mom,” Ash corrected.

“You’re my sweet little boy,” Delia said, far more simple than doting. “You’re ten forever!”

“Well, if their pokémon were taken, there’s a good chance they might be in our system,” Jenny elaborated. “Obviously a lot of these pokémon were bought and sold, that was out of our control. But still…”

“…it definitely won’t hurt to check,” Ash finished for her.

“Exactly,” she affirmed. “Here, I’ll take you over to the holding area.”

She led the three of them to a large enclosure, a single computer at its far corner, closed off in a little greenhouse-like shed. Lightning on the nine-key, she immediately had programs and stats open, swiveling back around to meet their eyes.

“Alright, all I need is for you to tell me the species of the pokémon you lost,” Jenny explained. “We have them all logged in here and have been letting as many as we’re able out. Most trainers recognize their pokémon or vice versa pretty easily!”

Ash took a deep breath, steeling himself. If even one of Team Rocket’s pokémon decided they weren’t happy to see him, this entire thing could go bad. Pikachu had made this pretty clear upfront, putting a knick in the boy’s unfaltering optimism. Still, he’d be remiss if he didn’t at least try—and he felt better knowing that apparently, his mom was far better at covering the facade than he was. It made him wonder just what kind of things she’d done in her heyday.
Team Rocket’s pokémon had a habit of disappearing region to region, which wasn’t particularly strange to Ash, seeing as his own pokémon all had their own personal journeys to go on, too. He’d watched James tearfully hand his cacnea over to Gardenia once upon a time, and Ash remembered it as the first moment where he realized that Team Rocket were capable of caring for pokémon as living things. It was a hard truth for him to come to—so easy to think of them as people with no regard for all life around them, the kind of people he hated most. Knowing that even humans who adored pokémon could do wrong was difficult, to say the least.

That night in the diner, one of the things they seemed the most choked up over in all their discussion wasn’t the fact that their lives were without structure, or that they didn’t know where to call home—it was that their pokémon were trapped at headquarters, and they saw no feasible way to get close without potentially getting recognized and their stories ending there.

The biggest problem was that they didn’t say which pokémon, and Ash didn’t have the mind to ask. So he ran a list in his head, starting from the very beginning.

“Some poison types, right off the bat,” he said. “An arbok and a weezing.”

Jenny nodded, typing things into the program as it ran. One by one, the other workers around the facility began tossing the balls the machine then produced, loosing the pokémon sleeping inside. Ash and Pikachu both scanned them intently, nervousness growing when purple started blurring together, but still not a single one of the pokémon stuck out to them as recognizable.

It wasn’t a particularly sizeable amount—poison types weren’t too popular, all things considered. Not a face among them was one they knew, and the two of them shook their heads.

“No luck,” Ash said, sighing. “Let’s try some more.”

“That’s a shame to hear…” Jenny said, the sentence never getting easier no matter how many times she uttered it. “What else?”

Ash thought for a moment, and Delia nudged him in a gesture that clearly said Don’t make it so obvious that you even have to think about this. He had to fight from spitting out the words as soon as his mom jostled him, finding his even tone.

“A lickitung and a victreebel,” Ash said, and the process repeated.

There were far more pokémon, this time—a large gathering of lickitung and a rather small one of victreebel. Again, none of them were recognizable as they shimmered to life, and Delia leaned down to whisper to him, sensing his anxiety.

“Are you sure you can tell?”

“Pikachu and I saw these pokémon pretty much every day for months at a time, mom,” Ash retorted, a tight whisper through shut teeth. “Even if I couldn’t, he definitely would.”

Raising his voice back to normal volume, Ash turned back to Jenny.

“Same as before,” he said, trying not to feel discouraged.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” she assured him. “We’re gonna keep trying!”

“Next is...” he ran his mental index again. Cacnea was with Gardenia, and he couldn’t possibly forget the night Jessie released Dustox. Chimecho was at the estate, so that only left...
Determined to get at least one pokémon back to a longtime acquaintance, Jenny flicked more keys at lightning speed. Pokémon started materializing, and this time it wasn’t long before Ash lit up like a christmas tree, face against the glass in childish glee.

“That’s it!” he said, gleaming. “That’s her seviper!”

Without waiting for any kind of direction or permission, he bolted out the doors of the enclosure, running over to it with Pikachu following behind, swallowing his own hesitance. Delia pressed a hand to her cheek, giving that look she so often gave—unsure if it was committed to embarrassment or utter, unapologetic pride.

As Ash neared Seviper, he slowed a little. The pokémon looked disoriented, like it hadn’t been let out of its ball in far too long. There were only a few seviper surrounding it, so he could surmise it wasn’t a particularly popular pokémon. The sunlight shining above seemed to blind the snake, and it gave a quiet, almost bitter sounding trill as it struggled to register the figures standing in front of it.

When Ash’s form finally registered in Seviper’s line of sight, his bright smile was a kind of agony the pokémon didn’t need on top of anything else. It hissed its name in an ugly, threatening cadence, and Ash threw his hands up in response, surrendering. Pikachu took this as his cue, trotting forward in an attempt to calm it down.

“Relax,” the mouse told it. “We’re here to help.”

“Help!” Seviper practically laughed. “When has your presence ever meant anything helpful, rat?”

“The feeling’s mutual,” Pikachu said plainly. “But you wanna see Jessie again, right?”

Seviper almost immediately loosened its aggressive stance, dropping its angry periscope and moving its face down closer to meet Pikachu’s gaze. The mouse stood stalwart, not at all intimidated by venom-drenched fangs and slitted toxic eyes.

“You know where Master is?”

“Not entirely, but Ash and I saw her just a while ago,” Pikachu said. “Look, I don’t like you, and you don’t like me, but we only fight cause our friends do, right?”

Seviper pondered on it for a moment, tilting its head. “Right.”

“So I won’t lie to you,” he continued. “Humans lie. Not us.”

What Pikachu was saying made sense. There was a sort of unspoken rule amongst pokémon that they not judge each other for any battles that might have persisted between them due to their trainers’ personal grudges. Seviper’s distaste for Pikachu was mostly personal, if the snake was being honest with itself.

“We saw Jessie, and she said she was gonna try her best to meet up with us again,” Pikachu said. “She might. Ash puts a lot of faith in that. But even if she never shows, we can take you to a nicer life than one inside your ball forever.”

When he said the last part of the sentence, a pang of darkness flashed in his eyes, one that Seviper couldn’t help but take note of. It was oddly vulnerable, given his cold and matter-of-fact tone.

“In Pallet there’s a ranch with open fields and all the fruit you can eat. There’s people who will look
after you and friends you can make,” he said. “We’re gonna get you out of here.”

It didn’t exactly take kindly to being ordered around, but Pikachu sounded oddly passionate in what he was saying, as though he was speaking the hope into existence so that he too could believe it. It was compelling, but more than anything, Seviper liked the idea of having a pasture to slither around once again, Jessie or no Jessie.

“Alright,” it hissed. “What’s the plan?”

“How good an actor are you?”

“Phenomenal,” the snake boasted, grinning.

“Pretend my master is Jessie for about five minutes,” Pikachu said, simply.

Seviper looked to Pikachu, then to Ash. Without missing a beat, the larger pokémon tackled Ash to the ground, peppering him in forked-tongue kisses and sprawling its long body all across him like an affectionate noodle.

Obviously, Ash could hear Pikachu’s end of the conversation, but he wasn’t expecting such a lack of hesitance, the breath knocked out of him completely between the onslaught and the laughter and tears he was fighting through. Delia finally caught up to him, hands on her hips as she leaned down and inquired.

“How on earth did you so instantly know it was that one?” she said.

“C’mon, mom, what kinda pokémon trainer do ya take me for?” he said, wiping at his eyes. “Look, her seviper has this really long crisscross of scars on its right cheek. I could never forget something like that!”

Playing his part, Pikachu let out an equally exuberant chirp of his name, looking right at Delia. The woman just gazed on at them adoringly, always in awe of the beautiful thing she managed to create. All wild-born seviper had scars, memorizing their intricacies was something only someone like Ash would do.

Untangling himself, he looked over to the pile of mime jr., who were in all sorts of manner of play, jumping on each other affectionately in a mirror to how Seviper had Ash seconds before. One little one, though, had run up to them excitedly, cheering its name up at Seviper.

“I haven’t seen you! In ages!” Mime Jr. said, happily wiggling its arms in a grabbing gesture. “What are you doing here! I missed you so much!”

Like most of James’ pokémon, it contained too much love for its tiny little body. Seviper pressed its head into the smaller pokémon, whose arms weren’t even big enough to wrap all the way around.

“I missed you too,” the snake said. “Looks like we’re gonna be spending a lot more time together.”


“Guess Thetwerp is gonna bust us out.”

“He has a name, y’know,” Pikachu turned around, deadpan.

“...I thought that was his name,” Seviper said, stunned, and Mime Jr. mirrored its expression, genuinely for once.
Pikachu didn’t know what to say to that, so he turned back around.

“I’m so happy!” Mime Jr. snapped back to it. “Am I gonna see Master again?”

“Here’s hoping,” Seviper hissed, drawing itself close to the other pokémon, feeling far more comfortable and safe.

“Alright!” Ash finally said. “That’s two down. Things are looking up after all, huh?”

Pikachu still had some qualms with helping Team Rocket, but he supposed their pokémon didn’t deserve to suffer just because they were rotten. He squeaked his name out happily, punctuating his trainer’s joy.

“Let’s keep this ball rolling!” Jenny said as pokémon were being returned to their balls. “Who else?”

Ash and Pikachu shared an excited look, and Delia felt her heart sing at them being confident and back on the same wavelength.

“Alright, there’s a yamnega and a carnivine…”

“After they shut down HQ, everyone worked really hard to reunite pokémon with their trainers,” Ash said. “That night Pikachu and I found you guys, I just couldn’t let go of what you said about the fact that all your pokémon were there too, and I figured… even if you guys didn’t go through with everything, your pokémon at least deserved a home somewhere.”

Delia, Oak, and Tracey had joined beside Ash now, the former of the three giving him an affectionate slap on the back as she spoke.

“You would have been so proud of Ash! Looking officer Jenny right in the face and telling her they were his friends’ pokémon!” she laughed. “Guess he learned a thing or two from you all!”

“It wasn’t a lie,” Ash pointed out, colour on his cheeks.

“Maybe not now,” Delia grinned at him. “But back then, who knows! You hardened criminal!”

“In any case,” he wisely decided not to take on his mother in a battle of snark. “You should all really be thanking Professor Oak and Tracey. They were the ones looking after your pokémon this whole time.”

Jessie regarded the pair, still having trouble taking everything in. The part of her that hated humbling herself wrestled with the part of her that felt as though the universe was finally handing her what she deserved with no caveats. Nothing to seize, nothing to fight against—just a gift, one from the cosmos to her. She exhaled tension, kept it simple.

“Thank you,” was all she could muster, and she supposed it would suffice, because the both of them waved her off as though it was nothing.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Oak said. “Most of them were quite well-behaved!”

“And they’re really full of personality,” Tracey added, eagerly flipping through his sketchbook. “I don’t think I’ve ever spent so much time drawing one person’s team.”

Jessie looked down in adoration, lightly tracing her fingertips across a smudged pencil sketch of the lot of them all asleep on each other beneath a shady tree. Seviper with its length wrapped loosely
around, Yanmega and Mime Jr. on the ground cuddling, Mareanie and Inkay deflated in the grass and tentacles entwined, Gourgeist and Carnivine with roots tangled as a sturdy pillar in the center. Mimikyu, awake, peering out from behind Seviper’s head, its false one casually tilted.

Her heart sang. Beneath her manicure laid tangible proof that what she loved most was under careful watch in her absence. Relief came to her she didn’t know she needed, feelings she hadn’t realized she’d pushed far away to not have to acknowledge them.

“Regardless of what’s happened in the past,” Oak continued on. “These pokémon showed no signs of being mistreated when I first became acquainted with them. It’s clear they were raised by trainers who truly loved them.”

James was standing now, his eyes back on the pokémon as they all caught up with each other. Half of them were gathered around Oddish, excitedly shooting questions its way. The weed pokémon didn’t look overwhelmed by all the attention for a single second—to the contrary, the tears in its eyes seemed to be from joy rather than any sort of unpleasant overload.

“It was kinda weird for me to think about for a long time,” Ash said. “But even though we had a lot going on in the past, I guess I always had this in common with you guys. It mighta ended at your own… but you still cared about pokémon.”

Jessie kept talking to him and the others, and Meowth had managed to break himself away from the crowds to offer his gratitude to the twerp and his crew as well. James stayed with his eyes trained on Oddish, how natural it looked in the center of everyone. The feeling returned—of everything being almost perfect, just a hair short of what this reunion should have been. This time, he knew he had the courage to push past it.

The man whipped his head around, swift movements throwing a wrench in the conversation that was taking place. They all noticed, peering into James and giving him a rather uncomfortable cue to say what was on his mind.

“Professor, I know it’s absolutely uncouth of me to ask one more favour,” he began. “But there’s one more member of my team I need your help to get here.”

“Oh?” Oak said. “Well, depending on what you need…”

“Just access to one of your transfer machines,” James said, looking up brightly at him. “Everything else is precisely where it needs to be.”

The professor smiled earnestly, waving him off. “That’s certainly an easy request to fill. Tracey, why don’t you show him to it?”

“I’m on it!”

The boy started a soft, jovial trot toward the lab’s towering windmill, but James was far more anxious on his feet, power-walking toward it even though he had absolutely no idea what to do once he reached the lab’s doors. His team watched him as he went, the pokémon most confused of all.

“Hey Jessie, what’s he talkin’ about?” Ash asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” she said, staring at her teammate as he disappeared.

In the space where he left, the group took turns catching up with each other, all learning their order in the former Rocket’s personal lore. Wobbuffet and Meowth had taken it upon themselves to be the self-appointed storytellers, with the latter doing most of the work and the former popping in every
sentence or three to loudly shout how he personally felt about the situation being described. Arbok and Weezing were utterly enraptured, and just a little bit jealous they’d missed out on everything since then.

When James and Tracey returned, it was just as they’d gone—James bolting out the doors, and Tracey panting and struggling to keep up with him. The smile that the man was wearing on his face was unlike anything Jessie had seen from him in ages, and she tried to ignore the way it made her heart jackhammer against her ribcage.

James’ adrenaline slowed and his body caught up to him, and he too was completely winded by the time he’d crossed the field’s shifting green. Despite their curiosity, the group waited patiently for him to regain himself, still in the dark about what exactly he was this dead-set on.

All at once, like he did, James straightened his back with a bright grin stuck on his face. He tossed a final pokéball in the air, watched as it eclipsed the sun above at its apex, a beautiful sort of darkness.

The shadows turned to vibrant cyan turned to endless green, and James fumbled his catch as the ball trickled back downward in all his joy and excitement. What breath he’d only just managed to get back was knocked right out of him again, where Cacturne tackled him back to the ground.

The cry James let out was only out of force of habit. Mentally, he’d vowed to never resent the feeling of needles on his skin again. Physically, hugging a cactus never really got easier. He held on anyways, and Jessie and Meowth balanced their heads in their hands.

“Gotta… call Harley…” James cried, through nuzzles.

“Gotta call Harley,” Jessie muttered into her palms.

On the outset of the scene, Chimecho, Mime Jr., and Seviper were staring with stars in their eyes. The wind chime pokémon couldn’t contain itself, and when Cacturne finally pried itself off James like velcro and stood back up, it tackled the scarecrow with a forced that threatened to send it right back to the ground.

“You’re so big!”

Cacturne looked at the tiny thing in its arms, not at all bothered by its prickly complexion. “I guess I am.”

“Where did all your round go!”

“Mostly to my face, I think,” it said.

“Your hat’s so cool!”

The two of them kept on, and James watched as Cacturne slowly melted into the group, happily chirping its name to old friends, getting to know all the new that had come since. Everything looked just as it should, now. Not a single piece out of place.

“James, is that your cactnea?” Ash said, eyes swimming with stars.

“Gardenia’s taken quite good care of it, hasn’t she?” he said, a bittersweet sort of pride in his voice.

Ash understood it easily, pictured a charizard where Cacturne stood—a goodra, a butterfree, a gliscor. He knew, logically, the reasons the universe had kept him and Team Rocket from being anything other than enemies for so long. He just wished, in that moment, that it hadn’t—it was hitting
him all at once, maybe they could have used someone who really knew what they were feeling to let them know that the universe wasn’t always going to take and take and take.

Cacturne picked Oddish up, placed the small thing on its shoulder, where it stood on footlike roots, ecstatic and proud. James’ pokémon all gave quiet cheers around the scene, faces caught in various states of play, of joy, of adoration in the fact that they were able to spend time together. In the midst of all of it, Oddish turned to look at James for only a moment, its tiny cherry-splash eyes shining up at him, begging for one last ounce of approval to make a perfect situation.

James knew in that moment that it didn’t ultimately matter—how much Oddish fit in, how much everyone else liked it, how easily it seemed a member of the team without a pokéball for it to rest within. The pokémon was waiting on him and him alone, patient despite everything, despite the fact that such a small thing shouldn’t have to suffer that much in waiting, wonder why on earth the thing it loves most doesn’t want it.

James looked back to Oddish, green on red, soft with apology.

He smiled.

Oddish awoke sometime in the early reaches of the day, legs typically restless and eyes enraptured by the moonlight filtering in through the window. Meowth didn’t seem to be awake—in fact, no one did—but it was thinking that wasn’t too big a deal, as lately they’d been a lot more lenient on it going out so long as it didn’t wander too far.

The window was pried open in the darkness of the hotel room, so Oddish angled itself onto the fire escape and quietly made its way down. Its boldness in wandering Pallet was getting easier every day—in all its short life, the humans had never stayed in a single location for this long. Memorizing all the landmarks wasn’t at all hard, and it made for a good amount of midnight adventures with friends.

This was the first one the weed pokémon had gone alone, though. It wondered for a moment if it was a good idea, shook off its worries and tried to be brave.

Oddish didn’t get far before it noticed it wasn’t actually alone—poised on a wooden bench gazing up at the pale moonlight was a familiar face, and when Oddish recognized the other grass-type, its feet carried it bolting over, bursting with excitement to have someone to spend the night beside.

“Cacturne!” it cheered. “What are you doing here?”

The scarecrow startled a little at the smaller pokémon’s voice, tiny and sudden in the wordless night.

“...I like it at night,” Cacturne said, simply.

“Oh, me too!” Oddish chirped. “I wish I could sleep all day and stay up all night.”

Cacturne crossed its arms coolly, looked up to the stars. “You’re telling me, kid.”

“Can I sit with you?”

The larger grass-type regarded Oddish, giving it a quiet nod and scooting over on the bench. Oddish flashed a bright smile and leapt up, feet dangling childishly as it gazed adoringly at the moon.

“What’s your story?” Oddish said rather suddenly, and Cacturne turned to face it, eyes aglow in the darkness.
Since evolving, the scarecrow had lost a good amount of its words. Once upon a time its energy was boundless, a little reckless in its precision. It found its emotions harder to contain, easier to succumb to. As the years had passed, it’d gained some control, but channelling that more vivid spirit was a little harder at times, even in the depths of night when Cacturne felt the most at ease.

“My story?” it asked, unsure exactly what parts Oddish wanted to hear.

“You’re one of his pokémon, right?” Oddish said. “I wanna be his pokémon someday, too. So I’m learning how everyone became friends with him, and maybe I can figure out how!”

Cacturne tilted its head. It had some questions. But in all fairness, Oddish asked first.

“I was born in a desert,” Cacturne said, simply, without much specificity. “A trainer battled me, and caught me.”

“Was it him? The one with the pretty hair?”

The larger grass type shook its head. “Someone else. We traveled around a bit. She didn’t like me very much, though. Wanted me to learn flashier moves for contests, but I never got down the ones she really wanted.”

Oddish made a face, looking to the ground. “That’s not very fair.”

“It isn’t,” Cacturne said. “So she left me in the woods one day. I was wandering around looking for food all alone, and I saw some humans getting chased by some beedrill, so I helped them out with a Pin Missile. One of them was Master.”

Oddish’s eyes lit up, and it stood up on the bench, too excited to hear what happened next to bear sitting.

“He thanked me and gave me a whole bag of cookies. I thought that must have been a mistake, so I kept following him trying to give the cookies back,” it ran a nettled hand across the back of its head. “Turns out he just really was that nice. I think he could tell I really liked him, so he asked me to stay and I did.”

The smaller pokémon tilted its head at the anticlimax, curious.

“That’s all?” it asked.

“I was pretty stunned and happy too,” Cacturne said. “I love him so much, every time I saw him I just had to make sure he knew.”

Oddish dropped its gaze back to the dirt beneath the worn bench, where the grass moved at a steady rhythm and the stars shone above it, picturesque. It was happy to know the life and memories of a friend to the human it desired closeness with most, but there was an underlying disappointment in feeling like it hadn’t become any closer to achieving that happy future.

“I wish I could show him, too,” Oddish said.

Cacturne turned to face it, a soft side-glance. “Why can’t you?”

“He’s scared of me.”

The scarecrow didn’t entirely know how to interpret that. What was it that its former master could possibly be frightened by in such a small, kind thing? Especially when he so easily took spikes to the face every day for months?
“Are you sure about that?”

Oddish nodded sadly. “Growlie says it’s because someone who looks like me really hurt him. It’s not fair.”

Overhead, the moon loomed, comfortably. Cacturne looked to it, scooting closer to Oddish, picking it back up and letting the little pokémon rest on its shoulder. At the higher vantage, the starlight soaked into its leaves, and despite everything, it felt rejuvenated.

“It’s not fair,” Cacturne assured it. “You didn’t do anything wrong, after all.”

Oddish leaned into the scarecrow’s neck, curling its leafy crown around it in a floral hug.

“I think him being scared of you is a good thing, though,” it said.

“How’s that?” Oddish asked, not following.

“You saw how his pokémon can be,” Cacturne explained. “He’s so good to us, we just… find it hard to remember that we’re a little too much, sometimes. But he still loves us and keeps us around.”

“Yes, what’s with that?” the weed pokémon said. “You guys just attacked him! And he just smiled like it was typical. But I can’t even look at him or he freezes up.”

“It’s just… how things are, I guess,” Cacturne fumbled. “He used to complain. Now I just think he’s grateful to know it at all.”

Oddish was silent. It drew itself closer to Cacturne, noting how the pokémon’s spines didn’t actually hurt that much, so long as one eased into them slowly, at their own pace.

“He might still need some time to think of you as his own,” Cacturne said. “But from where I’m standing, everyone else already knows you are.”

It wasn’t one-hundred percent what Oddish wanted to hear. Still, it felt soothing against its heavy heart. If James’ pokémon all liked it, then it was only a matter of time before he, too, warmed up to the idea of them standing side by side.

James turned on his heel, feeling far too exposed in the unending blue light of the coming sunrise. Chimecho gave a quiet ring of its name as the man started to walk away, as the half of the conversation James could understand petered out.

“I’ll be okay, Chimecho,” James said, the image of Cacturne and Oddish together like that burned into his mind’s eye, unshakable.

“Chime?” it pressed on.

“I understood enough,” he told it. He understood what his former pokémon was saying, understood the bittersweet longing and dips from overjoyed to deeply lonely that escalated in Oddish’s tone. He understood what they were talking about, understood that it must have been the millionth time Oddish had this conversation with one of his pokémon. Understood that he had run from his own
demons long enough, that it was time to start facing them head on.

The sun was rising when he made his way back to the diner. Fumbling the key in his hands, he unlocked the back door and made his way upstairs, where he grabbed his bag and wallet, ignoring the way his eyes burned with lack of sleep. Jessie stirred in her bed, blearily regarding the sight of James all dressed up and leaving unannounced, her heart lurching a little with dull fear in his urgency.

“James?” she muttered. “What’s going on? Where are you going?”

In the early hours of the morning, before her walls were up, she sounded incredibly vulnerable in the wake of it. He knew what the question really meant—*I know things have been weird. Please don’t leave me.*

Cursing his lack of foresight, he strolled over to their bedside, leaning down to meet her eyes. The closeness of their faces tinged her cheeks with red, and it only intensified when he brushed bedhead out of her eyes, giving a reassuring smile.

“I’ll be back in two shakes of a mareep’s tail,” he said, softly. “Promise.”

“Take me with you,” she said, too tired to fake apathy.

“This is a test of my own courage,” he said. “Is it alright if just this once, I go it alone?”

Jessie blinked lazily at him, wishing he’d save the pretentious purple prose for any time that wasn’t five in the morning. There was love in his eyes, the kind people didn’t wear when they were about to abandon her forever. She sighed.

“Fine,” Jessie said. “But you’re bringing me breakfast in bed when you return.”

“My pleasure, Jess,” he said, and an impulse crawled at his throat he wasn’t sure he wanted to follow. He pulled her into a hug instead, one she returned in such a way that he was certain she was battling with herself to let go of. Fireworks exploded in his heart when he felt her slow exhale across his neck, butterfree danced in his stomach.

*One day at a time,* he reminded himself, and broke apart from her, drawing blankets up across her shoulders as she disappeared back into the sheets.

James tore off into the sunrise, intent to catch the nearby bus as it left for Viridian. All things considered, it was the last place he wanted to be, sunglasses at his eyes and hair worn back and Chimecho drawn tightly across his neck, ringing softly as the vehicle hummed. Nothing about this situation was supposed to be easy, though—words from an old friend that Meowth had passed onto him, echoing in his mind.

*I can’t tell you it’s easy,* Brock had said, once upon a time. *Only that it’ll be worth it.*

The bus jerked forward as it hit another stop, and James stared out tinted windows at the sun as it rose over the horizon, signaling the birth of something entirely new

The sky was painted, lavender on blue.

A knock came at Jessie’s hotel room door, and it was the last nail in the coffin that told her there was no way she was getting back to sleep. Resigned, the woman dragged herself out of bed, feeling like she was moving through molasses as she made her way to the door. There was only one person it
could be, this early.

Delia stood with hot coffee in hand, cedar eyes soft in the low-light of the hallway outside. Jessie must have looked a mess, she realized only when she saw how flawlessly adorable the other woman was so early—she panicked a little, smoothing out a jungle of crimson hair.

“I saw James leave a little suddenly…” Delia said, sounding concerned. “I was worried maybe something had happened.”

Jessie leaned against the door frame, sighing a little. “I don’t know what he’s doing.”

“Well… no good to be alone this early,” the older woman noted. “Who likes waking up first at a slumber party, after all?”

The metaphor was endearing, even if Jessie didn’t have the simple luxury of fully understanding it. Delia pressed the mug into Jessie’s hand, and its warmth was something she didn’t realize she needed so bad. Her heart steadied.

“Let’s sit downstairs for a while,” Delia suggested. “Enjoy the sunrise.”

There was an obvious implication that came along with that—let’s sit around and talk about our feelings. Jessie didn’t care for that, anyone who thought she did hadn’t known her nearly long enough. Still, Delia’s presence was inviting, and in that moment the older woman was offering her what she needed most—the presence of another person, to dull the ache in her heart that she couldn’t push past on her own.

So, naturally, she followed Delia down to the diner, where the two of them sat at the small bar against the window, where the sun peeked over the horizon and dodrio began to crow on hilltops outside.

Jessie let out a shaky sigh, eyes staring at the line where the soft purple sky met the emerald grass below. He was in everything, now. She knew what it meant, was lost on what to do. Delia sensed her tension, brought her free hand to Jessie’s shoulder, resting it there comfortingly.

“There’s no harm in feeling lonely, sometimes,” Delia said, unprompted. “Even when it seems silly. People and pokémon need each other.”

“I don’t think it’s loneliness,” Jessie said, surprised at how easy it was to speak. “I think… we all just feel a little lost.”

That was an easy angle to frame it as. Jessie actually had no idea how her team was feeling. But if she poised them all as a unit with the same thoughts, it felt a little less like baring her entire soul to someone she’d only just gotten to know. Delia moved her hand down, tracing circles across Jessie’s own, the two of them drawn closer.

“You’re finally at your goal,” the brunette said, for her. “And you’re unsure of what to do now, right?”

Jessie nodded, eyes on the sun. “Luck’s never allowed me my dreams before. Pursuit was so easy. Success isn’t exactly what I imagined it would be.”

She took a swig of her coffee, let it melt on her taste buds. Took note of the way Delia remembered how she took it—cream and no sugar.

“I feel the same as I did in the beginning, sad as it is,” she continued. “Wondering where my life
The walls of the diner loomed around them, their aged wood absorbing her words for a time in the future when maybe, she would need their retrospective. Delia was back, then, to a time long passed, sitting in the same seat she’d been sitting in now. Nineteen years to her name with her mother hooked up to hospital machines and her fiancé gone, staring into Samuel’s eyes and smiling through everything she felt. Far too young, far too old.

Once upon a time she was a fire-faced girl decorated in flannel and denim shorts, bruises on her knees and dreaming of pokéballs in her scraped knuckles. The man she loved left on the wind and became no one, just like her father and grandfather before. Delia watched as the Indigo Plateau blew away in the wild winds around her, its applause silenced as it disappeared. Pokémon Master was not her story.

Soon as the storm had come, it began to leave at once. Lightning had struck at her feet, and the blaze hadn’t caught, only left in its wake a small gathering of embers and cinders in dire need of tending. She didn’t know this fire yet, but something deep inside her told her that someday it would grow to a glorious flame far bigger than the one she ever could have become, if only she protected its start with all she was.

She named its soft gray glow accordingly. She was right.

“Nothing else in life seemed truer to me when I was young,” Delia said, and Jessie turned, curious. “Taking on the league and becoming a Pokémon Master, I mean.”

“You too?” Jessie smiled. It was amusing, to say the least.

“I mean, could you think of anything more grand?” Delia’s eyes were shining. “A life of only pokémon. Traveling beside them, seeing the world… hearing the crowds cheer your name in the heat of battle…”

The passion in her voice was distinctly Ketchum, a cadence no other bloodline was capable of. In that moment she was honey eyes aglow and voice strong with the certainty of her dreams, and she looked more like her son than anyone Jessie had ever known. Vibrant warmth, almost sickeningly so in how pure and rapturous it was.

“Well, obviously, that didn’t play out!” Delia laughed, shutting herself down. “Unless the definition of Pokémon Master has changed recently.”

Jessie peered into her, confused at the sudden turn. “And where’s the optimistic turn in that?”

“Sometimes, life throws you an unexpected curveball,” the older woman explained, looking back at the sun. “But I think the universe knows what it’s doing. If you always try to be your best self, you might just end up happier doing what you end up doing than what you thought you were supposed to do.”

How long does the blasted thing take? was what Jessie wanted to say. The curveball was her livelihood and structure being demolished, and since then she’d been floundering about waiting for her happy ending in a place where she felt she truly belonged. Delia was so selfless, so patient, it felt as though no advice she could give could help someone like Jessie who took charge and cared for herself first and foremost.

She tried to phrase it delicately, and that thought alone caught her off guard. She wanted Delia to like her, to find her pleasant to be around—god, why did she want that so bad? —she took a shaky
breath, looked Delia in the eyes.

“Why did you stay, Delia?” Jessie asked. “Was anything really stopping you from saying to hell with it and putting yourself before the tw—the kid?”

Even phrased as nicely as she was capable of, it felt awful soon as it left her. She refused to believe that some human beings were just born with a radiant kindness that brought them no grief. Surely, she couldn’t be alone in fighting her more selfish instincts with all she was. Did it matter that they only existed because without them she never would have survived?

Humans all had to have had the capability for those desires to turn them wicked. Delia had made a conscious decision not to listen to them.

“Of course not,” Delia said, oddly bright despite the subject. “I’m only human, and I was barely eighteen when everything changed!”

Somehow, her putting numbers to it only fired up Jessie’s protective instincts more. That was far too young to have your dreams fall apart.

“There was a dark, dreadful part of me screaming that it wasn’t fair, a child needs as many parents as they can get,” she said. “The universe expecting a kid that young to throw away everything she’d ever dreamed of and become a single mother? Please!”

She stole a glance to the side, at the corkboard that was hanging against the diner wall, where photos eclipsed photos in an ever-growing collage of faces.

“But every time I fell back into those thoughts, I just remembered a time where I was little,” Delia continued. “This radiant star of a woman was talking with my mom during a late night here, and I’ll never forget what she said.”

“What’s that?” Jessie asked.

“She said that a mother’s love is one of the most powerful and important forces in the universe,” she said. “That it breeds its own dreams, moves a person forward like nothing else can.”

Something clawed at Jessie’s throat. She tried not to resent the hope that laid in the statement. Not every story of motherhood had to be tragic.

“Mother or not, you just have to find your light,” Delia said, entwining Jessie’s fingers with her own. “And never give up on it. No matter what happens after that, everything will be okay so long as you’re together.”

They were holding each others’ gaze in silence, and Jessie could feel her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Bittersweet and beautiful, that’s all she could think of this single moment as. She was utterly enamoured with this woman in no time at all, so thankful that people like her existed in the universe. She was resentful, alongside it, that it took her so long to meet them.

*What life would I lead under a mother who stayed,* she wondered, lost in Delia’s presence.

Shoulder to shoulder, they watched the sun rise in comfortable silence.

James traced over the intricacies of the Heal Ball in his hands, trying not to lose his nerve with the way his team all gasped when he pulled it out of his pocket and hit the button in its center. His pokémon were all present, the only one lacking Cacturne—who had gone back home for the week.
James was utterly silent with Oddish at his feet, trying to push past the dryness in his throat and the
tremor in his heart.

Jessie jolted forward—she had things she wanted to say—but Meowth held her back, best as he
could with how small he was in comparison. They’d been sitting in silence far too long, and she
wanted to stop James from making a decision he wasn’t ready for yet. Meowth’s paw on her heel
was a reminder— if he’s not ready, let him make his own mistakes and grow.

The man looked back down to the ball in his shaking hand, taken by its finish, pink on yellow. It was
a pair he wouldn’t think to put together—something so soothing against something so frightening.
Like electricity on bubblegum, like beedrill on skitty, like Stun Spore on Sweet Scent.

Those two colours made up a ball that rebuilt broken bridges, healed the wounds of the pokémon
resting within. It was a way to apologize when capturing a new friend— I’m sorry the road to us
becoming one has been even the slightest bit rocky. Let me do what I can to mend that.

Nothing about it didn’t ring perfect, when he saw it behind glass at the shop in Viridian. Its price tag
meant nothing, in all its serendipity.

In a kinder world, might it heal the trainer, too?

He let out a deep exhale, and Oddish stared at him open-mouthed, ever mystified at the strange
human it had fallen for. His friends knew what the ball meant. Oddish had a feeling, but it almost
seemed too dreamlike to be true—the sun dipping and casting the pasture aglow with everything
betwixt night and day.

James pushed tension away, let it roll off him with the breath, replaced fear and heartache with the
brightest smile he had. He kneeled down to meet the pokémon, looking sheepishly to the side.

“Where have my manners been?” he said. “Well, would you like to stand beside me, Oddish?”

Meowth brought his paws up to his face, eyes wobbling with tears at how easily his friend had said
it. The cat lost himself in the way Oddish lit up, putting the dusk around them to shame. They
watched, as it was about to jolt forward to headbutt the ball in James’ hand—but it stopped itself,
gentle. Leaf by leaf, it embraced the cold metal slowly, with care. Oddish leaned its temple to the
Heal Ball, disappearing in a soft red flash as tears pooled in its eyes and spilled over.

Three shakes, quick as ever, not suspenseful in the slightest. The ball clicked shut, and James’ team
lost themselves within the moment. Where Weezing and Chimecho sobbed joyously on each other,
where Carnivine had a vine balanced on them, trying to console through its own tears, where
Mareanie and Inkay swirled each other around in a dance like excitable school children, where Mime
Jr. elected to run to James’ side and do his victory pose beside him. It lacked the fervor he had in his
younger years, he’d admit—but that was okay. This catch more than allowed it.

Gently, he tossed his ball once more, giving Oddish its first breath of air as a pokémon with a trainer.
It felt the same, to Oddish. Everything else felt so, so different.

“Let’s grow together from now on, yes?” James asked it, and it buried itself in his chest, weeping
with joy it couldn’t contain. Stars blinked on above, and he vowed up to their quiet glow that
someday, he would be okay.

Jessie crossed her arms on the fringes, smiling genuinely at their embrace. Wobbuffet leaned onto her
as she looked on, trying to keep his emotional state in check but sensing she needed something to
steady her own. She gave her pokémon a loving pat on the head, acknowledging him but with her
eyes still fixed on James.

Nurturing, and patient, and brave, and loyal, even when everything in the world was working against him. Where she tore a fiery path that decimated the land, James trailed behind dutifully, planting wildflowers in the charred earth below. A dreamy sigh left her lips, and she dared not curse it any longer. Life had thrown her a curveball, but she had found her light.

The TV ran as quiet background noise, sound effects playing over the bubble of brewing coffee while Mimey and Wobbuffet were locked deep in a fighting game that the former was getting destroyed at.

The Ketchums had invited the former Rockets over to hang on what was set to be their last day in Pallet before they were on the road once more, searching for their white tomorrow. It was supposed to be uplifting, a nice little get together with good food and good friends, but all things considered, the lot of them didn’t feel like doing anything other than sulking.

Currently, the three of them were sitting on the couch, propped up against each other, an amorphous blob of depression. Ash shoved another sandwich in his mouth, leaning back on his chair.

“C’mon, would it kill ya to lighten up?” he shot at them, not bothering to swallow. “It’s not like this is the last time we’re gonna see each other.”

Of course it isn’t, Twerp, there is no way you will ever in a million years get rid of us that easily—is what Jessie wanted to say, but her fire was utterly snuffed out in how much she did not want to move.

“I suppose we should get to the inn and start packing,” was what she mustered, instead.

Following the voice of their brave and fearless leader, Meowth and James gave a quiet round of “yeah”s, and the group sluggishly stood up to head out. Ash fought the impulse to roll his eyes—saying goodbye was sad, but it didn’t have to be life-ending.

His mom was a step ahead of him, as always. She slammed her chopsticks down on the table, standing up with a maternal force Ash knew better than to challenge. Wordlessly, she cornered the group in the doorway, hands on their shoulders, eyes firm on theirs.

“I’ve had it!” Delia said, jolting them to attention. They gulped nervously, wondering what they’d done to incite her wrath after such wonderful days together. Soon as it was there, it dissolved, and she smiled warmly, speaking a single word that sounded like home when it hit their ears.

“Stay.”

Their eyes widened, and Ash and Pikachu’s followed from across the room. James stammered a sentence out, unsure what she meant—

“Stay?” he asked, nervous. “We can’t possibly—”

“Well, why not?” Delia demanded. “You’re the best thing this town has known in ages, can’t you see that? Your cooking is to die for, and I’ve never had such great help around the diner, and Jessie…”

She turned to face the younger woman, and Delia brought a hand lovingly to her cheek.

“...the people of Pallet love you, they talk about you like you’re their star.”
Jessie’s heart swelled. With love or with ego or with the relief that came with knowing she’d made it in some regard, she couldn’t place.

“Delia,” Meowth said, at her feet. “What is it yous sayin’?”

“Room and board for as long as you’d like,” she told him, told them. “Stay.”

They shared a look they’d shared a hundred times, scanning each other’s gazes for protest, for approval, for any sign that what they were all feeling was precisely the same, their connection unflustered, their beautiful cosmic hivemind the same as it had always been. Blue to green to blue again, no one seemed to hesitate.

Where was home? Your name in lights and a full stomach every night, the freedom to be who you are and say what you want to say, or people to hold you when you needed to be held? Was home really a place that one found in location, or in other people? And what kind of fools would take a quarter of their lives to realize that perhaps they’d known it all along?

Well, Ash could think of a few, right then and there. He kept his mouth shut, smiled and crammed another sandwich in there. Pikachu rolled his eyes.

The former Rockets nodded, all at once, like they so often did. The fog hanging over them disappeared at once, and their backs straightened when they realized it—this is what they had wanted all along. They just didn’t think it was the happy end they deserved.

They thought back—through hardship and suffering, through good times and bad, through every single time they cursed to the heavens that the fight for this ending was too hard, too painful, like swallowing nails and walking through glass. All of it, every single moment, was leading to this. Here, with most of the weight off their shoulders, in a place where they truly, genuinely belonged.

“Don’t eat the food the fae give you,” Misty had said to them, with a sly-eyed wink. “You’ll be trapped there forever, if you do.”

Jessie leaned back in her seat, a confident smile despite the lack of it she’d been feeling, as of late, a sharp laugh on her scarlet lips.

“That’s the fae’s problem.”

Chapter End Notes

predictably, what is essentially a set-up chapter for the rest of the final 3 ended up being 20k. why does this always happen.

way back when DTE was just an errant thought that had been ringing around my head for way too long, one of my biggest pushes forward in writing it was "hey, maybe i can get everyone to wake up to the wonderful thing that is my one true rarepair, jessie and delia ketchum.” i literally can't believe i stuck with it long enough that we're in that territory, now. i hope things only get gayer from this point on.
like i said, this chapter is really just a setup for everything that follows it! the next two are the doozies. i'm hoping i can write them a little quicker than this one, but work is... fickle ^^;

as always, i will do my best!
A messy chord shift provided a brief moment of respite for the melody, and Meowth chose to find a silver lining in the twist of his clawed digits. He let out an undisturbed, one-syllable laugh, and brought a paw up to tune his guitar.

Beneath the full moon, Pallet was only illuminated in a sort of silhouette. Starlight on treetops, leaving one side of them in shadow, a muted green to match the hills around. The wind was silent on the balmy countryside, sleeping just the same as most of what it surrounded.

Meowth looked down from Pallet House’s rooftop, far across the moonlit expanse. Nights like these were perfect. He strummed.

“Under the evenin’ sky, wit’ the moon high up above…”

Gotta rework this one, he mused, pausing before he went onto another verse. *Something a little brighter…?*

“I’m out here by myself, wit’ da t’oughts I’m t’inkin’ of…”

...*Good enough?*

The cat angled his eyes up at the moon, begging it wordlessly for lyrical inspiration. He was in need of a new tune, but the muse hadn’t been kind to him despite all the changes that’d gone on since he’d written his old ones. Quieting his voice, he kept on with paws at the strings.

*Love ballads are all I’m good for,* he grinned a little pathetically to himself. *Ah, well.*

Meowth’s ear twitched at a light patter of footsteps, and his ministrations ceased in a gradual motion. The sound was oddly nostalgic, and that alone clued him into the fact that it wasn’t one of his friends here to keep him company. He turned to face the source of the noise, where Pikachu peered into him, golden eyes curious, then cloudy.

With only the moon lighting him, Pikachu almost didn’t register Meowth as he cut a cat-eared portrait into the starry skyline. The polished gold resting at his temple shone in its wake, a beacon of light against the shadow he was, inside and out. Pikachu’s expression twisted—*so much for working off this restless energy.*

The mouse sought solace, and he wasn’t finding it in the absolute last person he wanted to see right
now. Conflict clawed at his insides—this wouldn’t be happening if he could just suck it up and forgive the three of them, like everyone else had, like his friends had, like Ash had. He couldn’t. He didn’t understand how they could.

Pikachu turned on his feet, immediately swiveling to walk away, wordless. He’d find somewhere else to enjoy the peace of the night.

Meowth found himself lost in the silence that hung between them, in the moon as it lingered like a watchful deity between. Taken back to words he’d said long ago in a diner booth, the only lie he didn’t mean maliciously, or even as a lie at all—

“You ain’t never gotta forgive me. I made my peace wit’ dat.”

At the time, it seemed so easy to say. When you spend your whole life with falsehoods on your tongue, they seemed to slip out without much thought.

Quicker than Meowth could gather his eloquence, Pikachu was disappearing back toward the fire escape, intent to scale the building and get as far away from his old enemy as possible. The cat stammered as he watched him go, voice a little louder than he meant it to be.

“Hey, Pikachu, wait up!” he coughed out, lowering his guitar. To his surprise, the smaller pokémon stopped, looking over his shoulder.

“...what?” Pikachu said, unconvinced.

“Uh, well, y’know, it’s, uh—” Meowth struggled, not having planned that far. “It’s a beautiful night, ain’t it?”

Hearing this, Pikachu turned back around to face him, unamused still, but curiously willing to acknowledge the cat.

“Yeah. I want it to stay that way,” he said, half-poised to turn tail once more and leave.

“Pikachu! Wait up, I said!” Meowth called, descending further into desperation.

Pikachu sighed, a single foot raised in the air as Meowth’s frantic cry stopped him in his tracks. Whatever angle he was going for, he was doing a pretty garbage job at it. Still, if the mouse could say one good thing about Meowth, it was that he remained determined.

Meowth sucked in a breath when his nerves calmed themselves, let it out with a defeated sort of sigh. The moon was on his back, at his side, all around him. His eternal companion, the closest he had to a home. Once upon a time, Meowth emerged from an egg on a moonlit night, enraptured at the sky that towered above, far too big for such a little thing to comprehend. Instincts made him adore her, the brightest, roundest, most inconceivable ball of cosmic yarn. How she united every living thing beneath her is what made him spend every month by her side.

He borrowed some of her courage, still a thief at heart.

“Why dontcha come sit wit’ me, Pikachu?” a sudden smile, oddly genuine for what it was. “I’m just playin’ my heart out to da stars. We ain’t gotta talk or not’in’.”

Pikachu squinted a little in the darkness, unsure what he was getting at.

“Just cause Ash and I are best friends,” the mouse began. “Doesn’t mean I agree with everything he says.”
Meowth looked from Pikachu down to his paws, trying not to sound defeated.

“’Course I know dat.”

He didn’t drag his eyes back to meet Pikachu’s, trying to find the words he needed in the silence that followed. He expected the electric-type to turn right back around, skitter down the building and leave him with the statement. Pikachu remained. Meowth looked back to the sky.

“I ain’t got not’in’ ta say,” he said, simply. Pikachu was waiting for the cat to press on, to contradict himself with a tirade of sickly-sweet manipulation, cloaked in philosophical musings. He was far shorter of words, oddly true to himself.

“It’s kinda a weird feelin’, not havin’ anyt’in’ ta say,” Meowth continued, finally. “Ever since I was born, all I ever did was talk people’s ears off!”

Pikachu leaned in. A few steps forward, a quip on his tongue.

“Wow, I finally found a way to shut you up?”

The cat laughed, through a clenched smile, shut eyes, genuinely tickled. Something about the comment felt alright. There was a bite to the words he almost fancied, paradoxical as it was. He tried to ride the feeling, keep its vibe in the air that surrounded them.

“Come sit wit’ me,” Meowth said, again. “You do da talkin’ an’ I’ll just listen. If I break dat promise, ya can just get up an’ leave, deal?”

Pikachu stiffened, a little. “I have nothing to say either. Nothing nice, at least.”

“Hey, didn’t say it had ta be nice,” Meowth leaned back. “Maybe some scoldin’ could do me-owth good.”

Pikachu was metaphorically quirking an eyebrow at the cat, entirely unconvinced. There had to be a motive here, something buried within Meowth inviting being held rightfully accountable. He was in search of something, he had to be, he always was—

Meowth must’ve noticed the mouse’s expression darkening, because he warbled a little in frustration as he pressed on, his voice all over the place as he rambled.

“Look, Pikachu!” he said, worked up. “I’ve known ya forever, and I barely know a t’ing about ya. Ya battle style and weaknesses on a good day, an’ it ends dere! Don’t ya t’ink dat’s tragic? We been toget’a dis whole time, but…”

He sighed again, heavier, collecting himself. The cat’s eyes brightened when he brought his gaze back skyward, away from Pikachu.

“Da moon all full like dis… doesn’t it make ya feel like talkin’? Like sharin’ stories?”

He looked back to the smaller pokémon, aching to extend his olive branch.

“…when ya look at it, doesn’t it make ya feel like… maybe we’s too small ta always be wastin’ time at each uddah’s t’roats?”

Pikachu sighed, dryly, his eyes on the ground and then on Meowth.

“If this is a scheme, it’s the biggest waste of time,” he said.
“Ain’t it?” Meowth grinned. “If I was dat patient a pokémon I’d be blue in da face.”

The electric-type took a moment to regard Meowth, trying to find his proper judgment buried beneath years of healing wounds and well-deserved biases. The cat looked oddly vulnerable in the moonlight, claws sheathed, only emerging to pluck out tunes to the gentle night. The doting, darling, cutesy voice he used when he was spinning a wild lie was nowhere in sight. His tone now was heavier, pensive, paradoxically frustrated and serene. As though he were angry he couldn’t pull Pikachu into his oasis of peace.

Best case scenario, Meowth really was being genuine, and Pikachu got to let him know exactly why he deserved all the scorn the smaller pokémon had to offer. Closure.

Worst case scenario, the other two idiots popped out of a bush at some point that night and shoved Pikachu in a cage and whisked him away to… somewhere. He got to fry their brains with a couple thousand volts and be the only person in the whole world who had some sense in their wake. Closure.

“Let’s walk.” Pikachu said, suddenly, and Meowth’s eyes widened. “I can’t think in one place.”

With that, he started back the direction he came—this time, intent to let Meowth follow. The cat nodded, caught off guard, shakily bringing himself to his feet.

“Uh, sure.”

The night was still fairly young, but Meowth was becoming a little anxious at how far toward the edge of town Pikachu had taken the two of them, not a word passing his lips. Initially, it was easy to just lose himself in the beauty of the night—but as more time passed, he wondered if Pikachu was merely wasting his time to spite him, leading him on as karmic retribution for every time the normal-type had done the same to him.

“Didja change ya mind?” Meowth said finally, frustrated at the silence.

Pikachu kept quiet, eyes forward as he scaled one of Pallet’s larger hills, practically at the small town’s end. The cat’s curiosity was nigh unbearable, so he quietly sighed and kept on, trying to catch his breath as they scaled the steep incline.

As far as hills went, it was one of the more symbolic ones—the one Ash always stopped on when he was running home to take in the sight of his home, finally in view. The one that gave the perfect view of the town and everything around it.

Pikachu stopped at its apex, taking a much deserved breath. Meowth just short of crashed into him, too busy pathetically clawing himself to its top to notice that the smaller pokémon had ceased moving. When the cat was able to regain a bit of himself, he saw Pikachu angled forward—nose pointed somewhere off in the distance, tail at rest despite how vigilant he looked otherwise. As if to punctuate, he gestured a paw off toward Viridian Forest, towering treetops obscuring all that lie beyond it.

“See that tree?” Pikachu said, then specified—“The one that’s way bigger than all the others?”

Meowth looked from him to the forest, blinking a little. Indeed, there was one tree that put all around it to shame. “Uh, yeah.”

The mouse drew in a breath—long, preparatory, and heavy. Whatever he was going to say next,
Meowth knew it was something he had to remain attentive to.

“That’s where I was born.”

Intent to listen, Meowth nodded sagely. Yes, that made sense, the thing that Pikachu just said. Nothing about it was strange, or sudden, or weird. It was important to the cat that he showed his undivided attention, didn’t walk over Pikachu’s desire to say whatever it was he wanted to say. He kept on nodding, arms crossed, considerate.

... *Wait, what*?!

Breaking the casual facade, Meowth’s expression morphed into utter shock, and he made an unflattering noise that Pikachu paid no mind to at all.

The cat had expected, in all honesty, to lightly tread some feelings-shaped rain puddles with his old pal Pikachu. Instead, Pikachu had decided for him—*you and me, furball*. The electric-type had grabbed him by his scruff and jumped far off the safety of their cliffside, plunging the both of them into the swirling waters below.

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A stray cloud drifted past, its makeshift eclipse ending as quick as it came. The sun returned, filtering down far into the dense treetops and speckling all manner of life with kaleidoscope patterns and adoring warmth.

*Viridian Forest held stories stretching back lifetimes, whispered from the caterpie to the pikachu to the pidgey, carried far off on their wings to every corner of the world. Of beginning trainers passing through, of weary travelers who finally found a cozy place to curl up, of the storms the trees survived and the days the sun shone brightest. Days like this, where it re-emerged from its hiding place behind the overcast, its rays twice as warm.*

*Dead in its center, the pikachu colony thrived, tails making zigzag silhouettes as they happily squeaked out greetings to each other from the high treetops. Apples split apart and shared, embraces littered with static, lightning-bolt hellos—with the colour of the sun across their fur, the pokémon thrived in its gentle light.*

*At first, it was a day like any other when Pikachu found himself slowly awakening with sunlight on his face. His vision blurred softly back into view, greens meshing back from darkness to watercolour to pristine form. The mouse lazily blinked—once, then twice—trying to regain himself in the wake of the drowsiness that lingered. The forest remained eerily quiet.*

*He rose to a sit, then to his feet, taking in his surroundings in an attempt to recount how he wound up here. That was right—he wasn’t in his nest because he’d wandered off somewhere and promptly decided to take a nap in a particularly cozy patch of grass. The urge had simply been too much to resist, and apparently he needed the rest—as he’d slept through the whole night, judging by the angle of the sun in the sky now.*

*The silence wasn’t something he was able to place, though, and it was starting to unnerve him. The pidgey weren’t chirping good morning trills to the sun, the bushes lacked their normal rustle that came as bug types skittered through them. The kakuna and metapod hung motionless on the trees, speaking not a word of anything they’d seen.*

*As he made it to the main clearing with agitated footsteps, his heart sunk—there wasn’t a single other pikachu in the forest. None but him.*

*Working himself into a quickly escalating panic, he paced an anxious circle around their tree—they*
had to be nearby, right? Where could they have gone? His parents, his friends—they wouldn’t have just migrated without him, would they?

The mouse turned back to the metapod and kakuna, tears swimming in his eyes. They were the only thing left in the forest, no legs or wings to carry them far away. Desperate, he begged them.

“Please!” Pikachu said. “You have to have seen where everyone went! What’s going on? Why’d they leave?”

He watched as their eyes took on all forms of heaviness—some frightened, others empathetic, all just as deeply resigned. Still, not a word passed from them, and Pikachu felt himself fall further into despair.

Eyes at his feet, the pokémon had never felt so utterly alone. All it took was a single sleep for his entire world to change, and here he was, lost in the forest he knew like the back of his paw, begging the world for answers.

Answers arrived, sooner than later. The world’s mercy came with a catch.

An ominous fluttering and a cacophony of squawks drew Pikachu’s trembling gaze to the overcast skies above—his feet frozen to the ground when he saw what eclipsed the light filtering in. A whole flock of fearow and spearow, beaks razor sharp lines against the heavens, hungry eyes peering down into the trees below.

The flapping of their wings grew deafening, cries of their names filling the silence that Pikachu missed only now. The first one dive-bombed into the forest, and a hundred more followed.

His legs moved on their own, kicking up dirt and ripping grass from the forest floor. The bird pokémon swooped, intent to gulp up every bug or mouse left in the forest. Pikachu bolted back to its center, knowing he was nothing to them but a giant yellow buffet.

They knew it was coming, his mind raced as he tore across the divide, making a beeline for the tree at its center. Everyone left because they must’ve sensed something, but…

A few of the cocoons glued to the trees cried out in agony as their ends were met. Pikachu shut his eyes tight, desperate to will the awful sound away.

Why did they leave me?

There wasn’t time to descend into the despair that so badly wanted to take the mouse’s heart. One of the fearow had locked onto his shock of yellow fur against the green of the world below, and it came down like an angry lance, ready to mercilessly skewer him.

I was asleep… he reasoned. They started leaving, they didn’t notice me gone from the nest, they probably didn’t think of it until it was too late to go back for just one measly—

Pikachu felt it just barely graze his tail, threatening to pin him to the unforgiving earth. He only barely escaped it as he shot into the hollow in the center of the tree.

He could see the bird pokémon struggling to fit inside the small entrance, and the mouse scaled its twisted insides to higher ground, where its vice of a mouth couldn’t reach him. Hard taps against the tree’s walls told him that the swarm outside were desperately trying to drill razor-sharp beaks into it, but the tree remained sturdy, standing unperturbed, as it always had.

Ravenous squawks all around chilled Pikachu’s blood, and he curled in on himself, tail wrapped
around him in place of another’s embrace. The walls were tighter on his fur, here toward the top of
the towering tree. He balled up. He waited.

Through days with no food in his stomach, through nights where the idea of sleep meant potentially
rolling over and falling to the fatal ground below. The night it started, thunder boomed outside, and
where previously its sound would give him courage, now the static in the air only seemed to taunt
him. Even with the universe’s strength, this was not a fight he could win.

So he waited. Waited days, ears fine-tuned to the noise outside. He couldn’t comprehend how long
it’d been, started to wonder if maybe the flock had taken the forest as their own. Surrounded in the
bark prison with light filtering in through a single hole at the tree’s base, Pikachu wondered if this
really was how he’d leave the earth—alone in the dark, clawing at the stifling walls as they silently
closed in.

Trapped, imprisoned, suffocated. All he wanted was to breathe the open air one last time. Legs
aching to move, simultaneously bursting and exhausted with sparks he was dying to release and pent
up energy he needed to rid himself of.

It must have been pushing a week when the silence finally returned to the forest, and almost
immediately after, Pikachu heard a voice. Though the mouse was young, he knew a human when he
heard one.

Humans, most of the time, were kind.

He’d heard mixed tales of them, true—been told never to trust one blindly. But Pikachu had also
observed plenty a human from afar, seen the way they left out seed for the pidgey, or the way they’d
smile at the metapod as they passed. The human outside grumbled a little, obviously frustrated with
whatever it was they were looking for. Even in anger, the voice was oddly inviting. Pikachu rose,
weak and wobbling as he made his way down the tree. Sunlight seared his face, blinding him as he
entered the outside world once more.

“Oh my god,” the voice said, and Pikachu blearily peered up at it, his eyesight still not adjusted
entirely to the light.

He saw her eventually, though—gaining form up against the light that enveloped her. Long, messy
black hair rested at her back, matching the dark of her wardrobe. She looked like a friendly shadow
up against the brilliant world, save for sky-blue eyes that glistened absolutely starstruck as they met
Pikachu’s own.

“I thought everyone was messing with me!” she marveled, hands on her knees.

“Pi—ii?” was all Pikachu could muster, curious despite it.

“People kept telling me there were pikachu in the Viridian Forest, but I’ve been here for hours and
haven’t seen a single one,” she said. “Sounds like the kinda thing Johnny My-Uncle-is-Professor-
Oak would say. yeah?”

Pikachu didn’t know what any of that meant. He knew he was exhausted. And he knew that he was
gripped by some sort of otherworldly feeling—eyes on this human who looked like a guardian angel
—that he was the only one left in this forest specifically so he could meet her.

She looked to the mouse, a little serious, now. Pikachu watched as she dug in her pocket, produced
a ball.

“Hey!” she said, jovial. “You look like you’re in bad shape, sparks. This forest is kind of a mess,
huh? Why don’t you come with me, and I’ll take you to a Pokémon Center.”

He stared at the capsule in her hands, aptly decorated with a lightning bolt, as though it were made for him and him alone. Pikachu was certain of it, now—that all the pain, all the lonely nights, all the fear and claustrophobia, it was for this moment and this moment alone. He placed his hands on the pokéball, grip loose as he trembled.

Her voice sounded like a safe haven. He wondered if all humans sounded so comforting.

With his claws at sturdy metal, Pikachu let his vision fade, and he collapsed onto the respite that dwelled in her hands, not an ounce of fight left in him.

Destined, he quietly faded out of consciousness as the ball swallowed him up.

This is why I was left here.

“Ya tellin’ me,” Meowth stopped him. “Ya had anudda trainer before da twoihp?”

Pikachu nodded, oddly quiet. Meowth was reacting to his vulnerability in a way he couldn’t pinpoint, pensive where the mouse figured he’d usually be theatrics and tears. To the cat’s credit, he was almost silent as Pikachu spoke, far more attentive than the smaller pokémon had ever seen him before.

“…what was she like?”

Pikachu shook his head. Putting words to her was difficult.

“Bold, and scrappy, and confident. A little bit of a glutton,” he said, picking adjectives carefully. “…a lot like Ash, actually.”

His expression twisted, instantly feeling sour at the comparison. Their footsteps carried on, quiet as they neared Seafoam’s beaches, a place Pikachu found himself instinctively drawn to on nights like these. Waves doppedle into earshot, a sign that they were closer than he’d realized. He backpedaled.

“But…”

Meowth was behind him, long arms limp at his sides, guitar strapped to his back. “But?”

Pikachu didn’t look back as he spoke. Slowly, he kept moving forward.

“Can you believe it, Pikachu?” his trainer said. “You really won me this Cascade Badge all by yourself!”

“Pika~chu!”

“Of course, behind every great pokémon is a great trainer,” she boasted, a confident smirk at her lips.

The mouse chirped another utterance of his name, muscles aching with the thrill of a good fight. He’d learned a lot about his trainer in the last few weeks—the most interesting of all being her fondness for electric types. He was only her third, but she spoke of great things, regardless—riding atop the back of a zapdos, the very world at her fingertips, thunder on her back. Her passion was
endearing, her dreams so grand. Pikachu was humbled that he got to be a part of them at all.

“Man, if that’s what a weak little pikachu can do, imagine how strong you’ll be when you evolve!”

The comment snapped him out of his daydream. He blinked once or twice, unable to properly register it.

Weak? He wondered. I just swept a whole gym…

“Pii-ka?” he tried to articulate himself, and she laughed him off, waving her hand like he were a bug to swat away.

“C’mon, I’m just messing with you,” she said, not meeting his eyes. “Just sayin’, you got a ways to go, so if this is what you’re capable of now, I’m kinda stoked.”

Her commitment to so swiftly moving past what she’d said hurt like a papercut—a sting that remained, impossible to ignore. What did she mean when he evolved? What was wrong with him now?

These comments here and there—silent jabs at his pride—had been accumulating for a while, now. The first week they were together, Pikachu felt himself on top of the world, finally a pokémon with someone by his side, healing from all he’d seen, the gripping loneliness he’d felt trapped in that tree for days.

His human was kind. He was… certain she was, with her warm smile and inviting voice, with how she saved him when he was down on his luck. Maybe she just didn’t know.

“Pika, pikachu,” he pressed, intent to question what she meant.

“God, you’re really stuck on this, aren’t you?” she rolled her eyes, refusing to give him even a moment of validation. “S’nothing personal, sparks, I’m just saying, you’ll be stronger when you evolve! That’s how it works!”

“Pii-kachu!” he shot back, and something flashed in her eyes at his frustration, something that made him reel back a little.

What am I… so scared of?

“I think I know more about how it works than you do, dude,” she said, voice dripping venom, eyes narrowed. “Why are you fighting with me? I’m your trainer.”

‘Cause you’re being a jerk, that’s why!”

She turned her head, and Pikachu followed, their eyes swiveling to the source of where the voice had come from. Just a ways away was a twig of a girl, red hair shaggy as it messily grew out, fists balled and frame tight with anger.

“...excuse me?” Pikachu’s trainer quirked an eyebrow, then peered closer into the younger girl. “Oh! Pfft, you’re baby Waterflower, right?”

“I have a name!” she shot back. “It’s Misty!”

“Right, whatever,” the older girl turned away, side-eyeing her. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, you can be a little nicer to your pikachu!” Misty ordered. “It just won a badge all by itself for you!”
“I told it I was impressed,” she countered. “Not that it’s really that much of an accomplishment, your sisters are handing these things out like candy…”

“Strong trainers or not, a pokémon should always be praised when it fights for you!”

“You deaf, squirt?” the older girl shot. “I told you, I was praising it.”

Pikachu looked to his feet. Somehow, he felt like this was his fault. He curled his tail around himself.

“And you wrapped it up in some dumb spin of evolution!” Misty said. “Did you ever ask Pikachu how it feels about evolving? Or did you just think about what you wanted?!”

Misty hit a nerve. The older girl grit her teeth, stood up, and turned away. Pikachu peered into Misty, his heart swelling at how a stranger could know his heart better than someone he’d spent hours upon hours beside.

“Let’s go, Pikachu,” his trainer spat, digging his ball out of her pocket.

Misty’s face was the last thing Pikachu saw before he was placed back to rest in the capsule. Her arm outstretched with all the help she hadn’t been able to offer, her eyes wavering as the two of them went. She swallowed thickly, heart dropping with a pain she was growing well-acquainted with—hopelessness. Pikachu belonged to this girl. Pikachu was at her mercy and hers alone.

She couldn’t save him. She couldn’t save everyone.

“Even when she would apologize,” Pikachu said, sand at his paws. “I couldn’t shake this feeling…that it was all just some kind of game to her. Nothing she ever said felt real.”

“Yeah?” Meowth inquired, inspecting a particularly comfy-looking log that had washed ashore long ago.

“When she would praise me, or be nice to me, it sounded like she was reading lines off a piece of paper,” the mouse continued. “It’s… something only humans do.”

“How d’ya reckon dat?”

Pikachu had found a tiny outcropping of cliff, a makeshift awning that shaded the still sands. It was a cozy little niche, and he found himself right at home beneath it. Meowth followed, tail at a quiet metronome as it swished casually.

“Pokémon are upfront,” Pikachu explained. “If a fearow wants to eat you for breakfast, you know right away.”

The waves rolled in, the only sound for miles in the dead of night. Meowth pulled his guitar from his back, played a couple quiet chords. Pikachu didn’t seem to mind. It was oddly relaxing.

“How are you doing, Pikachu?” the cat asked, a little apprehensively. “T’her, I mean.”
Pikachu curled up tighter, desperate to gain some semblance of warmth. His head hurt.

He couldn’t have surmised how many days it had been since he’d been let out of his pokéball. Weeks, maybe? It was his own fault, anyway. The mouse knew he should have seen this coming.

It was standard protocol, after all. He lost the battle. What good is a pokémon who loses battles? She’d return him to rest, and he’d stay there until it was time for another chance.

The comments got worse. The flashes of cold rage brewing in her already icy eyes flared up more and more. Every time she returned him to the ball, it felt like he stayed there longer and longer each time. He was beginning to wonder why she kept such a weak and useless pokémon like him around to begin with. She fed him, and cared for him, and yes, every once in a blue moon she got really, really angry—but he could still count the days where she was kind, too. Maybe if he were a better pokémon, he’d know that kindness more. Maybe he could draw it out of her, find the good he knew slept inside.

He was getting better at dodging the ball, to his credit. Zapping it away, batting it back with his tail. But this only seemed to mount her frustration, and the electric type suddenly felt himself torn between freedom and damage control. Did he want to be happy now, or in the future?

Today, he was down on his luck, and everything had aligned in such a way that there was no way he had any chance of combating it. Mid-way through the day he’d started to wobble on his feet, a chill creeping up on him that he couldn’t shake despite the burning sun. Like most days, his trainer seemed to take no note of his poor health, and no mercy was given to him for losing the day’s battle in his fevered state. On a better day, when she pointed that ugly red beam at him, he could have dodged it with finesse, turned the threat into a playful game of ping pong, much to his trainer’s chagrin. Today, he collapsed long before the thought even came to him.

Sparks crackled at his cheeks, sending another painful jolt through him. He wondered if maybe being sick wouldn’t be so bad, if he just had someone to keep him a little company.

Pikachu closed his eyes, the walls of the capsule tight around him. In some far away place in the back of his heart, he heard Fearow tearing through the trees. Trapped in his own home, feeling more alone than he ever had, he began to wonder if his life really had changed much at all.

Days passed. His fever broke. And eventually, Pikachu found himself breathing natural air again.

When he was released from his ball, the light of the room was so bright he almost regretted the freedom he’d spent so long missing. Admittedly, he was utterly clueless at what he saw, where he was—machines littered the stark white walls in the contained space, whirring gears singing to the silence of the room. There was a man in front of him with a shock of grey hair and a warm smile on his face. His trainer was nowhere in sight.

Confused, then nervous, then utterly destroyed. That’s the only way Professor Oak could have described the progression of emotion on the mouse’s face. He was down at Pikachu’s level, trying to make his voice as soft as possible.

“Now, now, why do we look so down, Pikachu?” he asked. “Aren’t you excited to meet your new trainer?”

What… Pikachu stepped back from him, trembling a little. What is he talking about?!
“Pi… pika?!” the pokémon shuddered out, heartbroken confusion lining his voice.

“Surely, she must have told you…?” Oak said. “She said you were in need of a new home, and so she graciously donated you to be one of the starter pokémon that will be accompanying the new trainers as they leave Pallet this April!”

Pikachu marveled at him, eyes wide and jaw agape, trembling and shaking his head. His voice wavered. Oak’s expression shifted.

No… Pikachu’s heart raced, splintered cries of his name all he could muster. I have a trainer! She’s my trainer! She’s my trainer!

The mouse felt static crawling up his throat, bristling his fur, tearing through his veins. Images flashed through his head—of him and her together, of all they’d seen and done, of all she’d thrown away without batting an eyelash. He was a livewire, now, thunderclouds living within him, cracking open on the unforgiving earth below. The Professor backed up a little, realizing all at once that the pokémon didn’t consent to this decision.

She’s my trainer! He grit his teeth, red cheeks a searing white, now. She’s my trainer!

He broke. Not at being left behind, but at how she’d conducted it. He could see her so clearly in his mind’s eye, walking away from that laboratory with one less pokéball weighing down her pocket. Feeling so good about herself for donating a pokémon to a trainer in need. She couldn’t have just tied him to a post, left him in an alley, done it like every other neglectful human who traumatized and hurt and lied.

No, she had to convince herself she was doing something generous. Because if she couldn’t convince herself, how could she ever convince others?

When she told this story, she would tell it with herself as the hero. She would make no mention of the pikachu she took advantage of and verbally tore down and ignored for days at a time, except to quietly comment on what a problem child he could be.

A deluge of electricity tore across the lab’s interior, its searing heat evaporating Pikachu’s spilling tears before they could even hit the ground. Oak took the volts in stride as he held up Pikachu’s ball, panicked—and the pokémon was far too lost in its own emotions to bear noticing or putting up a fight. He disappeared from the lab, and the lightning storm went with him. Hair on end and frazzled, Oak coughed out an ugly cloud of smoke, sighing.

It was going to be a long couple of weeks.

Professor Oak was certain, at this point, that he had enough electrical burns and bite scars to last him a lifetime.

He’d dealt with and rehabilitated quite a large amount of abused and abandoned pokémon throughout the years, but not a single one of them seemed to have as much personality or as much fight in them as this single pikachu. Beneath the surface, it was sentimental and deserving of a poem or three—how alike him and the boy were at heart. At its base level, though, it was mostly just shaving years off the older man’s life.

He’d been fidgeting with the electric-type’s ball in his hands for what felt like hours now, debating in his mind if this conversation was worth it. Sure, Pikachu seemed to have calmed down a little since
the initial shock, but it still had a fairly long way to go until it was really trainer material. Not only that, if he let it out of its ball now, getting it back in was sure to take him all night, and he had soaps to watch with plot threads he desperately needed to find out.

Oak ran over the words a thousand times in his head since that pikachu had first shown up on his doorstep. The night he met Delia, and ages later she whispered longingly the last name of the man she swore she’d marry, oddly familiar. Remembered the night her boy was born—“it’s a girl,” they’d said, but Oak knew better, and in a few years, so did Ash. He’d seen those eyes before, remembered the thundercloud sleeping on his shoulder.

Bravely, Oak tossed Pikachu’s pokéball. The mouse gave a disoriented little shake of its head as it slowly came back, one that quickly dissipated—just as it always did. Pikachu looked the same as ever—eyes cloudy, expression dim, fangs bared. Whatever Oak had in store for him today, he had enough fight in him to combat it.

But to Pikachu’s surprise, Oak didn’t put his hands on him, or tell him to do anything, or even react much to him at all, really. The man simply leaned back in his leather computer chair, hands behind his head, relaxed.

“Good evening, Pikachu!” he said, as though the mouse wasn’t responsible for half the injuries he currently beared. “How are you tonight?”

“Piiii,” the mouse said ominously, talkative as ever despite his demeanour. A response was a good sign, regardless—it meant the pokémon wasn’t entirely apathetic.

“Me? Well, it’s certainly been an eventful night, with everyone preparing to leave tomorrow morning,” Oak said, looking off to the side. “You know, the chazuke at Pallet House was wonderful tonight. I can tell Delia really put her heart into it.”

Pikachu narrowed his eyes at the man. None of this pertained to him. He didn’t understand why Oak felt he needed to be here for this at all, but he supposed he wasn’t about to look a gift lack of pokéball in the mouth. His tail twitched.

“I was just on the phone with her, wishing her goodnight, actually!” Oak said. “Though, she had to cut the call short rather quickly. That boy of hers was still awake upstairs making a ruckus. Knowing him, there’s not a single doubt in my mind he’s far too excited to sleep.”

He laughed, a little. To himself entirely. Pikachu remained silent. He hated humans, always thinking the world was begging to hear their thoughts.

Slowly, and with careful precision, then, Oak stood up from his chair, the warm smile on his face never once vanishing, despite everything. He moved at a slowbro’s pace as he brought himself down to Pikachu’s level, the utmost care in his movements. Not out of self preservation—though, the less voltage in his blood, the better—but out of a genuine willingness to not disturb the pokémon further. He peered into Pikachu, and Pikachu met his eyes.

Oak was no longer a world-renowned Professor, in that single moment in time. He was Sammy, a bright eyed boy with a sketchbook in his calloused hands, graphite and charcoal smudged at his palm. Somewhere far back in his memory, he marveled at the raven-haired boy in front of him—at the otherworldly way he spoke, at the bravery he wore without a second thought, at the strange technology at his behest, at the perfectly silky fur of the pikachu that rested on his shoulder.

It didn’t take an experienced Pokémon Watcher to know how loved it truly was—all he needed was a cursory glance.
The professor placed a single hand in a hover at Pikachu’s cheek, and he could feel as static instantly swam on his palm. He willed himself not to recoil in the wake of it. There were things that needed to be said. Slowly, he turned the gesture into contact. Pikachu’s fur bristled, but the sparks within him remained at ease—there was something in Oak’s eyes he was desperate to know.

“Oh, Pikachu,” the man said, sounding heartbroken at what the world could be. “You’ve hurt far too much for something so new, haven’t you?”

The mouse stiffened, a little, but did not bite or shock or fight—this feeling was alien, terrifying. Someone acknowledging his pain as real, declaring out loud that he’d been through much of anything. Oak persisted, his voice like solace.

“I can tell you still are,” he said. “You don’t trust a soul, do you?”

He paused. The words were not accusatory, but understanding, empathetic. There was wisdom in what he said next that Pikachu found himself taken by, a confidence he’d never known in any other human.

“Please believe me when I say, very soon all that is going to change.”

The pokémon lost himself in the words, in all their certainty, in the ethereal sort of prudence the man uttered them with. So mesmerized, so relaxed, so taken—he didn’t even notice Oak slowly motioning for his pokéball with another hand, wishing him a goodnight as he went back into the capsule with a whoosh.

Alone in the lab, now, Oak let out a relieved sigh. All things considered, it had gone better than he planned. He looked at the ball as its lightning-monogrammed finish rested in his hand, speaking to it one last time before a new day dawned.

“I’m afraid I’ve done all I can do for you, Pikachu,” Oak said.

“The rest, it seems, will be up to him.”

Pikachu ended his sentence, and the sound of waves quickly took its place. When he didn’t start speaking again, Meowth realized that meant this was the end of something—the whole story, presumably. But there were pieces missing, plot threads he wanted to know the end of, questions he wanted to ask that he wasn’t sure he was allowed. The sky was starting to light up. He took his chance.

“...wait a minute, so was ‘e right?” Meowth asked, ruminating on what Oak had said, and all it could have meant.

“Yes,” Pikachu told him, without a moment’s hesitation.

The cat looked at his paws, then to Pikachu, utterly clueless.

“I don’t get it, Pikachu, what’d da geezer mean?”

The electric type brought his eyes back to the softly fading stars, reflected and wavering in the swirling oceans below.
His words were simple, but held all the weight in the world. Pikachu didn’t have to elaborate on their significance, so he didn’t. Meowth shifted, unsatisfied.

“Meetin’ someone new don’t just cure all dat pain you musta been feelin’,” he noted. “Was it really so simple?”

The mouse shook his head. “No. I hated Ash, he was just like any other human to me.”

“Yeah, ‘n’ look how dat worked out, ha!” Meowth grinned. “What got ya sweet t’ da twoihp?”

It was a loaded question. How could Pikachu count the ways he loved Ash? He could talk about how Ash came into the lab wanting everything but him, but fell in love the second he saw the pokémon there, grabbing him in his hands and holding on tight through hundreds upon thousands of volts. He could talk about the way Ash never questioned a pikachu who said no to its pokéball, but tied that rope to him and donned his gloves regardless, because the two of them were going to be friends whether Pikachu realized it or not. He could talk about everything that happened on that sunny path to Viridian, how Pikachu laughed at his misery for hours and how Ash responded by standing up for him instead of returning the favour. There was so much he could have said, but he feared the universe didn’t hold within it enough time for him to ever get all the words inside out. He’d hardly realized he’d been doing just that—voicing all these feelings—the entire time, filterless in the wake of the love he had for his best friend, his soulmate.

“On the way to Viridian, when those spearow were attacking,” Pikachu said. “I swore, I recognized some of their faces.”

The ocean purred. Wind shook the palms. In his memories, the flock circled in front of the two of them, and Pikachu’s vision blurred in and out, the rain smearing what cohesion he had left. In the open field, there was nowhere to hide, no tree to burrow into, no safety to crawl toward. Thunder struck the earth, illuminating the boy’s silhouette in front of him, arms protectively thrown out and shielding the tiny yellow thing with all he was. As though he believed it was all he was put on earth to do.

“No, it whispered. But I think I want to.”

“I’m going to capture and defeat you all!” he cried, voice a roar even above the thunder. “You hear me?!”

Human, pokémon, him and Ash were born of the same earth. Their air was the same, their sky was the same, their universe was the same. Sometimes, when the world willed it, so were their challenges. A year ago, Pikachu was curled up in a tree’s hollow, trembling at the ominous flapping of wings as he felt the forest die around him. Nothing had changed.

“Come and get me!” Ash dared, sneakers dug hard into the mud.

Everything had changed.

It was then that Pikachu decided, thinking on all he’d been, all he wanted to be—there was no way he would stand by while another living being had to face the menace of the world alone to see a brighter day. He refused to let Ash know what he had known.

Back in the present, the mouse picked his words. The waves faded back to his ears.
“Ash never gives up until the very end,” Pikachu said. “Not on things, not on people, and never on pokémon.”

“Ya just annoyed him til ya fell for da kid, didn’t ya?” Meowth elbowed him, and he let out a defeated sigh—this one, with a smile.

“Maybe,” Pikachu affirmed.

The two of them broke into soft laughs, basking in that lasting moment of dawn where everything existed in the same shade of blue. Another few krabby shuffled onto the beach, and though Pikachu was certain Meowth would curiously peer into the gatherings of them with a question on his tongue, the cat was oddly silent, still. The story was over, Pikachu had said his piece—though he’d never got to spelling out why he’d mentioned everything in the first place. He was waiting on Meowth to ask the questions he definitely had, but didn’t want to voice.

Lazily, the mouse flopped onto his stomach, waiting for Meowth to work up the nerve. Finally, he did.

“Hey, Pikachu?”

“...yeah?”

The cat softened, almost sheepishly. He looked off to the side.

“What’s it like?” he said, a waver in his voice. “Havin’ him as a trainer?”

It wasn’t at all what he was expecting. What’d Meowth care? He never seemed to give a single thought to what that aspect of a pokémon’s life could be. He wasn’t sure what to give Meowth. He just told the truth.

“Sometimes his strengths are also his faults,” the smaller pokémon said. “He’s too brave. I’m scared one day he’s gonna run headfirst into something and never come back out.”

“Tell me about it,” Meowth said. “Never a dull moment wit’ dat one, huh?”

Pikachu shook his head in agreement. “A lot of the time thanks to you.”

The mouse shot him an acidic look, and Meowth jolted a little, unsure of what it was he could’ve said to that.

“...but through everything he puts me through, all the stress and all the hurt as we figured it out, it’s worth it.”

“Yeah?” Meowth leaned in. “N’how ya reckon dat?”

“I’ve always known my home is by Ash’s side,” Pikachu smiled.

The word home lingered in the air, and Meowth found his heart beating against his ribcage, taken in a way he couldn’t understand. Something deep within him started to breathe, and it was taking all he had to not let the sentiment show on his face. Home. Home.

“Can… can home really be a person?”

“What?” Pikachu said, genuinely surprised. “‘Course it can. Don’t you feel that way about those two dumbells you call friends?”
The cat felt like such an idiot, in all he’d spent so long agonizing over. Sure, his friends and him had a permanent location now, but he’d had a home all along. The longest con, it turned out, was the one he was playing on himself—this idea that there was nowhere for him, when there was always two people in his life willing to sacrifice everything just to keep him by their sides.

Of course, it would be Pikachu who’d carry him to that realization.

“Y’know,” Pikachu interrupted his thoughts. “If you guys weren’t always putting me in cages, this probably wouldn’t be so hard.”

He looked back to Meowth, that same quirked eyebrow sort of stare, judgmental.

“I don’t have a lot of buttons, but you sure found em anyways and pushed with all you had,” he said.

It all fell into place, then—why Pikachu had told him all this. Of course. It wasn’t just some quiet night together where Meowth unlocked the elusive tragic backstory of his ultimate foil, it was Pikachu’s way of explaining why his forgiveness was so hard to give. Trapped in that tree, trapped in his own ball, it was no wonder he bore so much resentment toward Team Rocket in all they specialized in. They were pros at making him feel claustrophobic and isolated.

The cat almost felt embarrassed, at this. He considered, for a moment, how he’d feel if someone locked James in a room full of vileplume, and the immediate involuntary action of his claws unsheathing themselves told Meowth all he needed to know.

To Pikachu’s surprise, that was when the normal-type finally started crying. A pitiful kind of laugh escaped him along with it, like he was in disbelief of everything the world had swung not just him, but Pikachu, too. Meowth wiped at slitted eyes, quietly hysterical, not at all what the smaller pokémon was used to. Empathetic to a fault, the cat didn’t know how to offer a stronger ‘I’m sorry.’

Though the stars had almost entirely faded, the moon was full as ever. Pikachu lost himself in it, waited for Meowth to quiet his cries to a few lowly sniffles. The krabby shuffled to the cliff edges surrounding the beach.

“Y’know how I said humans are tricky?” Pikachu asked, and Meowth nodded, wondering where he was going.

“I think that’s why I always struggled so much with you.”

Meowth tilted his head, spots of tears still stuck at his eyes. “Whaddya mean?”

Pikachu turned to face him, brown on blue.

“You have the heart of a human,” he said. “You gotta know that, right?”

“Course I do,” Meowth said, almost proudly. “Uddahwise I wouldn’t be speakin’ to ya all human-like, now would I?”

Pikachu rolled his eyes. He pressed on.

“Maybe I’m mad at myself for thinking of humans and pokémon as such different things,” he kicked up a tiny cloud of sand. “Letting myself be tricked by someone like you who looks like me and acts like the people who hurt me.”

The cat was pensive, to this. Though philosophy was his strong suit, he found himself lacking the
finesse he so usually had. A rival snatched your confidence in ways you never expected.

“Well,” Meowth said. “Human, pokémon, do ya t’ink anyone can change if dey really, really try?”

Pikachu knew, in how he said it, that it wasn’t just a question Meowth had come up with on the spot. It was one he’d known long before that night, turned over in his head on sleepless nights of his own. Dawn had arrived, now, and the cat had done nothing but listen and keep his heart open, black as Pikachu was... certain it was. The smaller pokémon sighed quietly, losing himself in the waves. He wasn’t a philosopher. He leaned onto Meowth’s shoulder, and the cat made a soft sort of trill at the touch—hardly expecting it, after everything. His heart pounded, an action he couldn’t justify.

“For your sake and mine,” Pikachu said. “I hope.”

The sky began to exist in hues other than azure, and it was only when the krabby started blowing bubbles out to the ever-breathing sea that Pikachu found himself dozing, suddenly struck with just how exhausted he was. In the shifting colours of the dawn’s new day, the pair of pokémon watched mesmerized as the bubbles drifted to sea, iridescent as they reflected the rainbow clouds around them, blown on by the winds of origin.

Meowth rested paws at his guitar as the mouse quietly began to waver beside him. Pikachu was not born into a comfortable life and handed a loving master at the start—he suffered hard and long and painfully, just as Meowth had, just as Meowth’s friends had. It felt repetitive—the revelation that good was a choice, not a birthright. Admittedly, the cat might have been a little behind on believing it, himself.

He closed his eyes, and a grouping of words struck his tongue. When he softly whispered them aloud, they felt like the most coherent form of déjà vu—though he was certain, absolutely so, that he had never once spoken them before.

“Da same eart’, da same air, da same sky…”

Meowth sat on them for a moment, letting their sentiment sink in, hoping to internalize them for a better future. Pikachu was asleep, now, he could tell it in the way his breathing slowed, the way his tail twitched at the cat’s back. Meowth’s heart melted into a thought, then, the strange feeling of living through a memory you never want to forget—good, evil, human, pokémon, none of that mattered to him, then. All that mattered, as they sat tiny specks on a tiny planet hurtling through the vastness of the cosmos, was this single moment him and Pikachu were sharing together.

Meowth opened his eyes. Mew was several inches away from his face.

There was probably a more poetic way to describe the sight—of two crystal blues peering like mirrors into his thoughtful resting gaze, of the curvature of the mythical pokémon’s slender body as it hung upside down, floating whimsically off the sandy shores around them. Of the rosey fur he’d seen only twice—once? Twice?—once before. Before he could register it, though, it was gone—vanished right before his eyes with a quiet little blip.

Delayed, always, Meowth made an ugly noise in surprise, and Pikachu stirred with an annoyed utterance, too exhausted to protest but still not happy about his sleep ending so soon. It wasn’t like Meowth was happy about the moment’s end either, but…

“Pikachu, am I crazy, or—” he messily shoved a paw past the two of them, pointing hysterically at what was left of the moon as daybreak came.

“Look! Ya see dat too, right?!”
Across the sky, Mew was a soft pink streak, its tail like a playful windsock as it flitted gingerly behind it. Pikachu squinted blearily, and sighed, and fell right back asleep.

Meowth looked, agape—to Pikachu, then back to Mew, then to Pikachu, then back to the empty space where Mew once was. With no one to confirm what he’d just seen, the cat wondered if maybe he was deluded with exhaustion, too.

He sighed. He tried not to let the sighting of a literal legend keep his already restless mind awake. With care to not wake the smaller pokémon once more, he turned to face Pikachu—vulnerable, and asleep, and despite the bite that still lingered in the electric-type’s voice, that way around his enemy since time immemorial by choice. His heart filled with words he’d been pawing for like the most tantalizing treat at the fish market, hours before. Paw-pads inched themselves toward the strings.

If Mew couldn’t wake Pikachu up, he doubted a little light music could.

“Hey, Pikachu—

Maybe in ya head ya see me,
As ya everlastin’ rival,
As da one nuisance ya just can’t put t’ bed…”

The muse shifted a little in his sleep. Pikachu nuzzled involuntarily into Meowth, returning warmth with gentle static, unaware of his own affection. Meowth released feelings tossing around inside him with a shaky exhale, kept on crooning, sounding almost self-parody as he conjured more lyrics.

“Hey, Pikachu—

It’ll break ya heart t’ hear dis,
But really, truly, deeply—
A single t’ought o’ you ain’t never cross my head…”

Meowth closed his eyes, kept on strumming, let the waves take him away as the krabby sent bubbles like gifts to the sun as it rose. Exhaustion gripped him. His filter left, and he sang.

“But, Pikachu, if I was more like yous…
Like if maybe… ah, I don’t know!
I made hearts race with my cute face, napping on da shore…
Well, I s’pose dat might not hurt my cred at all….”

Love ballads are all I’m good for, he sighed to himself. Ah, well. Everyone’s gotta niche.

“Our paths are far too intahtwined,
For ya t’ not know how I feel,
Both of us, so much left behind…
Days spent longin’ for happiness dat never seemed real…”

Pikachu felt like his eyes were glued shut, but despite every tiny ounce of him begging them to stay that way, he managed to force them open by sheer iron will alone.

He was spread eagle on Ash’s bed, not interested in doing much of anything besides laying there. The sun was halfway through the sky outside, and he could hear the telltale swish swash of Mimey sweeping the cobblestones out through the opened window. Trophies and ribbons decorated the shelves. He was home.

Sluggishly, the mouse brought himself to a sit—giving a wide-mouthed squeak of a yawn as he did so. There were voices downstairs—distinctly Ketchum voices, no troublemakers in sight—and the train of thought collided him straight into the next. Right, troublemakers. Those three, Meowth.

...when did he pass out? Did Meowth say something about Mew last night, or did he dream that? And who carried him back to bed? Couldn’t have been the bigger pokémon, scrawny as he was—

Something caught his eye, then—the sunlight catching on its pristine glass, far more rare than any crystal, any stone, any gem. The telltale red of its shape, sitting atop Ash’s nightstand like another one of his trophies, this one far more delicious than any victorious league battle. The electric-type salivated. He was awake, now.

That was the good ketchup. The kind Delia didn’t let him paw. The kind he’d envied from afar, dreaming of a field he could run through where it grew on bushes, hung from trees. It was right there. It was prime for the taking.

This is a trap, his better instincts said. Last night was to exhaust me, this is when they’re gonna swoop in reciting idiotic rhymes—

Despite his thoughts, he was quietly inching toward the bottle, static collecting in the bedsheets with every brush of his fur.

I am an intelligent creature! Pikachu fought. I’m smart! I don’t fall for tricks like I used to!

His hand was on it. This was a battle he was destined to both win and lose, and no stellar moveset or type advantage could turn the tides either way.

A shockproof net didn’t immediately fall on him upon grabbing it, and there didn’t seem to be a pitfall anywhere nearby, either. Pikachu blinked a couple times, unsure of what, exactly, was going on. It was only then that he noticed, in all his haste, the folded scrap of paper beneath the ketchup bottle.

Fighting the urge to drown himself in tomatoey euphoria long before he inspected the note, he picked it up, careful not to topple the bottle resting above. The letters made his head swim, but he could tell even in their collective nonsense that the handwriting was, to be kind, atrocious.

Pikachu pulled apart the lid with his teeth, jumped off the bed as he started lapping at the sweet, sweet ambrosia sleeping within. If he were a weaker pokémon, he was certain his knees would’ve given way and sent him tumbling down the stairs of his trainer’s childhood home.

He reached the bottom, nonchalantly pattering paw-by-paw forward as he made his way to the kitchen. Ash graciously stopped shoving lunch in his face for a few moments to greet his partner, stopping himself midway to question the circumstance.
“Hey, g’morning sleepyhe—Okay, mom, Pikachu already found breakfast, I guess.”

“Pi-ka!” he affirmed, the bottle already halfway gone.

Quick as the mouse had finished his sentence, he handed the letter that had come with said breakfast to Ash. The boy was reasonably caught off guard at his pokémon suddenly presenting him with a note, peering down at Pikachu with a casual tilt of his head. The electric type licked red from his lip.

“Chuu,” he said.

“You want me t’ read it to you?” Ash questioned.

“Pika, pikachu,” Pikachu nodded.

“Uh, alright, buddy,” Ash unfurled it in his hands, not entirely knowing how his pokémon acquired the note, or what to expect.

“It says… *Thanks for being the light that guided me home, even though all I gave you was darkness.*”

The boy placed it gingerly on the table in front of him, crossing his arms in thought at the flowery prose. He stared at the space where the signature would be, in its place—

“It’s signed with a pawprint,” he noted.

“Oh, and a heart!” Delia cooed over his shoulder, suddenly present and startling him out of his introspection. “How romantic, you have a secret admirer, don’t you, Pikachu?”

“A what?” Ash quirked an eyebrow, genuinely asking.

Pikachu sighed. If he was being honest with himself, he didn’t know what part of the title was more ludicrous—‘secret’ or ‘admirer.’

A hazy image resurfaced in his mind’s eye. Of bubbles at sunrise, of the hypnagogic state between waking and dreaming, of a voice that shouldn’t have sounded that easy on his heart, given its usual cadence, the triumphant way it used to laugh while it rung at him from the other side of steel bars no thunder could penetrate.

Pikachu shook it from his head, wordlessly took his *absolutely not a love letter* back from a still perplexed and curious set of humans, and buried his face in his high-class condiment selection.

Much as he hated admitting he was wrong about someone he was certain he’d pegged, he was equally certain now he’d have plenty of time to figure out how to trust even the untrustable again.

After all, he’d done it once before.

Chapter End Notes

so like, jessie and james weren't in this chapter which is kind of hysterical to me. but like, meowth has been desperately deserving the spotlight in this fuckin story for so long, i'm
kinda chill w that.

this one came out fast because it's another chapter i wrote in my head, like, two years ago. so i'm a little nervous about posting it, as i always am with those ones, lol. but i think it turned out lovely. i've been putting together pikachu backstory in my head for a very, very long time. he is a little angsty here! dude was not a happy little rodent in episode one, and i've always been obsessed with knowing why.

the first song meowth sings is the aged classic 'meowth no uta'/meowth's song' (4kids did that first line in ep070/go west young meowth, i did the new one after it) and the last one he sings is 'hey pikachu,' which i localized, crying the entire time i did so. it is a really cute song.

ANYWAYS i am riding my krazyship to work, now. i should be doing my hair and makeup but i'm thirsty for validation. love y'all! next chapter's gonna be fucking wild and i'm literally not emotionally prepared to write it at all!

as always, though, i will do my best!
Earthbound

Chapter Notes

happy fucking halloween babes!!!!!!! enjoy a spooky chapter to celebrate!!!! spooky in that im crying!!! ive been crying for 30 years!!!

no episodes referenced in this chapter. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jessie allowed herself a moment’s solace amongst the typical routine, prying her arms away from the table she’d been wiping down and electing to wipe the sweat off her brow instead. It had been a long night, the kind where everyone and their entire family decided their cozy little establishment was the place to be. Hours later, the lot of them were still feeling the effects of it in full force.

Delia was counting cash at the till, humming a melodic little tune as she did so, filling the silence that the relative emptiness had left. James, Meowth, and Wobuffet were in the corners opposite of Jessie, intent to get cleanup done quicker and meet in the middle so they could climb upstairs and fall into bed.

Looking on, it was strange to realize this was Jessie’s life now. She didn’t dislike it—quite the opposite, really!—but the idea of structure was so alien and new, it almost seemed like she wanted to reject it. Her impulse told her it wasn’t safe, conditioned by years of bad luck and moving from place to place. She beat it back in her mind with a metaphorical broom. There was a time and a place to be ungrateful.

Jessie turned back to resume the work she was doing, but her peripheral caught on the diner’s wall. The corkboard was resting there—same as it had always been—with photos and letters and postcards decorating it, overlapping in a way that made them unreadable, but perfectly easy to understand despite it. She peered into it, lost in her thoughts.

This was her life now. Her job, her town, her home. She’d set up a comfortable, quiet respite in Pallet, but still, she knew so little about what slept within its hills. With each passing day, it became more and more hers. Her gaze fixated on the corkboard, she scanned it, taking in all this small fragment of her new future had seen.

Scribbled letters from wives about how their husbands shaped up after Delia gave them a late-night scolding. Pictures of her, of varying ages, with varying degrees of family and friend. The most buried pic, of a young and dashing Samuel Oak, decorated in starburst stickers, as if to declare him the most valuable customer of all. The contents of the board were bursting, and Jessie considered a second one hanging there, perhaps as a Christmas gift in the coming months…

Her vision snagged, once more. A flash of violet caught her eye, a single, worn photo toward the lower corner of the collage of memories.

The photo was plain, all things considered. A fading polaroid—little Delia, hair in pigtails and wearing the most country girl getup Jessie had ever seen. She was standing beside someone, presumably her mom, judging by the woman’s shining brown gaze, feathery raven hair. Beside them, the object that had caught Jessie’s attention, was another woman—obviously the stranger that
the picture had been taken for.

Jessie squinted, feeling like her blood was magnetic in the wake of this blurry photograph. The woman in the picture looked like a superhero—bold, with her fingers in a victory pose and a big toothy smile, aubergine spirals framing her sharp features.

Looking at her felt like the made for TV movies they’d catch on the hotel channels—when it was five in the morning, and Jessie would swear she’d seen that actor in some other thing, and suddenly it was a race for her and James to both find an internet connection so they could gather answers, because who are they? I know I’ve seen them before!

So, so familiar. Maybe she was some celebrity who happened to pop in, and the girls were able to snag a photo alongside her, or maybe—

Jessie squinted harder, battling with herself. This was so juvenile, and she was obviously just procrastinating. She wanted to let it go, more than anything, her morbid curiosity… something wasn’t letting her. Her own stubbornness, maybe, but…

“That interesting, huh?” Delia broke her out of her thoughts, amused at how Jessie nearly had her face pressed up against the corkboard.

The younger woman blinked a little, embarrassed to have been caught by her boss in something so notably childish. Ever the troublemaker, she had an excuse on her tongue before she had a filter.

“There’s something about this woman,” she said, almost sounding resentful at the stranger for taking up so much of her time.

In their respective ends of the diners, the rest of the team quietly angled their heads to eavesdrop. Unsurprisingly, Delia didn’t seem in any rush to close up quicker. Instead, she flitted over to where Jessie was, curious to see what photo she was so unshakably transfixed with.

“Which one?”

“Here,” Jessie said, pointing sharply at it. “Look at her, doesn’t she seem just a touch out of place to you?”

Delia chuckled, somehow understanding her meaning exactly. She remembered that night rather fondly—up close and in the photo, the visitor was larger than life.

“She was definitely a peculiar one!” Delia affirmed. “Could you tell just from looking?”

Jessie stared into the photo harder, not looking at the older woman. “It’s just… I swear I’ve seen her somewhere, and it’s driving me crazy. You’re really telling me she’s not some famous actress?”

Delia pressed a finger to her chin, unsure if she could answer that in good conscience. “Well, not that I know of. But if I found out she secretly was tomorrow, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

It wasn’t the answer Jessie wanted, so she skipped the polite formalities and cut to the one she did want.

“Well, who is she?” she said, finally meeting Delia’s eyes. “What do you know about her?”

Even Jessie herself shrunk a little in the wake of her tone. It had fallen far past curious and dove into ravenous territory, as though she’d been starving for decades and the only thing that could satiate her was the knowledge of this mysterious figure, cloaked in black but radiating sunbeams.
She sighed. Always too rough, voice always an octave too high around a cute brunette paying attention to her. Her tone softened as she corrected herself.

“I suppose I just mean, what makes her so important? That she’s allowed a permanent place here, is all.”

Delia offered a smile, endeared to the way the younger woman needlessly quieted her passion. She so badly wanted to tell her that it wasn’t necessary, that the fire in her voice was something she’d easily come to love. Jessie wasn’t patient enough for that kind of love, right now. It was clear what she wanted, so Delia gave it.

“To be honest, my mom and I just liked to keep memories of anyone who stuck out to us, or anyone who had compelling stories passing through,” she said. “Maybe you see the same magic in her that we did, all those years ago…”

Jessie peered into her, unsatisfied. “And what exactly do you mean by that?”

In all honesty, Delia didn’t know where to start—until she recalled an early morning conversation with Jessie, one where she pulled from wisdom she’d heard in a time long passed, wisdom she’d kept with her ever since. Wisdom she hadn’t understood at the time, but grew to love like an old friend over the years.

“Remember a while back, when it was just you and me talking? And I told you about something that someone had said to me long ago, something that really stuck with me?”

James was leaning on his mop, motionless. Meowth and Wobbuffet met under the tables, sharing curious looks. Close could wait.

“Well…”

“It’s positively wonderful to know the embrace of a small town, though! All it’s been lately is expedition after expedition…”

“We could trade places, if you’d like. Pallet’s nice, but I could do with a vacation. Maybe pop over to Seafoam…”

“The Seafoam Islands! You know, I nearly captured an articuno there…”

Delia stood on tiptoes as she quietly peered over the counter. Her mother had closed up hours ago, but here the lot of them still were, enraptured in the stories this younger woman was telling. Reflecting on it, she couldn’t really blame her mom for being so taken by this stranger… there was something about her that just radiated charisma, left you hanging off her every lilting word.

“You’re a riot!”

“Perhaps, but it’s the truth, you know!” the storyteller spun. “Oh, I wandered that cave for what felt like days… and when I finally did see it, it was so clear I didn’t stand a chance in its wake.”

“The way you talk about it, you’d think you did catch it. What’s with that starry look?”

“Oh, eh…” she placed a hand at her face. “Well, Articuno and I had this moment, is all. It touched down in front of me with its arms spread wide, and it gave the proudest, most soul-piercing ‘ca-caw!’”
As though she weren’t a day over ten years old, the woman threw out her arms, mimicking the bird’s impressive wingspan. She held the pose for a moment, letting the echo of her impression fill the silence of the diner. After a beat, she melted back into telling the story. Delia stood on the edge of her seat—squinting, as if that would help her hear the wondrous tale with sharper precision.

“...well, I sure thought it was gonna kill me.”

“Thank goodness it didn’t!” the older woman said. “Now you’re alive to tell a story that’s questionable at best. That was your ‘moment,’ huh?”

“Oh, you!” she whacked the table playfully. “No. Articuno, it… after it presented itself to me, it looked me deep in the eyes. All of a sudden it looked so sweet and gentle… like the complete opposite of the fierce thing it was before.”

“Strange. I wonder why?”

“Well, it sort of gave me the up and down, but lingered at my stomach. I felt like I was under a microscope! It moved its eyes back up to me, and then… it touched its head to mine and closed its eyes. It felt as though we were embracing, and suddenly I felt so strange about wanting to take this wonderful creature for my own glory.”

A pigtailed silhouette from behind the low-light of the bar, Delia’s eyes were completely filled with stars, now. This woman was something extraordinary, dolled up in cherry lips and winged eyeliner and buried in violet locks that curled just perfectly at the ends. Not only had she seen the world front to back, she’d seen pokémon. She’d seen pokémon far more fantastic than the ones Delia would ever know, trapped in Pallet and waiting for her tenth year.

“Darling, you talk about your conscience like it’s a newcomer to your life.”

“Aha, maybe it is… if it’s still here at all. So, anyways! When I opened my eyes, Articuno was gone. A frigid breeze blew past, and I realized I truly had missed my chance. I didn’t think much of it… not until a week or so later when I found out I had a kid in tow.”

“Hold the phone! You were out spelunking with a baby on the way?!”

“Have mercy on me, dear! I didn’t know!”

“But Articuno did!” Delia blurted, and finally her presence could no longer be ignored. Embarrassed, and realizing she probably shouldn’t have been eavesdropping, she ducked back behind the counter, hiding her face as pink collected on it. Normally bold, she found her confidence slightly shaken in the wake of this incredible woman talking to her closest friend.

“Delia, honey,” her mom beckoned, knowing the girl probably was feeling a little third-wheeled. “Why are you hiding over there? Come join us.”

Gathering the courage she so usually knew, Delia gingerly stepped out of the bar and walked toward the pair as they spoke. The younger woman’s eyes lit up as she neared, hair done up in ribbons and flannel tucked messily into her jean-shorts.

To her surprise, the spellcasting storyteller immediately let Delia become her entire world. She leaned over to face the girl, slate eyes sparkling.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there!” she beamed. “Delia, is it? And how old are you, little one?”
"I’m nine," Delia said, feeling her voice come back.

"Nine!" she echoed. "Delia, my dear, what a charmed age. Everywhere you go people will be
telling you it’s the worst of all… they haven’t the slightest idea what they’re talking about."

"It is, though!" the girl puffed her cheeks. "No year has ever passed slower! I swear, if I gotta wait
any longer to be a pokémon trainer, I’m gonna scream!"

The woman opposite to her laughed—heartily, from her chest—and her mom gave a smile that
followed suit. There was such conviction to her words, so much fight in such a small thing.

"You have so much light in your eyes!" the younger woman told her. "Hey, you make sure it never
fades, you hear?"

Her tone had changed on what seemed like a dime—first hopeful and humbled, to fierce and
resolute. Like something had overwhelmed her in the moment, turned her soft love to protective love.
She swiveled back up to look at the woman opposite, gaze aflame.

"This new job… I’m good at it," she said, seemingly non-sequitur. "It terrifies me how good I am at
it. I know I’ve been in here for hours just preaching to you like some kind of golden deity on high,
but listen…"

Her gaze softened, creases around her eyes she shouldn’t have had so young vanishing alongside it.

"…a mother’s love is the most powerful force in this universe! It’s the most important thing a person
can give, and so few are given the opportunity to share it."

She turned back to Delia, smiling, now.

"I mean you too, twerp. If some day you have a kid of your own, you need to love them with all you
are, okay?"

Unsure of what to say to that, Delia nodded more out of compliance than genuine resolve. She
wasn’t totally sure about that! Was there even time to have a kid when you were busy winning
leagues? Her thoughts carried her there, curious as ever.

"What’s your kid like, miss?"

The woman laughed, bringing her gaze out the window to the glittering stars outside. She pawed at
her drink, running a finger across its rim.

"My daughter is a small fire," she said. "Blazing hair and searing blue eyes, and a stubbornness
that will get her far."

Delia leaned on the table, her eyes filling with stars. "Is she a pokémon trainer? Hey, do ya think
she could teach me how t’ be a master?"

"My heart can only pray that’s the carefree sort of life she lives. I hope she never has to experience
the heartache this world has to offer, but I know if anyone will survive those things, it’s her," the
woman looked back to Delia, then, trying to ignore the tears the flowered up from somewhere deep
inside her as she stared down at the girl—so young. So small. So full of promise, and she’s the last
person who knows it.

"I’m sure you’d love her, little one. She’s got the same light in her eyes as you."
A mother’s love truly was a force to be reckoned with, Delia found herself realizing. She didn’t know this girl, but in the way the woman staring into her described her, Delia loved her already. It was contagious, the adoration that fell off the storyteller’s every word. She wanted to know the world beyond the hills that swallowed her, wanted to know this wonderful stranger and all the warmth she had to offer.

“What’s her name?”

Tears rested at the woman’s throat, and she felt no harm in letting one silently unearth itself. There was no sorrow in the life she’d been given. There was no resentment in the name of the one she loved most on her tongue. All that remained was the impenetrable feeling that it was the name of a beautiful force of nature who deserved so much better than her.

“Jessica.”

It hit her all at once, a punch to the gut Jessie didn’t know she needed to keep her guard up against. Mounting, mounting, mounting—snapshots that flashed in her head one by one, ones she’d kept at bay for years. The quiet embrace of arms around her while she was curled up at fireside, trying to stay warm. Hands across her neckline, sending shivers down her spine as the artist at her back pulled wild red hair into blue-dotted pigtails, humming. Mirrored enthusiasm, their hands entwined as the two of them bolted outside, barefoot in the snow as it silently fell in the night around them, two angels imprinted in its previously virgin surface, mother and child. A chipping manicure running through her hair as though it were harplike, singing soothing lullabies in an attempt to assuage the chill she’d caught as a result.

Old memories, ones Jessie had carried with her forever, never fading. The single thing she could never recall—the face of them, of the one who always used to be there and vanished without a trace. Now, it was there. Her mother’s face was there.

Foggy recollections pushed past padlocked doors, ones she’d changed the locks on time and time again, she’d been so careful, how could this happen now of all times—

It wasn’t until the tears reached her neck that she noticed them, silent and far too laced with shock for them to feel like anything other than the same cold static swimming through her head. On every side of her, her team noticed—in her stance, in the way she shook, in the way she did not speak. Delia did not, so caught up in the blissful memory of that encounter, all she could do was continue on. Jessie stared past her, at the picture of her mom that had been hanging in plain sight, all this time.

“Such a pity I never got her name,” Delia said, sighing sadly. “She left as quick as she came, we were all far too enthralled to—”

She turned her head, then, noticing the eerie silence of the room, feeling something dark on the air. The boys were all frozen, looking completely powerless and unsure of what to do. Jessie was similarly motionless, with her gaze still facing forward, rivulets flowing endlessly from her eyes. She didn’t make a sound, despite everything, until the inquiry had left Delia’s lips. When the younger woman spoke, with all eyes on her, it was with a forced smile, a tortured, wispy laugh.

“Her name is Jane,” she said, wiping at running makeup. “Jane Miyamoto.”

Meowth was standing on one of the errant chairs, now, and him and the rest of the team shared a look, in sync as ever. The cat vocalized their thoughts, disharmonious and concerned.
“But… Miyamoto… dat’s…” he turned to James, met the fear in the man’s eyes. “Jessie’s… last…”

Their hearts collectively sunk as the information took hold. Across the room, Jessie’s team looked far more ready to collapse than she did—about ready to burn down the world for her, but with no enemy to direct their protection toward.

Jessie sucked in a hard breath, unattractively and sharply. Within seconds, she’d regained herself, some. When she spoke again, it was oddly robotic, the complete opposite of who she’d been before. Calculated, and collected, and not at all her.

“Delia, I need a moment to myself,” she said, eyes on the floor, almost ashamed. “Allow me to make it up to you later. I simply can’t be here right n—”

“Go on,” Delia interrupted her, a hand on her shoulder, pulling her out of her trance. “It’s on me. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Jessie met her eyes, maternal and protective, and it wasn’t long before the feelings she’d so swiftly pushed aside returned, heart wavering in the woman’s wake. Always generous, always kind, always understanding where Jessie was so used to scorn. She pulled away from Delia, offering a sort of half-bow, a couple unsteady, short steps toward the door. As Jessie made her exit, her pace quickened—by the time she was at its end, she was in the beginning motions of bolting. Her friends recognized it, easily—the way she ran when she was barely held together, when she didn’t dare show herself to any living being in the world. No matter how she tried to hide it, her impatient heart never could.

Meowth and James shared panicked gazes, completely unsure where their place in this was, if they were allowed one at all. Their motions in sync—eyes to the door, to the half-mopped floors, and back again.

Delia, as of late, had more or less been a common sense filter in the wake of their group dynamic. Tonight was no exception.

“What, you aren’t going to follow his lead?” she said with her hands on her hips, and it took a moment for them to register that she was talking about Wobbuffet, who was out the door in ten seconds flat. The living personification of pacifism was taking more action than them, so maybe she was right to scold them.

“What are you waiting for?” Delia nudged. “Go after her!”

At the sound of her authoritative tone, they straightened up immediately, cleaning supplies cluttering unceremoniously to the soapy floors below. With a choked out chorus of ‘Yes!’s, they stumbled out the doors, right after her.

Feet like lightning, Jessie was a streak of blood red against the jade of the sprawling hills as she passed them by. Were she able to register the blur of a world around her, it would look like nothing as the colours bled into each other, beyond comprehension.

She ran.

A creature of emotion, at the mercy of only herself, Jessie let the wind rush through her hair, willed it
to bring her back down to earth. In that moment, she could not tell you who she was—beyond the fire that seemed to crawl through her blood, the claws and fangs she was so certain she was bearing, her pain, nothing but her pain. There were so few things walking the earth below her feet that could bring her to her knees. Always and forever, her greatest enemy was herself.

Every inch of her was aflame, inside and out, etched ciphers in her heart and on her skin, impossible to comprehend, let alone decode. When her humanity finally caught up with her, Jessie fell to the soft grass below, uprooting it with little remorse as the weight of everything surged through her. She was in a forest, now—how far from home, she couldn’t say. Not even the pokémon that slept here seemed mindless or fearless enough to approach her, white hot flame that she was.

Nails in the dirt, eyes on the ground, lungs run raw from sprinting to nowhere, she screamed. For the life she couldn’t have, for the life she was handed instead, for patient zero in a long line of disloyal cowards thereafter. Alone, alone, constantly alone—alone then, and alone now. No good she’d known since birth existed, now—all Jessie became then was the pain and trauma of every single thing she had to fight to survive, to become. She screamed, with all she was, with all she had left, piercing the night like an angel piercing the heavens and bringing fury to the world.

Pushing herself off the torn world below, she turned her fury to the trees that surrounded her. Morphed the sturdy wood into the face of every enemy she’d ever known, and plunged her fists hard into the effigies that lingered. Utterly primal, she cried out—to no one in particular, and to everyone at once.

“Why?!” she wailed, shaking the branches with every strike. “Why, why, why?!”

She could feel her knuckles reeling, but the pain within her so greatly outweighed the pain outside her—adrenaline keeping her savage, keeping her safe.

“If you thought a mother’s love was so fucking important…”

The telltale creep of blood down her fingers, desperately trying to shock her back to herself.

“So caught up in everything, so blinded by the wild flames that crackled and spat like they had a soul of their own around her, she did not see that her team had caught up with her, standing on the fringes and paralyzed with the hopeless feeling that permeated them always in the wake of Jessie’s rage. She punched the tree again, and the lot of them winced where she could not.

“Why did you set the precedent for every person who abandoned me thereafter?!”

“It was James who dared to pierce her veil, much to the shock of everyone present, himself included. As soon as the words left him, he seemed to recede back into himself, acting on impulse and not at all prepared for whatever consequence might come with it. In spite of it all, she listened—fist raised frozen in the air, bleary blues shining up at her team, stunned. There was no time for Jessie to reasssemble her walls, she realized—this was all she could be, right now. Nothing else existed besides her and her wrath at all she’d overcome, all she’d yet to. Her shock twisted back to anger, her teeth came back out.

“Get out of here!” she screamed at them. “No one asked you to come!”

“Are ya crazy?!” Meowth shot at her, a determined pawstep forward.
“Yes!” Jessie roared. “Get away from me! Get out!”

With every hard syllable that came, she drove her hands into the bark once more, and the pain it was searing up James’ own knuckles was growing too much to bear—her pain his, her life as well. Awash in tears and rage, she had stopped looking at them. She begged, she ordered, she fought.

“Leave!” Jessie continued, not able to meet their eyes as she wept. “Everyone else has! Why are you fools still here?!”

Once more, she lifted her arm—this time, clearly losing steam, the pain catching up to her. It was registering now, but even so she was far too numb in spirit to care. James grit his teeth, shut his eyes, and tore forward. Within moments, he and the others were holding her back, the three of them with their arms wrapped dutifully around her while she writhed.

Her teeth stayed out, her claws didn’t sheath themselves—Jessie kept on, foaming at the mouth and turning curses on them, ready to burn the world to cinders in the wake of all she had known.

“Get off!” she wailed. “Get off of me!”

“Jessie,” James said, a softness to combat the firm hold he had on her. “Please.”

“Can’t you just let me have my psychotic breakdown in the forest?!”

A beat, this time sounding far more fearful than angry—

“Fuck off before I hurt you!”

Her throat was raw from shouting, her hands were bruised and bleeding and feeling far too broken to move, and the fatigue of everything seemed to be setting in all at once. A heaviness she couldn’t put words to sunk into her chest, permeating all she was. Tears and blood and wholly undone, her beauty was unraveled and she was utterly raw as she began to lose the fight. She had nothing to offer—not her looks, not her kindness, not her heart. Still, they held onto her, as if letting go would mean their end.

“Let me go,” Jessie cried, her fire slowly flickering out. “Let me go.”

“Are you really so far gone that you’d think fear could keep us from a friend in need?”

James said the words so casually, she almost couldn’t register their sentiment.

“Puh-lease,” Meowth agreed with him. “Ya oughta know by now. We love ya too much ta let dat sharp tongue ‘n’ dose even sharper fists o’ yers get in da way.”

“Wobbuffet…!”

Jessie pressed her fangs together, wincing at the softness and love infused in every word her team said. More tears slipped out, and she’d long since stopped trying to pinpoint their source in the wake of everything. Slowly, she was beginning to sink to the floor in her teammates’ arms, the roughness in her voice leaving, withering to nothing. There had to be a catch, there always was.

“Leave,” she ordered, sounding weaker with every word. The arms around her stayed.

“Stop talkin’, Jess,” Meowth ordered right back. “You’ll t’ank me later.”

“Shut up!” she fought weakly. “Shut up. Shut up.”
With every repetition of it, she became more and more formless. Her tears transformed, the anger that flavoured them leaving. They overwhelmed her gradually, ten more sorrowful ones creeping up where one livid one had previously been. She stopped weeping in rage, became quickly overcome as she wept in mourning. Jessie dissolved to nothing, and the lot of them sank together to the forest floor, embracing.

She cried—much more restrained now, far softer, exhausted. Jessie was so, so unbearably tired—tired of hurting, tired of pain, tired of feeling one thing and becoming that feeling for the rest of her natural life. She knew that somewhere, there had to be peace for her. She was so tired of waiting for its serenity to find her, wrap her up in its arms and tell her everything would be alright.

“It’s going to be alright,” James whispered, then, and she fell apart all over again, a bawling mess in his arms.

“Why didn’t she want me,” Jessie said, unprompted, buried in his embrace. “Why didn’t she want me?”

He didn’t have an answer for her. He couldn’t fathom, holding this wonderful thing in his arms, how anyone could ever let go of her. Shakily, he ran a hand gently through the jungle she’d cried her hair into. James tightened the embrace, and the pokémon followed suit.

The four of them stayed, not a word passing between them in the quiet of the night. Around them, the world remained just as silent, clouds drifting across the waning moon, obscuring the starlight above. There was so much that Jessie kept buried deep down, hidden from the world even when she wore everything else on her sleeve. They knew, realistically, that eventually it was all going to come to a head.

Her sobbing turned to crying, and her crying petered out to soft shudders and quiet hiccups that became less and less over time. In their arms, the lot of them felt Jessie take in a sharp breath, compose herself all at once. Swiftly, in the same way she’d done earlier, she snapped apart from them, dusting off her work clothes and standing up.

The boys blinked up at her from the forest floor, unsure what to expect. Looking aggravated, Jessie started feebly combing through her hair in an attempt to tame it, wiping at the makeup she’d ruined. When she spoke, it was completely even-toned—as though her hands weren’t limp and injured, as though she hadn’t just short of punched a tree into two-by-fours.

“Well, that was dreadfully annoying,” Jessie announced. “Let’s go home, you three.”

Her team stared, dead-eyed. Oh. It was gonna be like that, was it?

“Oh, no,” Meowth stood back up, walking accusingly toward her. “We are not doin’ da pretend-disnevah-happened schtick!”

“And why not, furball?!” she shot right back. “I think it’s my authority on the matter over yours!”

James and Wobbuffet were on their feet now too, exchanging nervous looks as the more fiery half of the team got into it.

“‘Bout sixty seconds ago you was a trainwreck! Ya ain’t gonna just bully me into forgettin’ about ya!”

“And now I’m fine,” Jessie spat. “I had my one mental breakdown of the year. So let’s move on and face forward, stop living in the past!”
“Face forward? Ya ain’t fixed not’in’!” the cat said. “Ya still got all the same issues as ya did yesterday!”

Fed up, James trudged forward, putting himself in between them like he so often did. A firm hand in Meowth’s direction, a far softer one in Jessie’s.

“Stop bickering, both of you!” he ordered. “This is hardly the time. Jess, all he’s saying is… you can’t just keep shoving these things down and ignoring them.”

Fear flowered in his heart when the words didn’t at all assuage her. The fire flickered back to life in her searing blues, a choice few words brewing on her tongue. It was a pretty rich sentiment, coming from him.

“Actually, James, yes I can!” Jessie fought. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but my head is built different! Different like how you used to stop speaking when you saw an oddish, different like how you never look anyone in the eyes or the way you’re constantly moving!”

He shrunk, a little. She’d never been so blunt before, and he’d never cared to ask. Suddenly, he felt like a bad friend for not knowing—where her personality ended and her neuroses began, if even there was a way to detangle their wires.

“The kind of different where I—” she struggled. “I can’t feel these things, or I don’t know what sort of wretched things I’d do to myself to make them go away!”

James gathered himself. Regardless, the message still stood. If anyone was brave enough to do it, he knew Jessie could, the sickness in her mind notwithstanding.

“If you don’t allow yourself closure,” he said, stubbornly. “You’re never going to make peace with what’s happened.”

The woman looked at him for a moment, the expression she was wearing somewhere past shocked and before livid. The audacity James possessed was incredible, the finesse he lacked deserving of some kind of backwards award. Jessie actually laughed, incredulous, and he seemed to flinch a little, unsure of what it was he said to prompt something like that. Of course, she found herself thinking.

“This might come as a shock to you, but we don’t all get closure!” Jessie fought. “Not every little kid lives a life charmed enough to ride out of their burning mansion on the back of their starter! What kind of spoiled little brat even dreams up a world like that?!”

She regretted the words almost as soon as they left her, twice as much when she saw the tortured expression on her partner’s face. He looked like she had hit him, eyes at his feet, completely destroyed after all they’d been through, after they’d known each other’s scars. This late in life, and Jessie still hadn’t learned—cutting that deep made her feel good for five seconds and miserable for the rest of her days.

It was the final straw for Meowth, who lunged at Jessie from behind James with claws out, intent to knock some damn sense into her. Wobbuffet was holding him back before he could make it far enough, and the cat writhed in the patient pokémon’s hands, offering him some choice words before his mouth was covered by his captor. Regardless of how Jessie felt, she’d gone too far. Wobbuffet agreed, but knew violence wouldn’t change a thing.

Reeling from her own venom, Jessie sighed heavily, dragged her open palms across her face, nails tangling in her hair. She tried again, hoped James could hear her.

“I’m sorry,” she prefaced, and he knew despite his own heartache that she meant it, that it was
nothing more than a mistake she’d made in a moment of anger. She kept on.

“I… I simply can’t afford to hold onto the hope of closure,” Jessie said. “Not everything in life gets a happy ending, and no matter how bad I want to delude myself otherwise, this isn’t some picturesque fairytale.”

She turned away from them, her words flowing far more easily when she could pretend she was somewhere else—a talented actress on a stage, monologuing to her audience. A world where she was reading a script, merely playing a tragic heroine rather than living the life of one.

“I would rather just focus on what I have now rather than agonize over what I’ve lost,” she smiled to the starlight, bittersweet. “Sometimes, my past coils around me and squeezes me like a starved arbok until I feel I’m going to explode… but I am resilient. Someone… very important once said that if anyone could survive something like this, it was me.”

There was a hand on her shoulder, one she didn’t register until she’d lost herself in the words as they fell from her lips. The tears she’d only just beaten back threatened to crop back up, and she silenced her unsteady heart. Though it was a pivot, Jessie was being honest. This was the life she was handed, and she wasn’t interested in sulking over it. She was only interested in change and transformation, and she was certain by now she knew that far better than anything her friends could propose.

Softly, she brought her own hand up to meet James’, weakly tangling their fingers together in a silent gesture as they stared out onto the horizon. She heard Meowth make a noise of resignation, the telltale pap of his paws on the ground again as Wobbuffet let go of him. They were by her side too, now, staring onward and not looking back.

“I’m sorry,” she said, giving James’ hand a feeble squeeze and trying not to wince from the pain it shot through her. He leaned into it, struggling to find the words to tell her he’d survive.

“Why don’t we head home?”

Home. The word grounded her. Beside her, Wobbuffet wordlessly snaked his arm up hers, holding on tight, and Meowth scrambled up on top of the taller pokémon’s head. Trying to let go of the words he still had to say to Jessie, he reluctantly offered a paw at her arm, as well—there was a time and a place, even when his temper wouldn’t have it. They had all the time in the world to talk, to reconcile, to heal. The thought was new, but real nonetheless.

With a silent nod, Jessie made the first step forward, and the quartet began the walk home, glued at the hips.

It seemed like ages before the group reached the open fields of Pallet once more, their steps shaky and ever so slightly out of sync, hindered by their ever-present need to be touching always. There was a soft wind shaking the trees, and it seemed to rock the lot of them back and forth as well, all of them far too exhausted to fight its whims.

After an eternity, they reached one of the town’s higher hills, a roost that looked out across lights that slowly flickered off one by one in the dead of night. Jessie let loose a breath she didn’t realize she
was holding at the sight of it. Her insides felt like sludge, her knuckles were raw and bruised, nothing felt kinder in that moment than the idea of falling into a hotel bed and living there until the storms inside quieted themselves.

She closed her eyes, shifting her weight onto James in a gesture that almost begged carry me, and were it any other night, she was certain she could’ve drifted off right then and there. Tonight, however, planned on continuing to be full of surprises—she heard it in the way her team seemed to take note of the world she’d shut out, utterances of surprise leaving them in sync.

Curious as to what it was that could have gathered their attention, Jessie opened her eyes. It wasn’t long before she had joined them, eyes wide in wonder, mouth hanging open with the inability to comprehend what was in front of her.

Mew was there—its starlit eyes blinking a few times in inquisitive succession, its tail swishing without rhythm. The winds around them had stopped, the ambient sound that came with them gone just the same. The silence was not eerie—far more serene as they peer into the mythical pokémon, mere inches from them. All around them, the world remained quiet, all that existed in that moment them and the whimsical creature that had chosen to grace them with its presence.

“You again!” Meowth sputtered with a paw pointed accusingly, and James shot him a look that demanded explanation, one the cat didn’t care to register.

The mythical pokémon twirled a couple times on the dead breeze, offering an excitable chirp of his name. Its final loop transitioned into a curious flutter forward, dead center up against the quartet. It was only then when they collectively noticed—its eyes were trained on Jessie. It looked only at her, their blues mere inches from each other, their noses nearly touching.

Spellbound, Jessie found herself becoming lost in the pokémon’s eyes. It looked happy—no, delighted—to see her. As though it had been waiting for her for an eternity, as though she were the answer to all it had sought. The thought was ludicrous, of course… legend though she was, what was she to a creature like Mew?

She opened her mouth to speak, but the encounter had stolen what little words she had lingering. Regardless of what she could have said to fill the empty space, Mew seemed to have plans of its own. In the blink of an eye, it lifted all four of them off the dirt roads that led back home, surrounding them in an otherworldly light that completely enveloped the world that previously lingered around them.

The sensation was hard to put words to—like they were traveling on the world’s fastest bullet train, moving at speeds so fast the lights outside its windows had since blurred to one massive, blinding presence. It only lasted for a moment, over long before they could find the words to justify it. The former Rockets landed—hard—on a worn wooden surface, boards below them threatening to crumble to nothing. In the low, eerie green lights that flickered from lanterns around them, they could see cave walls and a spiral staircase illuminated upward. Oceans rolled in beneath their feet, the sound of waves crashing in the distance all around them. They were not in Pallet.

Coming back to her senses—both from the moment, and the night as a whole—Jessie surprised the team by being the first to speak.

“Hey,” she broke the silence. “What just happened? Where are we?”

Weakly standing, James took in their surroundings.

“...well, unless my right mind’s left me, I’d say it’s safe to conclude we’re stranded on some sort of
“Brilliant observational skills as always, thank you,” Jessie whined, standing up alongside him.

“Ya don’t t’ink…” Meowth placed a paw at his chin. “…ya don’t t’ink Mew mighta used Teleport ta bring us here, do ya?”

“I’m more interested in figuring out where ‘here’ is,” Jessie announced, staring at the cascades of water that fell from higher ground around them. There was no other land for miles, staring out at the cold, dark seas as they swirled, and the sickly emerald of the lowlight around them was beginning to make her skin crawl. Just like before, staring at that photo on the wall, she was certain she had never been here before, but…

“…is it just me, or are any of you feeling a touch of déjà vu?”

James spoke her thoughts aloud before she could, shameless far more often. Admittedly, she was, and the look on Meowth’s face told her he was feeling similarly. Wobbuffet, quite often the odd one out, wasn’t paying them any mind as he faded to the background alongside the sound of waterfalls and tidal waves. It was only when he pointed at the shores with a fragment of his name that the rest of his team remembered he was there.

“What?” Jessie said, shuffling over to whatever had piqued his curiosity. “Let me see.”

“Wob~ba,” he said, hoping to offer additional information. He was peering at a sign that was standing rather plainly at the station where the port met the earth. One by one, the team began to crowd around it, their eyes scanning the words that had been engraved into its crumbling, faded wood.

*If any human—sets foot here again,*

*—et it be a kindhearted pers—*

*—ith that hope, I depar—*

In the bottom corner, it was signed only with a strange sort of paw print—three perfect circles, and the singed wood around them, vanishing slowly as time did its work. Meowth traced the imprint with his own paw, taking in the handiwork as he registered it all.

“Well… how bout dat,” he mumbled, trying not to smile at the feeling of a kindred spirit, somewhere out there.

“What is it, Meowth?” James turned to him.

“N-Not’in’!” the cat sputtered, pivoting quickly. “Look at da way dis little greetin’ was crafted. Dose wohlds ain’t carved in by no traditional means… dey was burned into da sign, perfectly shaped ‘n’ everyt’in’.”

“And what does that mean?” Jessie raised an eyebrow.

“It means whoever wrote dis eit’ah had da steadiest paws evah…” he said. “…or dey used some kinda psychic powahs t’ singe it in.”

Brain only charged enough to register the word ‘psychic,’ Jessie turned to Wobbuffet, an accusatory look on her face.
“Hey, are you playing a prank on us?”

“W-Wobba!” he stammered, hands in the air, surrendering.

It was James who broke the mystique of the moment, grabbing his team’s attention with a yelp of surprise. He pointed to the stairway, and their eyes followed suit—Mew, who they had completely forgotten about, was floating quietly at the top of it, watching.

Once she had registered that their captor was still present, Jessie rose back to her feet from the crouch she was in, addressing it directly. She had a few things to say.

“There you are, you flighty feline!” she chided, hands on her hips. “Now listen here! I’ve had a very long night, and I’m in no mood to—”

“Mew!” it announced, interrupting her before it flew off, up the winding staircase and into the unknown.

Jessie let out a primal sort of groan, aching for the comfort of her bed and the embrace of being unconscious for a few hours. Whatever torturous video game cutscene the world had suddenly placed her and her team in, she was determined to keep hitting buttons until the dialogue stopped flowing and she could finally save her game.

“Come on,” she said, beckoning the boys to follow her up the staircase. “Looks like we’re spending our night playing hide and seek with a demigod.”

Mew didn’t actually do much of leading them anywhere, they noticed halfway through their trudge down the labyrinthine building. Equal parts nature and man made, the lot of them were resenting the footwear they’d chosen that night, not at all built for traversing shallow underground waterways.

Though every corridor seemed to bring on a new forked path, not once did the four of them ever disagree on which way to take. No rock paper scissors, no screaming matches, just a brand of in sync that seemed strange even for them—with Wobbuffet the only one a little out of place, stumbling behind them as he struggled to keep up.

Every once in a while, they saw Mew again—waiting down at the end of a hall, staring down it at them with shining blue eyes, to make sure they hadn’t stopped following. Somehow, it always knew where they were going. Somehow, they always knew where it wanted them to go.

After and eternity, they came to a ladder—nothing out of place, almost looking prop-like, awash in grey, same as everything else around them. Without fail, though, three of them stopped at once, their fourth messily bumping into the halted group. Eyes transfixed on the object, they heard Mew’s voice calling from somewhere beyond it. With a round of shared, knowing looks, they ascended.

It brought them to an unorthodox sort of hallway, decorated in doors that opened in otherworldly crisscrosses. Immediately, their attention was drawn to a room at the far end of the hall, just barely off-right—its door already open, lights flickering softly from inside.

They made their way inside, unsure of what about its interior to take in first. The strange sort of pods that hung ceiling to floor, a mysterious liquid swirling inside them, though nothing else dwelled within. Mechanical contraptions, claws and gears and conveyor belts, rusted and inoperative from years upon years of deactivation. And at the center, far on the back wall opposite the former Rockets
Mew, hovering quietly in front of an old, out of date computer monitor that was embellished in a sort of clamshell throne.

The mythical pokémon tilted its head when it saw them, clearly having lead them to the place it wanted them. It flicked its tail, curling in on itself with a soft chirp of its name.

Jessie stared at the creature from across the room, every muscle in her body aflame from the climb. Mew was euphoric to have done this to them—pulled her and her friends far from home when she was down on her luck, given them absolutely no hope of getting back. Her head was pounding from how much crying she had done, legs wobbling from the long pilgrimage through the bowels of this wretched place—it was a miracle she’d kept her eyes open despite it all. Overcome with the contrast between her mood and its, she clenched her fists tight, which only served to shoot even more pain throughout her. Not a single part of her was functioning at a hundred percent. She didn’t have time for this.

“I’m sick of this!” Jessie shouted, pointing at Mew with a trembling arm.

“Mew?” it inquired, and she grit her teeth, walking imposingly toward it.

“You, you little runt!” she clarified. “How dare you! To just waltz in on one of the lowest nights in my otherwise flawless life and rip from under my feet the comforts of sleeping it off! And what exactly did I ever do to you to deserve this?!”

She lunged for it—whatever she intended to do, she was still figuring out—and Mew fluidly flitted out of the way, paying her no mind. Stumbling into the empty air, Jessie caught her balance on the computer’s base, eyes burning as she met Mew’s own again, now floating where she previously was. Suspended in between her and her team, it giggled rapturously into its tiny paws, amused at her struggle.

“One of us is leaving this island in a body bag,” she screeched. “And it’s not going to be me!”

She could see her friends, now—an exclamation of her name followed by the command to wait so clearly building on James’ tongue, ready to burst forth any moment. It was futile, of course. Jessie had no plans for how she was going to fight the capricious little deity, but she knew she had two semi-functional fists and, with rare exceptions, it felt good to do violence unto that which annoyed you.

The woman was lightning quick, but Mew was quicker—knowing her every move long before she did, materializing an ethereal sort of bubble out of thin air and sending the lab aglow in a shining rose-coloured light. The mythical pokémon fired it off in Jessie’s direction, and it made a direct hit, knocking her backward. The bubble burst, shoving her into the computer’s keyboard, her back hard up against the screen.

Mew kept on laughing, this time with small fangs bared and arms waving wildly.

The boys were watching on in utter despair, their arms wrapped fearfully around each other. They didn’t want to know what Jessie was going to do to Mew, what Mew was going to do to Jessie, either way, they couldn’t see the scenario ending well. Across from them, they watched as she slowly opened her eyes, scarlet lips pulled back in an animalistic sort of snarl they knew meant she was out for blood.

Jessie pushed herself off the computer’s makeshift desk, ready to tear forward for the pokémon once again. She wasn’t able to get more than a foot before something stopped her—a voice filled the room. The monitor behind her had since lit up, an uncanny shade of foggy blue-grey colouring its
Frozen in her tracks, Jessie whipped her head around to face it. There was no picture, only audio—a voice. A voice that made Mew disappear, that made the weight within Jessie’s heart vanish, that felt like some sort of morphine, sending her reeling with serenity. Jessie leaned in, beguiled. Step by shaky step, her team broke apart, came to stand beside her.

The voice that serenaded them was buried—beneath the crackle of an obsolete speaker system, beneath what sounded like absolutely unrelenting winds up against whatever recording equipment was used. Still, Jessie could hear it beneath—the shaky, but tangible voice of a stranger and an angel all at once.

“—no or—nary pokémon… that keeps my heart —ating…!”

It was familiar to her, the voice she heard in her head when she tried to go to a kinder place. She swore, she’d never heard it outside her own mind before…

“What I, —ent Calamity, dare to dre—is a lege—ry pokémon!”

Now, it was here, and her friends were beside her. They could hear it too. A woman, with wild winds raging on every side of her, voice rasping and weak from the fatigue of a long journey, it seemed. Her spirit so far ahead of her body, refusing to give.

“Hm? Could it be Moltres? Or p—aps Zapdos? Taming a —dos, now t—ould be a real calamity!”

It was a joke, they realized, staring up at the screen—completely black, the only thing displayed on it what was presumably the name of one audio file selected in a list of many—CALAMITY634.

James snickered, amused at this stranger’s heart. Stranded and weak, her first instinct was to laugh. It resonated. Meowth kicked him, and he held back a startled yelp.


Her voice began to fade, the wind overtaking it. For the first time in the file, the audio did not cut out.

“My little girl’s at home waiting for a miracle like you…”

Something quietly snapped inside Jessie, and she reflexively slammed a hand down on the keys beneath her, silencing the file. The motion brought her to the file directly above it, the one labeled ‘633.’ Intoxicated by this woman’s voice, she selected it—though her technological prowess could have been better, this was something even she could comprehend. The crackle of the audio was lesser this time, the wind kinder on the receiver.

“I… I’m the beautifully exhausted Agent Calamity. My daughter… I can hear wedding bells…”

Agent Calamity, Jessie squinted at the lack of a picture, childishly believing that perhaps doing so would fine-tune her memory. She swore she’d… heard the name somewhere. Read it, maybe? It sounded so historical, spoken aloud…

“Oh, she deserves only the finest gown money can buy… I simply mustn’t falter. Mew, please!”

Pieces began to fall into place, after two of these. They were… reports, of some kind? And she’d been looking for Mew, clearly, but things still didn’t make sense…
“Please! It's me, the tenacious and dazzling Cal—”

It cut off abruptly, the gales unforgiving. Jessie’s eyes were transfixed on the screen, the kind of laser focus that made James and Meowth exchange worried looks. When she was this enthralled, all she was able to think about was diving headfirst in. She was unstoppable, they knew—and they worried what might happen if they needed to stop her. She hit the next file. The woman spoke again.

“'It's me, Agent Calamity! Mew’s out here somewhere, and I’m gone—ind it!'

With every passing file as they made their way to the list’s top, they noticed more vitality seemed to infuse itself into her voice. How long had she been on that mission? How long had she been searching?

“Darli—ca’s probably powering through rigorous exams as we speak, wishing she could afford—nicer textbooks! Time is of t—ssence, Mew!"

Chiding an all-powerful creature as if it were her plaything, begging it to bend to her whims. The boys shared a look, amused. She sounded an awful lot… like…

Jessie played another.

“The gorgeous and talented Calamity never gives up! Not when her little girl is in grade school, now! That’s money she’ll need, and you’ll be the one paying up!"

Her eyes darted, right clicking the files, checking the dates on them. They seemed to pour in over a span of decades, starting almost twenty-five years ago. She willed her heart not to, but it started comparing—the day she started school with the file her hand lingered on now. Her twenty-fifth birthday with the one two down. Jessie’s eyes widened. There was no way… it had to be a coincidence, none of this made rational sense—

The last file. The last one, lingering at the top. Once she hit play, that was it. This small deposit of the wondrous story-weaver’s voice would be depleted. She sucked in a breath. Her team looked at the gears turning on her face, perplexed and concerned. She hit play. The wind blew, far less this time.

“A-Ahem! Hello to all my adoring fans! It’s me, the lovely Calamity! Coming to you live from the highest peak this side of the mountains!"

Oh, the life that shone from her voice. This was what she sounded like at her best, they collectively surmised. This was who she was before the expedition in question had stolen her youth away—the smile in her cadence, the brightness that no doubt glittered in her eyes as she shivered. Something about her fire made tears crop back up in Jessie’s throat. She didn’t know this woman, but she so badly wanted to.

“If you look to your right, you’ll see the sun rising over the frigid tundra in an attempt to fight its nasty bite. Welcome to the middle of July up here!"

She gave her introduction in a parodic manner, playing around with her best TV newscaster voice, lilting in and out in tandem with the swirling breeze as it encircled her. Her voice dipped, and she flawlessly picked its mood back up off the frigid ground.

“...It’s alright, though. I, the sharp and stunning Agent Calamity, promise to you to give it my all!"

It lasted only for a moment. A sigh, then a pause. The winds around her whipped and fought. The flames she protected flickered only for a moment.
“I do wonder… how long it is I’ve been wandering, though... The other Team Rocket agents... we all got separated in the blizzard.”

The group’s eyes snapped further open, and a telltale tremble made its way to Jessie. She mouthed the words Team Rocket in stunned silence, their cadence adding an eruption of fire to the hurricane swirling inside her. There was no way... there couldn’t be...

“The only company I really have left up here is... this picture of my daughter I’ve been holding onto.”

Her daughter, her daughter, always her daughter, Jessie blinked her eyes closed, stringing the narrative in her head. She was in Team Rocket, of course. She was looking for Mew, a legendary pokémon—one of the most legendary of all.

“I guess... I am alone, but...” she took a long moment, dried her tears with an undignified sniffle. “I’m going to keep on waiting! Oh, I just can’t give up hope with my little girl cheering me on!”

To sell Mew would pay the bills ever so nicely, it was just like Team Rocket to prey on a mother down on her luck and with no other choice...

“I’ll meet that pesky Mew, right here on this mountain, even if I freeze to death first! I know it’s real. I know it exists, and it’s a sale just waiting to line my pockets! All the money in the world... to give her the life she really deserves...”

Suddenly, the recording went silent. Dead silent—so much so, Jessie feared that was the end of the file. The bar at the bottom still had plenty of room left to travel, though, the file barely halfway through. The wind, ever present until this very moment, ceased entirely.

“Huh? The blizzard... stopped?” she whispered, hushed awe. “Sunrise... The sun is rising! And it’s... the snow is sparkling silver! Like a mountain of all the money I’ll make! Oh, be still my beating heart!”

The former Rockets heard it, then—Mew’s unmistakable voice, clear as day. All at once, the boys heads wildly whipped around, trying to find where the thing had appeared this time after its little drag-out with Jessie. Jessie’s eyes stayed focused forward, and it was only when the woman in the audio file spoke that they realized—it was coming from the computer. She had found it.

“That’s...” she marveled. “You’re... You’re Mew!”

“Mew!”

If Jessie was a vase, this woman’s voice was an agonizingly slow flow of water, drop by stunted drop with every word she said. The dates were too close, almost down to the month. Her voice, oh, her voice, it lingered in a way Jessie didn’t want to acknowledge, permeated her in a way nothing else had. Nothing but a single photo, hanging on the diner wall, something so small she just couldn’t let go of—

“Oh, what a tantalizingly tender touch you have, Mew darling...”

She didn't want to say out loud who she thought this person was, because it was enough coincidences for one night, and what kind of beautiful contrivance, and what if she was wrong?

“You’re almost as cute as my baby girl!”

Jessie didn’t even want to think it, because thinking it meant thinking of so many other things, so
many other implications, ten mysteries where previously there was only one, and the vase was full to bursting now, she wasn’t big enough to keep it all condensed—

The calamity fumbled for something, a sturdy polaroid in her shaking, frostbitten hands. No sound existed atop the mountain—nothing but the time exchanged between her and this legendary pokémon.

“See?” she said, and the glass began to spill over, and Jessie shut her eyes tight, somehow anticipating what was coming next.

“This is my daughter.”

A beat. The utmost love in her voice.

“This is my Jessica.”

Falling forward in a feeble sort of stumble, Jessie couldn’t keep the tears from her eyes. She just short of collapsed, the computer desk keeping her from losing form entirely at the sound of her mother speaking her name aloud one final time.

Her tears, her fixation, everything thereafter—behind her, beside her, her team’s hearts raced. A Team Rocket agent searching for Mew, they could follow that much—but her daughter… she couldn’t have been talking about… Jessica—their Jessie?

Jessie’s mom… couldn’t have been in Team Rocket without her knowing… James took a shaky step back. …could she?

“Nursery school, kindergarten… child care! I just don’t have the money!”

Jessie shut her eyes tight, unable to bear the sound of it any longer, far less able to turn it off, to say goodbye even on her own terms.

“Wait, please, wait up, Mew! I waited so long, there’s no way! You’re the answer to every problem I’ve ever had!”

The tight crunch of vinyl boots on virgin snow, a sound they knew all too well. Jane desperately tried to gain breath in her lungs as she ran, stolen by the frigid air all around her. She ran, and as fate would have it, never stopped.

It has to be a coincidence, was the only thing running through the former Rockets’ minds. As if to silence them, Jane spoke once more—

“I am a Miyamoto!” she declared as she sprinted onward, as the winds kicked back into gear. “And a Miyamoto never gives up!”

Jessie broke, the confirmation evidently far too much for her to bear. Tears at her throat, pain surging through every inch of her, feeling like her mother’s words were a challenge from long in the past, she let out another guttural scream and slammed her fist down into the keys below. Her hand throbbed in pain, and she recoiled from the motion immediately, reeling back, sinking slowly to the floor.

It succeeded in silencing the first recording, but moved on to play the final one again. It picked up where she had paused it before, and Jane offered one final wish to her daughter, voice fading with delirium as the gusts enveloped her fire for good.
“Jessie, Jessie, Jessie…” she whispered, and Jessie fell to her hands and knees, feeling like atlas with the world on her back.

“Please forgive mommy… for being so messy.”

No doubts lingered about who she was, now—even if they did, not even Jessie’s masterful talent in being deluded could keep them near. It wasn’t the declaration, nor the names on her tongue that allowed it to sink in. It was Jane’s undying spirit in pursuit of her goals, the way her humour still lingered, even in what could have been her last hour.

Nails chipping on the cold stone below, Jessie felt like she’d betrayed someone or something by having doubts at all. Robbed of a regular childhood, robbed of the ability to hear her mother’s voice and know without a moment’s hesitation who it was—how could she, with all the time she spent alone? So much time to forget, to move forward, to heal in whatever way she could, even if it tore her memory to shreds.

Lowering themselves beside her, her team enveloped her once more. They had just as many questions as she did, questions that she knew would fill themselves in over time. Jessie lost herself in her own racing thoughts as she wove the narrative in her head—of her ex boss who kept her around through ten partners and ten thousand bumbling failures, of money that fell into her foster parents’ hands. They never told her where it came from, only that it was hers. Never enough to be a normal girl, barely enough to survive on her own.

Jessie was taken back to a moment where she lingered outside Giovanni’s office, her ears fine-tuned enough to catch a comment to Viper she was certain was nonsense at the time, so much so she’d written it off entirely.

“Convenient as it might be, she’s not one I can easily do away with,” he had said. “She is the Calamity’s daughter, after all.”

It wasn’t just some expression she’d never heard of. He’d known all along—the bastard had known more of her own mother than she had, and he hadn’t said a word.

Through her tears, in the arms of her friends, Jessie opened her eyes. Mew had returned, hovering in front of her quietly, and she raised her head to meet its gaze, her voice without barriers.

“Did you…” she took a moment to consider the ludicrous thought. “...bring me here on purpose?”

Mew said nothing. Ever whimsical, it only tilted its head, fluttered its long tail. Twenty five years to an immortal creature that never showed itself to humans, peering into a worn photo of someone’s little girl… to Mew, it must’ve been only yesterday.

“Do you… remember me?”

The mythical pokémon stayed silent. With one final fluid spin in the air, it vanished, and the former Rockets found themselves back atop Pallet’s hills, still in each others’ arms.

The town was pitch black in the dead of night, all the lights off, except for a single glow that lingered at the edge of town. Its soft dopple looked like the warmest flame after the most rigorous trudge through frozen air—and in a way, it was. Jessie shared a few soft looks with her team, none of them entirely sure how to come back again.

Reluctantly, she pried herself apart from them. Part of her didn’t want to let go, craving the touch of another, wanting to hold onto that which she loved forever. A far louder part screamed that everything was far too overwhelming, their embrace like a thousand fire ants on her skin.
Jessie broke away, stood up, and childishly walked a few feet away from them. The boys watched as she immediately sat back down, her back facing them, her knees close to her chest. She did this with no plan in mind, merely because it felt right—and thankfully, it was a gesture they understood, by now.

_I want to speak my mind_, it translated to, easily. _But I can’t face you while I do it._

They shared a couple knowing looks. What kind of friends would they be, if that much wasn’t obvious to them?

One by one, they stood up, too. She heard their footsteps, and fear flowered in her heart, begging them without words to not make her have any difficult conversations she was far too exhausted to have. A part of her wanted to just run back home and collapse, but she knew she’d be up all night if she tried, writhing in agony with all she had still swirling within.

James sat down, his back touching hers, staring out into the opposite direction. Meowth on one side of her, Wobbuffet on the other. Their eyes did not meet, but the four of them stayed together. It was a message of solidarity without the pressure to act. For quite some time, they stayed like that, silent as they waited for someone to take the plunge and speak.

Jessie didn’t have the energy to be anything other than blunt, now. She sunk further into her folded arms, pouted like a child to protect herself from the perceived ridicule of her own ungrateful heart.

“I’m still angry at her,” she said, sounding like a parody of a crying toddler.

She was expecting them to poke at her wounds, to force her into a place of vulnerability. What she got instead was far more comforting.

“Dat’s fair,” Meowth said, nonchalant.

Jessie sighed. It was too comforting.

“Forget my tantrum from earlier. I’m growing tired of you lot always just saying what you think I want to hear,” she raised her head to hone her bite. “Sometimes a girl needs a hard truth, you know.”

“Coins on da table,” the cat said. “I ain’t lyin’ to ya.”

Meowth leaned forward a little, his eyes on the moon as it peered out from beneath bleary cloudcover. He pawed back into his own recall, laying his soul bare.

“T’ink if my ma ever showed up again, I’d be pretty pissed at da gal too,” he laughed.

Jessie’s heart sunk. How could she forget? He knew exactly the pain she knew. He was speaking from the heart.

“It’s hard,” he continued. “Bein’ on ya own for so long, an’ bein’ expected t’ still love da people who left ya behind jus’ cause dey was dere for awhile.”

She laughed, and she willed herself not to make it sound condescending while her friend remained vulnerable. It was just so funny, though—her and Meowth had lost so many years, so many years they could have been bonding with each other over lonely nights and shared drinks. Instead, she was too proud to show her own scars, too caught up in herself to listen clearly to his.

The sound of her laughter in the quiet breeze didn’t incense him, his temper in bed for the night. After all the crying she’d been doing, it mostly just sounded like home. He laughed alongside her.
James remained silent, shuffling anxiously against her back.

“And what say you, wordless one?” Jessie teased. The intent was to be playful, but in all her residual grief, she feared it came out far rougher than she hoped.

“Nothing, can’t you tell?” he shot right back, and she heard the cheeky smile in his voice.

“The only time you’re this wonderfully silent is when you have multitudes to say,” she said, reading him. “So say them, for once.”

He sighed. She was right, but...

“Jessie, sweetheart,” James lead in. “I don’t want to argue. Everyone’s exhausted.”

“We’re arguing right now, you dolt,” she rolled her eyes. “Might as well get it over with faster, no?”

Another heavy sigh. He picked his words carefully.

“Fine,” James said. “Fine. If you want a hard truth, Jess, mine is that there’s no possible way I can feel for you in the ways I want to.”

He buried himself within his own knees as he said it, not fearing her ire, this time, but her heartache. Too many people had left her feeling alone and abandoned tonight, the last thing he wanted was to be one more stain on a long list of scum.

He closed his eyes, opened them after a moment, trying not to become lost within himself. Every cent in the world couldn’t buy him joy. There was no sum of money that could grant James a family who loved him. The walls of his estates remained big and empty, pulling into their driveways felt like the beginnings of a horror flick. To have a mother who loved him, enough so to scale mountaintops all in his name, he could never imagine rejecting it, no matter how starved and penniless it left them both. Empath though he was, the rich boy from the house that felt like war couldn’t get inside the head of the poor girl enveloped in the arms of a spirit who loved her from afar. He felt as though he’d failed her entirely.

“You were right. I am unbearably sheltered,” he said, lowly. “To me, it simply looks like you had someone willing to throw herself into anything for your benefit. I can’t understand rejecting that. Not with the life I knew.”

He was trying to be so, so gentle in his words. It frustrated her far more than the sentiment he was going for—did he think her skin was so thin? Did he really think she couldn’t handle confronting the differences that had ruled them all this time?

“Say what you mean, James,” she ordered, and he stiffened a little, not at all wanting to comply.

He swallowed. What was she hoping to achieve, hurting herself more when she’d already hurt so much? And why did he have to be the catalyst, voicing thoughts that weren’t productive?

“I’m waiting,” Jessie prodded.

Sheepish, he sunk back into himself, muttering it out in the same childlike manner she had at the beginning of their conversation.

“...I’m jealous,” he said, barely audible.

_There we go_, Jessie crossed her arms closer to her chest, satisfied. She didn’t realize until that
moment she’d wanted him to say it, wanted him to lead this conversation. It’s not that she desired the prospect of arguing with James—she was far too tired, far too thankful for all he’d done to turn on him. It was that there was a process to her thoughts she needed to get to, and no one had given her a map. She was certain, in all her years with him, he could see pathways and landmarks where she could not. Somehow, she rarely left a conversation with him feeling like she had words still unspoken.

“Jessie, I’m sorry,” he backpedaled, trying to justify what he’d said. “It’s just… you must know where I’m coming from, even in hypotheticals? I’d give up any sum of money just to have one person in my corner. How do you think I got here? How do you think I was able to meet you?”

James shifted again, clearly nervous at her silence. For every word she didn’t speak, ten fell from him.

“When I… when I envision the person I’d be in that kinder life, I don’t picture a human,” he said, nervous. “I-I picture… a flame. Someone who… never doubts his own worth, because no one who could tear it down could hold a candle to the first I knew, the one who let me know of it.”

“Someone in your corner, huh?” Jessie said, wistfully. There wasn’t a trace of anger in her voice, and it made James’ heart settle. A pensive sigh left her, and she closed her eyes, journeying backward.

Johto’s sun shone in through foggy window panes, their glass worn down from years of inattention. Sitting three rows down next to the window was a form of self-care, Jessie had since told herself—after all, that was where the protagonist sat, and what was she, if not the noble heroine of this story? In the window’s reflection, she tried not to look at herself for too long—the withered down pencil that stuck behind her ear, on its last legs and a problem she knew she’d be dealing with in a week’s time (who has money for something as luxurious as school supplies?) the rips and tears in the sleeves of her uniform, the messy bows that tied her hair back, the one thing she could never hate about herself, despite everything. Her plain face, framed by its brilliance—nothing special, no signature features to set her apart, just Jessie. She saw the other girls behind her laughing, their pretty faces, their brand new clothes. The illusion of the heroine shattered, and she turned back to her schoolwork, tears at her throat.

It’s Sunday morning years later on the PokéTech campus when a couple hundred rolls into her account. Feeling anxious with a number that big rolling around in her head, Jessie practically pirouetted to the mall. It was irrational, but a lingering fear permeated every ounce of her—screaming that if she didn’t spend that money now, it’d vanish into thin air. She’d wake up, and realize it was a dream.

So, naturally, she left the place in high spirits—her brand new sundress twirling in the wind, the drill-curls framing her dolled-up face bouncing alongside every skip of her feet. Sequins and glamour and feeling like herself, the her she knew she was beneath it all, for one day, Jessie was the most beautiful girl on the entire campus.

For one day, the middle-class girls sneering at her felt like an accomplishment, not like unaltering loneliness. And when the quiet boy with the lavender locks and the fancy coated canvas backpack saw her in the hall—so spellbound by her beauty he spilled his hot chocolate on himself, gained the ire of everyone trying to move through cram school traffic—she knew she’d made the right decision.

Until night came, and she tossed the sparkly, gaudy thing in her hamper. In the dark of her dorm, she realized that nothing had changed. She could pretty herself up all she wanted, she could raise her ego as high as it would go—at the end of the day, it was still her all alone, the poor girl with the nasty attitude and the fiery temper and still not a single friend to her name.
She came back to the present, unsure how long the trip down memory lane had left her silent.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Jessie finally said. “Before today, I hardly knew her voice. Her face was something shoved far from my memory’s reaches, something I couldn't conjure even if I wanted to.”

She paused, turning back to more clearly speak to him—the closest she could stand to eye contact, right now.

“Tell me,” Jessie said. “Is that how you’d think of a friend?”

“No,” James answered. “I suppose not.”

“Mother handed me off,” she brought her eyes back to the stars. “If what she said is right, it was because she couldn’t raise a child, let alone a phoenix.”

James smiled. His heart skipped a beat at the song in her voice.

“But, as fate would have it, her little girl grew up starved in shacks with leaking roofs and cracked windows, anyways,” Jessie continued. “I lived the life she wanted to prevent, regardless.”

An exhaled sigh. God, she hated pity. Every eye on her felt like a thousand, downturned expressions where she only wanted praise for her tenacity. Trusting them not to betray her was far harder than the pain itself.

“It would have been far more bearable if I had just one friend beside me,” she said. “But she was too much a coward to face the life she’d thrust me into.”

The stars blinked in a disharmonious tempo above. Heart quivering, Jessie wondered how many times she and her mom had been looking up at the same sky, each dreaming of the charmed adventures the other must have been on in their respective absences.

“It would have been bearable… if she’d only just stayed.”

James heard her swallowing tears, the cadence of it somehow far more heartbreaking than any emotion she’d worn that night. Her screams to the heavens, her bleeding hands, her violent tongue—none of that was Jessie. The break in her voice as she let the cosmos above swallow her up, he knew that was who she truly was, beneath everything.

“Does being angry with her really help you, Jess?” he said, as softly as he could muster. “Isn’t it… isn’t it possible she had no idea that’s the life you’d live?”

Meowth chimed in, eager to place himself back in her corner.

“People do t’ings all da time wit’ good intentions. Doesn't mean da damage dey cause goes away,” a dry laugh. “Ain’t we t’ree bozos know dat better dan anyone?”

Wobbuffet spoke up, an octave below his usual volume. Meowth shoved him.

“Four bozos.”

The mood lightened, they all laughed alongside him. Jessie sunk further into the sensation of having someone to lean on, let her words stay joyous despite all the weight they contained.

“You’re outnumbered by two terribly tenacious orphans, James,” she grinned. “Your upper-class fists are no match.”
He kept on laughing, leaning hard into her, into them. After the night she’d had, the humour in her voice fell on him like a sunbeam on a rainy day, like utter solace. The group dissolved, far too tired to let what little filters they all had know any place here. Jessie wiped a single tear from her eye, unsure of its source, far past the point of caring.

“This is so stupid!” she laughed, hysterical. “I love her. I hate her.”

In a moment of reflection, she let the pieces fall into place in her head, finally unafraid to acknowledge what she’d been avoiding all along—one single, inevitable truth.

Jessie never had to know her mother a day in her life to know she was born with a fire inherited, a tenacity and self-confidence that began as a small spark Jane placed within her daughter on the day of her birth. Jessie would be the first to tell you—it was her and her alone who kindled that wildfire, but knew she’d have to be an idiot to deny it was her mom who knocked rocks together until her hands were raw.

Still, her life was a long list of people unmentioned who left her in their dust without ever once looking back, and Jessie would also be the first to tell you that there was one who had to set the example, one who’s back silhouetted against the horizon stung far more than anything thereafter. Constantly torn down and beaten for the wealth she didn’t have, for the beauty she had to work to gain, for the life she just wasn’t allowed—and the awful, perpetuating cycle. Forced to become hard to survive it, and then all anyone could talk about her nasty attitude, the crease in her brow and the fangs at her lips, just stay away from that one. Hilarious, for the world around her to create a monster, and then complain of its monstrous nature. They isolated, she fought, they ran. Nothing ever changed, nothing ever healed.

Tears fell from her eyes, and she realized she’d been far less true to herself than she’d hoped. Jessie wasn’t fearless, hardly the storm she thought she was. There was always a single notion she was far too afraid to acknowledge, and as the moon set on her tiny world, she realized if she didn’t tonight, she might not ever.

“Oh, don’t you see?” she smiled through her tears, eyes on the fading stars. Swiftly, she turned to face her team, far too hysterical to bother caring how naked she was any longer. Far too tired to be afraid of them, any longer.

“Didn’t you all hear it, the song in her voice?”

Her friends peered into her. The smile on her face, caught halfway between forced and genuine, was far more concerning than the way she cried without stopping.

“She’s me,” Jessie told them. “Me without my anger. Me without my heartache!”

Her voice wavered. Like she was blessed to catch a glimpse of it, resentful all the same.

“All my confidence, my beauty, my love… without the minor flaws I hardly feel the need to list,” clasping her shaking hands together, Jessie closed her eyes in a sort of prayer. “She’s every beautiful thing I would have been if she had never left me.”

She broke again. The weight of it hit her seemingly as she was saying it, and nothing she had lived through before then could have prepared her for the onslaught of emotion that resulted. She was facing her team, now, and Meowth caught Wobbuffet’s eyes for a moment across the minuscule divide, oddly apart from his trainer—Jessie was only looking at James, then. The cat fought his protective urge to charge forward and be close to her, wondering what vibe the patient pokémon
knew that he himself did not.

Jessie sobbed, and laughed, and forgot with the stress of the night all she was and all she felt pressured to be. Her words sounded tortured despite their airy cadence, despite the protective laughter that framed them.

“Now I’m stuck like this, mean and nasty and only slightly less evil than before!” she wiped at her eyes, desperate to compose herself. “Somehow, I still love her. But… no one’s ever going to love me.”

She was barely able to finish her sentence. James’ arms were around her before she finished, anticipating, in all their time together, precisely what it was she was going to say. He didn’t jolt forward, never so bold—but still, his embrace was lightning-quick, not allowing her a single moment more of pain and loneliness. Swift in fear, swift in love, swift in comfort—hugging her was a well-practiced art. He knew it like he knew air in his lungs.

Like clockwork, Jessie melted into it, her shaking arms at his back, her nose buried in the collar of his shirt, lost in the still scent of rosewater and vanilla that always seemed to linger on his skin. James brought an unsure hand up to her temple, running baby-soft hands through the tangles that littered her flowing hair. There was a desperation he felt to infuse every word that left him with just how much he thought the world of her—but he knew it was impossible. Poetry classes and vocab tutors and countless lessons in articulation, and no amount of time or money allowed him the resources to put words to what he felt for her. Times like these, James knew all he could be was blunt and truthful, or the words would never leave him at all.

“I do, Jess,” he whispered, holding her tighter. “I love you.”

A sob escaped her, and she dissolved into her partner, hazey and dreamlike and far too tired to sit there and lecture him on what a fool he was. He tucked a lock of crimson behind her ear, trembling with anticipation, and her heart sped in ways she didn’t know possible beneath his touch.

He’d spent weeks, months now driving her crazy—lingering in her head, sharing his problems and his pain and his heart with her, forest-coloured held gazes and brushes of their hands against one another, every little moment like fire she couldn’t put out. He had the nerve to say he loved her, did he even know what a claim so bold did to her heart? She couldn’t stand him. He made her chest feel full in all the same ways every other useless person she dreamt of running away with did, his idiotic silver-spoon hands somehow knowing seventeen different and far more obscure knots to meticulously tie her heart into.

Nothing existed, when she pulled apart and looked into his stupid green doe-eyes and his ridiculously soft lips and his absolutely wretchedly handsome bone structure—not the dynamic she was afraid of ruining forever, not the idea that she could beat the feelings she’d unceremoniously caught for him, not the concept of him not returning them and loving her simply as what she’d always been to him. The only thing that existed was the relentlessly persistent urge to kiss him and never stop, an urge that Jessie was absolutely sick of fighting.

With an endearing lack of grace, she practically crushed their lips against one another, utterly resigned to everything. Years upon years, decades now that Jessie spent dreaming of a picturesque love story, tender and sweet. Where her knight in shining armour scooped her up in their strong arms, carrying her to luxury and security and wiping all her worries away with a single set of vows and a promise to never leave. The daydream hung around her like hazy glass, obscuring the reality that existed for her outside it. She didn’t want to step beyond its veil, worried she’d find that, comfort or not, it was not her love story.
Ever the fighter, Jessie raised her broken fists to its walls, shattering its foggy rose finish and opening her eyes to the radiant light that shone in beyond. The sun felt warm. She kissed James.

For a moment, the two of them broke apart, half-lidded eyes and unsure gazes. Even though it was her who had pulled him into the embrace, even though it was something they’d done time and time again, there was something in his gaze that looked nervous, as if he was unsure he was allowed to exist this close to her. The blush on his cheeks, the way his lush eyes quivered, she knew he wasn’t having second thoughts independent of worrying about her. Jessie stayed with her face hovering inches from his for only a moment before resuming the gesture, this time far gentler, closer to the world she knew within her romantic little glass box of cliches. They softened into one another, drifting to a place where things made more sense.

Time wasn’t something that existed tangibly when Jessie and James were that caught up each other, and neither of them could tell you with clarity how long they stayed entangled within one another. When the two of them finally did pull apart for good, it was only with the slightest bit of embarrassment that the world around them blurred back into focus, that they remembered their friends standing on the fringes, privy to it all.

The moment was almost ruined, in the undignified half-yelp that James couldn’t help when he registered Meowth and Wobbuffet in his peripheral. The cat simply rolled his eyes, grinning where he could’ve easily griped instead.

“C’mon, luvdisc,” he playfully shoved James with a paw. “Let’s go home.”

“Wo~bba!” Wobbuffet punctuated, leaning into Jessie.

There wasn’t a place for either of them to feel third wheeled, this far into everything. Rockets though they weren’t, they remained an unbreakable team. In friendship, in love, in heartache—what they survived, they survived together. The home they found, they found in one another.

Jessie entwined her bruised fingers with James’, pulling herself to her feet with a dreamy sort of wobble. Maybe she was tired, maybe she was lovesick—either way, her heart felt full. She forgot the way her head ached from crying, forgot the way her hands throbbed with every tiny motion. Home was all that mattered. James rose beside her, and the four of them made their way over the horizon.

Off in the distance, a single light remained on in the diner.

Delia blearily blinked her eyes open when she heard James fumbling with the lock, his hands unsteady from what was undoubtedly a long night. After a moment of disorientation, she jolted upright, shooting her gaze to the cuckoo clock that ticked on the diner wall. She barely had time to register the hour before the four of them stumbled inside, looking all manner of disheveled, wearing expressions she couldn’t place.

It took a moment for them to register her there, expecting her to have gone home for the night. Instead, she was half-awake in the booth almost directly adjacent, a still steaming mug of tea beside her. They watched the way her expression cycled—through so many sentiments, all of them easy enough to place in how well they’d come to know her.

Relief first— oh, thank goodness the four of you are okay. Then frustration— I have some things to say to you, making me worry like that! Finally, temperance— no. Think about how they must feel. Be
serene.

They stood frozen as she made her way over to them, a little unsure what they were in for. Delia looked them up and down—their waterlogged shoes, the fresh wounds on Jessie’s knuckles, the bags that hung like weights under their eyes. Whatever the lot of them had gone through, it wasn’t something she was certain they could summarize before the sun rose. She sighed, releasing anxiety, suddenly feeling like she had five children instead of one.

“Evening, boss,” James said, mustering all his charm. “Um, there’s a perfectly logical explanation for all this, I assure y—”

“You must be tired,” Delia interrupted him, her eyes indescribably warm. Noticing how quietly forlorn Jessie was, she punctuated the sentiment with a tender hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. Jessie seemed to come back down to earth, then, an uncharacteristically sheepish look in Delia’s direction.

She was.

It was the kind of night where being alone was not an option. The hotel room was packed floor to ceiling, the pokémon all out of their balls and slumbering peacefully in the open air. They didn’t need to speak, or remain close, or even be conscious—still, the former Rockets craved the presence of every friend they could get in the room, Jessie most of all.

The beds were pushed together, and a good handful of them were shoved into it with the two solitary humans at the center, back to back. Jessie had her face half-buried in Wobbuffet’s back, lamenting that he was far too big to hug comfortably and begging sleep to take her away.

Beside her, James anxiously shifted onto his back, loosing a heavy sigh as he stared at the aged popcorn ceiling, feeling lost.

“Jessie, are you awake?”

His tone made her apprehensive, but she’d have been lying to herself if she said that she didn’t crave the company. Jessie rolled over to meet his eyes, arms bunched up at her chest.

“Do you honestly expect me to sleep soundly after…” she fought herself for words. “…all that?”

Still on his back, he turned his head to face her, barely an outline in the dark of the room.

“To your credit, I’ve seen you sleep through some fairly extraordinary circumstances,” James said.

“Yes, James, but several in a row is a bit out of even my dazzling wheelhouse,” Jessie whispered, grinning.

She sounded lighter, despite everything. The lilt in her voice was like coming home after a long trip away, something he knew to be lovely only in recent weeks. Hoping to keep her mood where it rightfully belonged, James shuffled to his side, reaching out a hand to gingerly trace the bandages on her own.

“You’re not... hurting too much, are you?” he asked.

“Well, not externally, no,” she said.

James frowned. “I’m unsure whether or not to consider that a terribly optimistic answer.”
“I think I’ve known enough pity for one night,” Jessie said, averting her eyes. “Don’t you?”

He bit his tongue, worried she’d use that angle. In the heat of the moment, it was a lot harder for James to pick his words, use the ones he knew would comfort her in the ways she needed.

“I don’t recall pitying you a day in my life, Jess,” he said, nervously brushing his fingertips atop her hands. “I wish you’d believe me on that.”

His voice was low and apologetic, his touch incredibly gentle. She didn’t want to meet his eyes, fearful that the look in them would betray his words. It didn’t make sense, the way he looked after her so selflessly. If not out of pity, it meant only one other thing—one he’d been upfront about, but one she couldn’t possibly begin to comprehend.

James stared at her wrapped fists, biting his cheek in an attempt to keep his anxieties at bay. She’s fine, he repeated in his head like a mantra. The lot of us have endured far worse than this.

The concern on his face was palpable, and it told Jessie that he’d been awake for the same reasons she had—her pain his, her life his as well. She took herself back—to every night those last few months she had found herself restless for the same reasons, feeling hopeless that there wasn’t more she could do to protect him from the bad in the world she was so used to contributing to.

She knew with clarity now, why she’d spent those nights awake. James and her were complete opposites in almost every regard, but even in all their contrast, there were things they couldn’t help but share as kindred spirits who had found each other. Why the thought scared her so much, she couldn’t understand—that she’d fear it more than pity? That was unheard of.

Jessie didn’t want to speak it aloud, didn’t want to make a fool of herself, breathe to existence what she was so unsure of. He was looking at her in a way that she’d always dreamed someone would look at her, though, his eyes awash with all he couldn’t put words to.

“You said…” she looked to her hands—to his. “You loved me.”

Even in the dark, she could see the colour on James’ face—blunt and upfront as she was, there was a longing in Jessie’s voice he didn’t anticipate. Some stubborn part of him screamed that the two of them were just going to ignore this little blip in their history until it disappeared—the same way they ignored all the held gazes and passionate embraces and mornings where they woke up just a little too entangled in each other.

“I…” James smiled, sheepish. “I suppose I did, didn’t I?”

Jessie pursed her lips, staring back up at him. “...and how did you… mean that? I mean, it’s a little broad, if you consider it…”

“Perhaps, perhaps…”

Their whispered words halted, and the two of them childishly looked away from one another. In all their confidence and trust in each other, it was so easy for them to turn back into flustered smiles and unmet gazes. It felt so… innocent. So absolutely juvenile.

James gathered his courage. He’d faced down the wraith that had haunted his life since childhood, left his place of origin ablaze, torn through forests he never dreamed he’d set foot in again. Compared to everything, loving Jessie was easy. It was losing her he was petrified by, a paralysis of a different flavour and a million times more potent than any Stun Spore.

His voice shook. Still, he spoke,
“...When I look to a future, Jessie, one where... I’m happy,” James said. “One thing always remains... I know it exists because of the work we’ve done beside one another. You’re... always there, in my frivolous daydreams.”

Words caught in his throat. Try as he might to ignore it, there was one truth that James had always run from, one he refused to look upon even in his bravest moment.

“I’ve... never truly loved another,” he smiled, bittersweet, and she met his eyes again, heartbroken by how strangely sad he looked.

“I think it’s always just been you.”

Jessie stared up at him, doe-eyed and trembling herself, unable to steady her heart in the wake of the tenderness with which he said every word. He rarely looked at her when he was comfortable, but he was doing his best, then—eyes off to the side only by a hair, his best impression of someone with a more typically sculpted brain. She smiled. She laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

Quietly, through her teeth, buried in his chest so as not to wake the entire room. She laughed, because she had no idea how else to react. Her life, her fate, her luck—it was hilarious. All she could do was laugh.

Since sentience, Jessie had dreamed of few things—fame, fortune, and most of all, love. Of the cinderella story she would have, of the dashing royal who would carry her away. Sure, the image changed over the years—from men to women before she settled on “anyone hot and rich enough!”—but underneath everything, she was a romantic. Her white tomorrow was in the arms of someone who thought the world of her, who she loved all the same.

Jessie dreamt of shaking hands at her own, whispered confessions in the dark, days upon days by each other’s side. She dreamt of memorizing the cadence of her lover’s laugh, of them at her bedside when she was injured or ill, of the two of them against sunset skies, laughing and laughing and laughing as they ran into the coming night. She dreamt of a human so taken by her beauty they stumbled over their words and spilled drinks down their shirt, dreamt of someone kind and patient with her moods who loved her for every flaw, not in spite of it. Jessie dreamt of someone rich and handsome and gentlemanly, a contradictory beauty who allowed her to shine brightest but remained wonderful enough to stand on stage beside her as an equal. Of blood red roses, of suave tongue, of utter dedication.

She laughed. She couldn’t stop laughing. So gorgeous, so talented, so brilliant, and so completely blind.

Jessie dreamt of someone so brilliant, their mere presence would make her forget that she’d always been alone. Since long before she’d known him, Jessie dreamed of James.

“Oh, James,” she practically wept through her joyful hysterics. “How did this happen?”

Concerned at her mental state, but getting a feeling it was more positive than not, he remained bright despite his unsteady heart. He laughed alongside her, smile far less sad, now.

“Look around, Jess,” he said, angling his head past her. She followed his line of sight, curious as to what he was getting at. The room was silent, but not empty, and he was fixated on a single corner—where nearly all her pokémon on hand were asleep in a pile, quietly dreaming. Snakes and spirits and all other manner tangled in each other, united by one single thing they shared—unfaltering love and loyalty to the person they were all honoured to call their best friend. At her back, Wobbuffet shifted in his sleep, whispering something in his own language that sounded an awful lot like her name.
Sure of this more than anything else, James pressed his lips to the bandages on her hands—so carelessly cleaned and wrapped up tight, a mother’s love it took decades for Jessie to know. Half asleep and worried sick, Delia drew comforting circles around the younger woman’s open wounds. Ugly as they were, she barely blinked before fixing them right up.

“Count the people who have fallen for you.”

He watched as it resonated, as she dutifully listened—her eyes lingering on their hands together, on everything it meant. Jessie willed herself to become one with the sentiment, with the feeling of them there, surrounding her—rather than the fear that soon, so soon, it would all be over, and she’d wake up from it like it were some blissful dream. For everyone who left her, she tried to keep in her heart everyone who didn’t.

Most days, in all her pain, the numbers didn’t even compare. For that beautiful, perfect, moment, though—James taking the leap with his eyes on hers, how completely safe she felt enveloped in his tender watch—the love around her so greatly outweighed the burden of her life.

She knew she deserved love. She also knew, in all her wisdom, that the universe was never going to catch onto that fact, idealist though she was. She loved herself only because if she didn’t, no one ever would.

Jessie repeated herself, entirely incredulous.

“You said… you loved me.”

This time, James nodded, not a moment’s hesitation.

“I did,” he whispered. “I do.”

She wanted to collapse, to cry, to unravel—in all the kindest ways, drowned in a sense of gratitude she didn’t know she could feel. Her cinderella story, so far off before, had been right beside her all along. The story of the starving whelp with the tenacious heart, and the timid nobleman who ran from his wealth for a life beside her. Their silhouettes black against the setting dusk, drifting through the sunny heavens entangled in each other. Friends, and enemies, and friends again—a universe screaming you belong together, try harder this time. Promises to meet once more in every life thereafter, to search the earth for each other time and time again. Two roses in gardens far apart, their roots creeping toward one another beneath the soil, unnoticed for too long but irreversibly entwined.

How could Jessie not see? That all she’d ever desired had been right beside her, all along?

Overcome, she pulled him close to her, her free arm at his back, her face ducked into his bare shoulder. He leaned his chin atop her wild hair, and his fingers brushing lingering tangles from it felt like a warm shower on a freezing morning. Now, and always, his arms felt like home.

Jessie smiled against him, voice like a prayer.

“I love you, too.”

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Jessie was last up the stairs, and it was with a certain hesitance that Delia called out her name, halting her. More than she had questions, she had concerns—on all Jessie hadn’t told her, on all she was keeping inside. There was only so much that one person could take, and if there was any chance that Delia could take some of the weight off the younger woman’s shoulders, she was determined to
“Do you want to talk?” Delia tried. “About... anything, really.”

For a moment, Jessie fought her knee jerk—to deflect, to brush off, to yell about how she was fine, thank you very much. The walls she’d so carefully crafted almost entirely melted when she saw the worry that still lingered in Delia’s big brown eyes. Jessie steeled herself, trying to remember a time long passed, when rational thought came easily, when she wasn’t so hard.

She was going to be okay. She knew she was, some day. Her life was too extravagant, too wonderful to not have a happy ending—even at her lowest, it was a hope she always held onto, always believed. Part of that was some day having the strength to spin the tale, to let in people without fear of pity, sorries like knives on their tongues.

Jessie exhaled. Best as she could while still being true, she smiled.

“Not today,” she said, a promise for the future, however far ahead.

“Some white tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

this chapter took a lot out of me, and i wrote the second half of it while i was pretty sick, so HERE’S HOPING it’s coherent.

i’ve been excited to write this chapter for years, and much like 16, that means i’m very nervous with how it turned out—building it up in my head all this time, i’m worried it’ll never shine like i see it there. this chapter is NOTORIOUS, because ven and i argued over the events in it THREE SEPARATE TIMES when anticipating it in the future. eventually, we made a compromise, and i am so very glad about that, cause i think it really shows.

miyamoto is one of my favourite characters of all time, and it breaks my heart that she’ll never really get the anime coverage she deserves. her story is so interesting and her character breaks my heart, and it’s so easy for me to feel all the conflicting emotions jessie knows toward her. that complexity is wonderful to explore. i could write novels on the two of them alone. i kinda did, here.

if you’ve never heard it, all of miyamoto/jane’s dialogue in the lab is from the birth of mewtwo, the drama CD that she originated from. i just localized it, added a little of that team rocket flair. she appears mostly in reports sent back to HQ, and one day they just suddenly stop. for ages, i’ve turned over the possibility in my head of how easy it could be for jessie to accidentally discover them.

anyways! i love this one a lot, i hope you do, too. now that jessie and meowth have more or less got their issues to light, and now that rocketshipping is FINALLY starting to fall into place, it’s time for these dorks to get their happy ending. i’m gonna be real, i
don't know how long the next chapter will be--i have so many ideas i want to cram into it, i might even split it up into two chapters and go back to our original length of 22. i don't know. it might take well over the month-long average we usually have in between, and all i can ask is that you're patient with me so that i can end this story in a way i feel it deserves.

this all feels so final, i'm not sure i'm ready to say goodbye yet. i love this universe i've crafted alongside you all, and i wanna stay within it forever.

thank you so much for all your support! as always, i will do my best!
Of Truth...

Chapter Notes

i'll talk about why this one took so long at the end! i split it into two because it ended up being pretty long. whoda thunk it.

as per request, the episodes alluded to in the final two chapters are:

-EP026/Pokemon Scent-sation
-EP048/Holy Matrimony!
-EP231/Dues and Don’t’s
-DP117/Noodles! Roamin’ Off
-XY054/Facing The Grand Design!
-SM021/One Journey Ends, Another Begins...
-SM058/Fighting Back The Tears!
-Like basically every Looker episode

I don't think you need any of those to understand what's happening, they just provide some nice character lore & go into some relationships mentioned here.

enjoy ;v;

“Oddish, show them an Acid attack!”

“Oh no you don’t! Dodge it, Mimey!”

With an imperfect shuffle to the side, Mimey left the weed pokémon’s attack in his dust. Its searing purple collided with the ground behind the fairy-type, toxic fumes quietly fading in Pallet’s near-pristine air. James balled his fist harder, white-knuckled and analytical. Behind the divide, Delia was grinning playfully.

Spring’s waterlogged overcast had dissipated for a few days time, and Delia had jumped at the opportunity to tend to the gardens without the burden of lugging her umbrella around place to place when her hands were already full with tools and seeds and wheelbarrows of fertilizer. James and Oddish naturally followed, but the sun had brought out a far more playful spirit in him and Delia both. Suggesting a small battle in its light was merely an errant impulse, if anything. When James agreed, that’s all he assumed it would be.

“Hit them with a Double Slap!”

Oddish swiveled on its feet, dodging the first hit and unprepared for the second. The grass-type took it hard, sliding backward as greenery tore itself from the earth around its feet-like roots.

Delia hadn’t meant for things to get this heated, really. She could see a fire burning within the little pokémon that crackled and snapped and begged to catch, and though Mimey didn’t particularly enjoy battling, the woman figured that would work out in everyone’s favour. Two amateurs in a friendly spar, finding their styles.
She’d forgotten, however, that the fire within her own soul burned twice as hot. That any battle was kindling to it all the same, pine needles on the forest floor catching just as well as the tree trunks they fell from would. Similarly, she blanked on the fact that James was an empath as intense as he was dutiful, the way he absorbed others’ emotions as though they were his own. Though the battlefield spread them far, the two of them metaphorically had their noses up against one another, flames popping and singing each other’s cheeks.

Jessie leaned back on her palms, trying to let the coolness of the grass wrest her from the way her face burned, her heart burned, her everything burned. It had been weeks since her drag out with Mew on nowhere island, weeks since she’d trudged back to Pallet half-soaked and sleep deprived, weeks since the universe had laughed in her face by making her come down sick mere days after while her team stayed right as rain. And yet…

Delia stuttered a little on her feet as James made a hit, finally, the woman’s adorable clumsiness only outshone by the way her opponent cheered like a child at his pokémon’s backside.

Jessie threw a hand over her brow, fed up. Definitely still feverish.

“Right?” Ash noted her exasperation, arms crossed. “Mom’s gonna cream him if he doesn’t focus.”

The boy’s voice from beside her snapped her out of her lovelit daydreams. Clueless as ever, he kept on, fidgeting a little as he watched.

“Mimey’s not an offensive battler,” his knee bounced erratically as he watched. “So mom’s always gonna play the long game with him. Oddish is gonna be too worn out before it can land a hit.”

Dropping her hand from her head, Jessie rolled her eyes and sighed.

“My life is so weird,” she said, simply.

She was referring to the scene in front of her, the sudden realization of it all. Jessie was sitting beside a former enemy she’d spent years of her life hot on the trail of, the two of them sharing a bag of chips in a fashion that was far too domestic for comfort. The pikachu responsible for half the scars lining her flawless form was having a heated philosophical debate at her flank, if the red on Meowth’s face as he tried and failed to ref was anything to go on. James was fighting an honest battle with the twerp’s mom, and Jessie found herself far too fixated on every microexpression the two of them made—the way their hair had come out of place in their respective ponytails, messy strands adorably disheveled, the way Delia’s honey eyes shone like gold when the sun hit them, the charmingly pitiful flush of pink across James’ face that begged for solace from the pollen wafting through the air, the—

She buried her face in her hands, this time with a muted sort of groan. Ash was getting fired up beside her, leaning forward with knees folded now, gloved hands balanced on the grass in front of him.

“She’s open, mom! Now’s your chance!”

Jessie’s heart didn’t know who it wanted to root for, ever the fickle thing. Similarly, Ash found himself fixated on James’ shortcomings, obsessed with correcting them.

“Mind yourself!” Jessie scolded him, taking the rest of the snacks for herself with a sharp gesture. “Still a dreadful backseat battler, are we?”

“I’m just trying t’ build some motivation,” he shot back. “I told you, my mom’s totally gonna waste your boyfriend.”
“He is hardly my—” she cut herself off, eyes snapping to the battlefield as an Absorb brought Mimey to his knees. “Oh, James! That was marvelous!”

Marvelous wasn’t the word Ash himself might have used—it was equally clumsy as every other maneuver James had made, but luck allowed it to hit, and that inspired a joy in the man that seemed to say **good enough**!

The boy could see it in his former enemy, read him like an open book when he was battling honestly, without tricks up his sleeve—his heart was so deeply in every attack he called, every strong gesture he made, every quiet moment him and Oddish shared as they met eyes in the fray. The passion was there, so tangible, so strong that it left no room for strategy. The shrapnel of a fallen spaceship was embedded in James’ heart, reminding him that it was always luck that gave him liftoff in the first place.

It was agitating Ash—that unconditional love for the battle, that reliance on the universe to allow a win with little direction. More than he could put words to, in a way that made his muscles itch to take James under his wing and pour the endless fountain of knowledge he had hoarded over the years into him. Fifteen years his senior, but a perfect pupil still.

He **had** to get out of Pallet. There was still so much out there to learn.

“Stand your ground, Mimey!” Delia called, confident in her next move. “Show them a Barrier!”

The fairy-type responded in kind, a half-asleep sort of dedication to his craft kicking up behind bright eyes. Battling and strategy were a bore he played along with to keep his utter flower of a master happy, but this? **This** he could do.

Oddish was charging Mimey from across the field when Delia made the move, and Ash found himself with teeth grit and fists balled, caught halfway between secondhand embarrassment and utter hope that maybe, **maybe** James had something up his sleeve to prevent his pokémon from colliding with the invisible wall that shielded his opponent. He saw it only for a moment—a starburst in the former Rocket’s gaze that he recognized. Not one he’d seen in their days as enemies, but one he knew all the same.

“To the side, Oddish! Jump!”

As though they were one, and with little words between the two of them, Oddish knew. Adjacent to the battlefield was a fallen log, one James had been itching to take advantage of. Small feet carrying it as fast as it could, Oddish leapt on top of it and ran forward, using the extra height to launch itself far above Mimey. With the grass-type eclipsing the sun, Mimey hardly had time to register it—let alone make a second wall above himself.

“No way!”

Jessie and Ash cried out the sentence in near-perfect unison, stopping for a moment to look at each other with amusement that petered off into antagonistic understanding. Where Jessie stayed invested, painted lips shouting more half-motivational insults at James and Oddish both, Ash stayed fixated on the battlefield in its entirety, a proud smile etched onto his face.

“Make it **count**, James!” Jessie cried, and he turned back to her only for a moment, grinning.

“Acid, Oddish!”

Though the grass-type’s vitality was spent, the toxic heat that burned from its leaves seared white-hot all the same. Mimey fell again as it made close contact, and Oddish reeled from the blast with a half-
perfected spin in the air, landing across the divide.

Delia sized up her pokémon, not content to give in.

“Mimey, can you keep going?”

He cringed a little as he rose back up, turning to his trainer with a half-hearted thumbs up. “Mime!”

“You’re the best!” she cooed, hands bunched up at her cheeks. “Let’s show them what we can do, dear!”

James let his gaze fall upon the open fields, how the wind sent petals flying across green seas, precisely how much energy all the players in this game had left. He could feel Jessie’s eyes on him like two fiery pinpricks, rooting for him tirelessly even though the stakes were, in all honesty, not particularly high. Before they’d been reborn, it was so rarely that she’d ever find herself invested in his hobbies, his passions. Now, she couldn’t take her eyes off him, her stomach refusing to settle until he rode out of this entirely inconsequential battle victorious.

He swallowed thickly. Delia was still winning. A Growth had rejuvenated Oddish in the torrid air, a few Absorbs had kept it standing. An Acid or three was whittling their opponent down, but Delia’s battle style was clear as day—she was slippery. Her pokémon dodged and avoided and moved. Take that from her, the win would be easy. James saw it as soon as the battle had started, done all he could to avoid having to think about it. Time passed, the wind blew, and things became inevitable.

He was trembling.

It was Oddish who broke him out of his compulsive thoughts, its voice small as ever, its resolve sounding comforting rather than imposing. James met its shining ruby eyes, his own becoming soft in the tiny thing’s wake.

“Oddish?” it whispered, voice a half-rasp. James sucked in a deep breath, let his fists fall from the tense ball they’d taken on. Its words still weren’t crystal clear, most days—though their bond was growing, it had a ways to go. He understood it in that moment, though, a sentiment so few people had ever let him hear. One so plain, so normal, and still one that he’d never been given as a boy.

_We can stop, if you want_, the weed pokémon was whispering. Maybe not word for word, maybe not knowing what it meant to James, but in its eyes, nonetheless.

The man shook his head, pitching forward to keep on battling, determined to see things to their end. Oddish’s gaze brightened, looking at its trainer with metaphorical flames encircling him, brilliant and beautiful and strong as ever.

“Stun Spore!”

There was a brief moment of hesitation—where Oddish became utterly lost in the cadence with which its trainer called the attack. As though he’d rehearsed it all his life, as though decades of practice had lead to that moment. There were still so many mysteries about this human that the grass-type didn’t—couldn’t—understand, so many questions that swirled in its head and remained unanswered through the language barrier. In that brief moment, all Oddish really knew was that this attack was not something normal to the one it loved most. Whatever it meant, it had to be extravagant.

As Mimey neared, Oddish closed its eyes, finding its center. A Stun Spore to an oddish was as simple as breathing, but that wasn’t what this one wanted it to be. The cloud obscuring the sun in that instant finally sailed off it entirely, bathing the clearing in summery light. The grass-type let its rays
soak into its leaves, infusing it with warmth.

Its trainer was not a man. He was a flame, resplendent and bright, unaltering even at his weakest and most low. Since it was born in the gentle and safe grip of his arms, Oddish wanted nothing more than to make him proud. To grow stronger, to be better, to utterly and completely transform alongside him, greater than it ever was before. The sun was shining, sweltering and watchful and kind. Lost in the fantasy of all it wanted to become, Oddish cast itself aglow.

The light radiating off it did not fade as it readied its attack. It shone golden, to silver, to brilliantly crystalized blue. From behind the pair, Ash bolted upright as Oddish became immaterial, its form shifting and sparkling, putting the burning sun above them to utter and complete shame.

“James!” the boy near-shrieked, stars exploding in his eyes. “James, it’s evolving!”

“Wh…” James responded, the fear in his heart vanishing entirely. “What?!”

Meowth was pointing an outstretched claw at the clearing, his composure utterly lost and his place as a referee forgotten in the moment. He made an unflattering sound, grabbing Pikachu by the shoulders and shaking him with a ferocity that made sparks crackle on the mouse’s cheeks.

Dead center on the field, Oddish’s form began to grow—where half its leaves curled upwards on themselves, others grew like vines outward. It’s center widened, its stance shone stronger, arms materialized at its sides as the red of its eyes vanished. A feeling of nervousness crept up in Jessie’s stomach as she watched—was this really okay?

Starbursts exploded off the pokémon when the transformation was complete, falling to the grassy floor like pixie dust in the sun’s lingering glow. The attack it was readying had long since dissipated, the heat of battle gone all the same. The cacophony of the clearing had gone dead silent as the newly reborn pokémon stood there, a quiet swivel backwards as it tried to register what had happened to it as it became lost in itself. Its old name died in its throat as it stared its trainer down through sleepy eyes.

“Gloom…”

James bolted. Forward, this time.

He was a pastel blur across the battlefield, practically tackling his pokémon to the grassy terrain below as he neared it. Without a moment’s hesitation, James scooped it up in his arms, tears streaming down his cheeks as he beamed with pride and love.

Meowth had since stopped bothering Pikachu and was now a weeping mess in Wobbuffet’s arms, crying to the patient pokémon about what a proud father he was. Adjacent to the spectacle, Delia shot Mimey a warm smile that let him know he was free to take his half-hearted spirit from the battlefield.

Jessie’s nerves settled when she saw James there, the unabashed joy he so easily wore on his sleeve, the love in his heart he never did excel at containing, always the crybaby. A heavy sigh escaped her, exasperated on the surface, but weighed down with and amourous cadence she tried not to linger on.

“Look at you,” James marveled at his pokémon through bleary greens as he pulled away from it. “I didn’t think you could get any cuter!”

“Gloom!” it beamed, and James ran a shaking hand across the buds at its temple, the well cared-for vitality that shone in their vibrant crimson.
Seemingly all at once, the tightness in his chest that had ruled every small interaction with Oddish had lessened, and he wondered if it was his own strength and pride or the nature of his past speaking. There’d never been a gloom staring him down with petals readied, as his betrothed had denounced the thing as far too ugly as soon as it evolved, shoved a leaf stone in its face without stopping to ask if that was what it wanted. Staring down at this wonderful oasis of a creature, he couldn’t imagine what on earth she saw that he didn’t.

“You were marvelous in battle, just now,” James said, pulling Gloom closer, softer this time. “Thank you, Gloom.”

The grass-type melted into the hug, barely registering the way nectar-lined lips quivered and tears cropped up in its dreamy eyes. James had never held it so close before, never clung to it with such a lack of tenseness in his grip. For the first time since they’d met, the two of them seemed one.

Footfalls on the grass in front of the pair caused the two to slowly drift apart after a long moment, and James brought his gaze up to Delia. Hands half-clasped and cocked to the side, like she so often did, like she was trying to prevent her heart from escaping through her chest.

“Why don’t we head back to the diner?” she said with a warm smile. “Cool down from all the excitement?”

Ash had sprung to his feet behind them with purpose burning in his eyes, and Jessie was mid-stretch with a grin just as bright. James turned to face his team, inquiring without words.

“I’m callin’ a draw,” Meowth said, a paw at his eyes in an attempt to rid himself of the tears. “Kiddo, I’m so prouda yous!”

He dissolved back into hysterics as he fell forward to hug the newly-evolved Pokémon, lost himself even more when he realized it had arms to hug him back with. Pikachu climbed atop Ash’s shoulder with a half-masked eye-roll.

“Probably a sound idea,” Jessie said, her eyes on the feline. “At this rate he’s going to dehydrate himself.”

“Almost sounds like you care about him,” Ash elbowed her.

“Riddle me this, King of Twerps,” she shot right back. “Would someone who didn’t care put up with Meowth this long?”

Wobbuffet trudged over and heaved the ball of fur and tears over his metaphorical shoulder, offering a few awkward pats as the group began to make their way back home. Delia and Ash took to the front of the pack, quietly chattering in a way that turned to white noise as the former Rockets fell comfortably behind.

Jessie leaned into James, lacing their fingers gingerly together. Her head against his shoulder as the two of them walked in silence, she prayed to the cosmos that the pride in her heart could reach him through osmosis.

“You’re kidding. The Indigo League?”

Unperturbed entirely by the question, Ash nodded fiercely. Oblivious to his reasoning, James gave him a listless sort of blink.

“...but why?”
The boy shifted a little in the diner booth, taking in the relative silence of the place. The sun was beginning to dip in the skies outside, the nightly rush long over as Pallet’s residents returned to their families. Across the bar, the woman was there again—cradling her silent phantump, scarlet frames unmoving from the paper.

“In all honesty, uh…” Ash started, then laughed a little incredulously. “It was watching you battle that did it for me.”

James loosened a little, a subtle tilt to his head that begged more exposition. What on earth did that mean?

“I don’t really know how t’ say this a nice way—”

“Ha! An’ since when’ve you cared about bein’ nice to us before?” Meowth interrupted.

“Since you stopped stalking me, mostly,” the boy retorted. “Anyways, it’s like… James, watching you battle, it kinda brought me back.”

The man swirled the ice cubes in his empty glass around with a clunky motion of the straw. “In what ways?”

“I was watching everything you were doing so… nit-picky,” Ash admitted. “Was way more invested in how you were battling than how mom was, and I was rootin’ for her!”

“You’re always nit-picky,” Delia commented. “Even back when you were an amateur!”

“No kidding,” Jessie agreed. “You think we couldn’t hear you screaming at your twerpette friends in the contest halls?”

The boy crossed his arms. “Nah, this was different. I couldn’t let it go. It wasn’t like how I usually feel.”

James was far more receptive to this than the others. “Well, what was it, then?”

“The way you battle, it’s obvious that luck has guided you all this time,” Ash said. “Luck and passion. ‘Til now, you’ve thought it’s enough. So strategy’s newer. Learning how to really read your opponent, seems like you’re still finding your footing.”

The boy leaned forward, a wisdom in his eyes James wasn’t used to seeing beyond brief flashes.

“I didn’t notice it until you had Oddish—or, Gloom, I guess—use the battlefield to catch ‘em off guard,” he explained. “But, uh… you’re just like how I was.”

“A ha!” Jessie half-choked, half-laughed, then messily threw a hand over her mouth to stop herself from dissolving into the utter hilarity of the statement. James shot her an agonized look, and she sunk amused into the corner of the booth.

“That’s why it was buggin’ me so much,” Ash said. “It was like I was… seeing myself back then, but with all the knowledge I had now. I wanted t’ go back in time and tell that kid everything I learned.”

Meowth piped up. “Somet’ in’ tells me he wouldn’ta listened to ya, twoihp.”

“Prob’ly not,” the boy affirmed, running a bashful hand across the back of his head. “So… knowing all I know now, I wanna do it again.”

“Nah, not a chance,” he smiled. “I’m taking the gym challenge again.”

“Ah, yes, that does make sense,” James nodded, arms crossed, before jolting forward completely agape. “WHAT?”

His team joined him almost immediately, marveling at the boy’s gumption. Delia just giggled from behind a closed fist, unsurprised.

“Kinda feel like I got most of my Kanto badges on accident, anyway,” Ash said. “Maybe if I earn ‘em fair and square it’ll shut Misty up.”

“Doubtful,” Jessie noted.

“She’ll find somet’in’,” Meowth agreed.

“So I think I’ll be heading out soon, mom,” he pivoted. “But I’ll be closer to home than usual, at least?”

“I’m not worried about that anymore, honey,” Delia said, sugar-sweet voice switching to its maternal chide on a dime. “But you better win this time, young man, understood?! No slacking off at home like you did before!”

“Aw, c’mon mom, I got top sixteen!” he retorted, and Pikachu gave a quiet sigh, wondering how long he was going to cling to that defense. To everyone’s surprise, Jessie leaned back in her seat, eyes flitting open almost mischievously as she broke the banter.

“Delia,” she said in a tone undetectable, and the table turned to face her, curious.

“If he’s going to lose to anyone,” the woman continued. “...why not make sure it’s you?”

A silence hung over the lot of them as they collectively tried to process exactly what it was Jessie meant. The statement seemed nonsense to everyone but the pair, and even Delia was struggling to wrap her head around it.

“What…” the older woman gave a doe-eyed blink. “What do you mean?”

“Mom?” he said, the word asking all the questions he had at once, and Jessie grabbed Delia’s hands in her own, staring deep into the woman’s dark eyes.

“You always wanted to be a master, right?”

Ash softened a little when he saw it in his mother’s eyes—a flare of hope, an affirmation in itself. There was a part of him that felt almost left out, hurt that Jessie of all people knew something about his flesh and blood that he himself didn’t. Maybe, all this time, him and Delia could’ve been even closer. Bonding over a shared dream.

“Mom?” he said, the word asking all the questions he had at once, and Jessie grabbed Delia’s hands in her own, staring deep into the woman’s dark eyes.

“You had a diner to run and a boy to raise,” Jessie said, as though she didn’t know. “Well, your twerp’s grown and your diner is in the hands of the three most talented individuals in all of Kanto.”

She spoke with such conviction, such belief. Delia’s eyes widened a little, her heart hammering at a speed she didn’t know possible.

“What’s stopping you?”
Her impassioned speech was met with silence, and it made anxiety flower in the pit of her stomach. Delia was gazing at her, halfway between wonder and an uncharacteristic sense of hopelessness. As though the answer pushing to escape her was silly to put a voice to.

“I… I just…” Delia said, wearing a meekness that was not at all her colour.

“I figured it was far too late.”

Jessie knew, somewhere in her heart, that was what Delia would say. It hadn’t been too long ago that she, too, had been shoved into a diner booth, wondering if she’d walked the earth too long to even begin chasing a dream other than the one she knew like her favourite song. Her heart turned to the universe and asked it the same, and the universe put old friends in her arms and a ribbon in her palm, whispered kindness to her aching spirit and security to her future. Surrounded her in a light so different compared to the artificial one she’d been bathing in for twenty-nine long years. She held on tighter, gently squeezing Delia’s hands.

“Delia, dearest,” she said. “It’s never too late.”

As the two of them shared in the moment, lost in each other’s smiles, both Ash and the former Rockets found themselves bonding in the quiet. An uncanny sort of pride they were all feeling at once, at the more brash and difficult member of the team whispering so effortlessly the scope of all they’d seen and known. As Ash had seen himself in James earlier, he saw himself in Jessie then—professing in full confidence that the best time to plant a tree was fourteen years ago, and the second best time was now.

“I think I’ve heard enough.”

The voice that joined them was not one they recognized—not at first, at least. It took them out of the dreamy reverie, brought them back to where they were. From the far corner of the diner, the Phantump Lady stood.

She was walking toward them with footfalls that rang both domineering and gentle, a strange paradox the lot of them found themselves drawn to. In one swift motion, they watched as she pulled her glasses from her eyes, staring them all down. Then, with a knowing smile, she threw off the disguise entirely, as though she were simply ripping off a tablecloth to leave the china flawlessly serene above.

All of them reeled back a smidge at the sudden movement—they were certain, in all their days existing in the same space, that they’d never seen her move more than an inch. When they opened their eyes, they registered the scene in small fragments—the getup fluttering down in the still diner air, the mishmash shades of brown that covered the clothes in their place—and then, the bigger picture: Agent Looker’s strong eyes and gentle grin putting the glint of his open badge to shame.

Where Ash brightened up and Delia looked a little lost, the former Rockets—plus Wobbuffet, who had unearthed himself to join the commotion—nearly fell out of the diner booth with a joyous cadence that threatened to shatter the windows of the inn.

“Lunchbox Guy!”

There were practically hearts swimming above their heads at the reunion, completely unexpected in the wake of how settled down in Pallet they’d been. Seeing old friends was so commonplace on the road, they’d nearly taken it for granted since they’d planted roots.

A veritable flurry of expressions gripped the rambunctious quartet in that moment, and Looker
watched as they came and went. The initial reaction was joy, a burst of energy at seeing an old friend again. The second was something halfway to sheepishness, where it was obvious they were contemplating if, in all he’d seen, he even remembered them. The third lingered on that thought— in all he’d seen. In all he’d seen, because he was Looker, because he was…

Their eyes were trained on his badge, a sudden pang of intrusive worry gripping all of them, strangling the optimism in their throats. Looker saw it clear as day on their faces, slipping the thing back into his jacket.

“The International Police?! ” Delia marveled, staring up at him. “Oh, Ash, don’t tell me—”

“He’s cool, mom! Don’t worry!”

She sighed as the point she was shooting for flew straight over her son’s head, colliding with the wall behind him.

“One of these days we’re going to have a talk about the things you get up to when you’re out on your pokémon journeys,” Delia insisted.

“No need, really,” Looker interrupted, smiling brightly. He turned his attention to the former Rockets, who were desperately trying to make themselves smaller from under their little black raincloud.

“...for any of you fine folks,” the officer continued, and the quartet’s stormy dwellings parted a little, their eyes shining and shifting as they looked up nervously at him.

“Name’s Looker,” he introduced himself, offering a hand which Delia shook, beguiled. “I am acquainted with Ash here. He’s your boy, then?”

“Sorry about him,” Delia simply said.

“ Mom!”

“He’s been quite the hero in a number of my most treacherous cases,” Looker regarded him. “I’m not at all surprised, running into you again!”

“Shucks,” Ash beamed, and Pikachu mirrored the humility in his expression. “Wait, what’s goin’ on in Pallet? Should we be on the lookout?”

Looker shook his head, relaxed in a way that sent calm to their collective heart. The former Rockets were still backed into their side of the booth, twiddling their thumbs and hoping Looker wouldn’t remember who they’d been, all they’d done. His eyes drifted back open, right on them.

“Now why are you four looking so shy?” he questioned them. “That’s unlike you!”

They jolted a little, their hearts wavering. He did remember. The sentiment was enough to send the floodgates open, and the lot of them burst into hysterics all at once, the way they so often did.

“We’re not bad anymore!”

“Oh, please don’t take us away!”

“We’ll do anyt’in’!”

“Wobb-uffet!”
In the emotional rush, they’d fallen out of their seats and were now clinging to the man’s ankles like an octillery who’d lost its mother. Looker stumbled a little as they ungracefully dropped, his arms not touching his sides as he struggled to remain standing.

“Settle down now, you lot, you’re in no trouble,” his smile didn’t falter. “We’ve got some things to lay out.”

They blinked up at him once more, sure the statement was too good to be true. This man was there the day Giovanni was put in handcuffs, like a specter of their past that wore the face of a friend. They were so used to being comrades on opposite sides of the law, now that they were on the same one, everything seemed so uncertain.

Soon as they had dissolved, the group began to reassemble themselves in short, unsure bursts. Looker had always been strangely kind to them, for a man whose work ran directly opposite to their own. If there had been time for the lot of them to question it, they’d never taken advantage of it—electing to never look a gift ponyta in the mouth, to accept that this man who should’ve been their undoing was instead, in many moments, their salvation.

There was something about seeing him on the TV that day that had nearly shattered the image, though—planted seeds of doubt in their hearts that made the serenity in his smile seem more ominous than it would’ve been years ago. Looker wondered, feeling their fickle hearts flip from confusion to hope to suspicion as though he was one with them, if he was an empath, or if they all just felt so wholly that it bled into everything and everyone around them. Meowth was the first to finally shatter the tense silence, a guilty dip in his voice.

“Lunchbox Guy, I don’t geddit,” he said. “How come of all da people we knew back when we was less morally straight, da guy from Interpol was da one offerin’ us a hand? Didja really not know what dose big ugly letters we was wearin’ on our chests meant?”

“Of course I did!” he said, far too chipper. “What kind of officer would I be if I took everything at face value, though?”

Jessie wanted to quip *a normal one* but wisely bit her tongue. Looker kept on.

“An investigator in even the highest power seeks justice,” he continued. “And in order to seek justice, we must first seek truth.”

“Precisely,” James offered. “And our truth was that we were in the bloody *mafia*.”

The agent shook his head. “It’s unwise to deal in absolutes. Don’t you know that better than everyone, with how far you’ve come and all you’ve seen?”

He spoke the sentence as though he had been there, every step of the way. Pulling a chair from the table adjacent, he took in the sight of all of them—the former Rockets, rising to their feet and gauging how to awkwardly shuffle back into the safety of the booth, and the Ketchums, who remained charmed and quiet by this forgiving spirit in their second home.

“May I?” Looker inquired, fixing to sit beside them.

Delia snapped back to herself. “Of course.”

There was a brief lapse as he clumsily stumbled backward, remembering at the last second that he’d forgotten his coffee at the diner’s bar. Though he’d never broken character in the days he’d frequented, it was the one action that could have possibly been a tell—an adoration for the ambrosia that seemed borderline sensual. Grabbing what was left of the beverage and trotting back over to the
table, he sat.

A long silence followed, as he settled into the position and took a long, nearly suspenseful sip of his coffee. The air in the diner was entirely still, the walls that had finally started to feel like home growing tighter around the former Rockets, just a touch stifling given the circumstance. Jessie fidgeted in her seat. When she dreamt as a young girl of living life as though she were in a storybook, she neglected to acknowledge all the dramatic pauses and narrative devices that came alongside it.

Looker set the mug down, gentle as ever despite the strong look in his otherwise warm gaze.

“Nacrene City, one year ago, almost to this very day,” he said, his line of sight sweeping over the table as though he were scanning them for some hidden purpose.

“Two former B-class Team Rocket agents that the International Police had their eye on were apprehended in the dead of night, attempting a heist that would be their last.”

The distance he was following at coupled with the bloom the sunset cast on the world around wasn’t doing any favours for the already dreamlike picture Looker had in front of him. All things considered, he couldn’t yet pinpoint why it uneased him the way it did—he’d been through things that had brought him to his knees, but this? This was so delightfully mundane, just another day at work. Nothing so extravagant, nothing so worth the disquieted flutter in his chest.

It was a simple case, in theory. He’d already been tailing the two when they were initially arrested, and his tendency to wait had ended up paying off when someone bailed the two of them out. The Rockets in question—Cassidy and… Bento, was it?—seemingly had no immediate family or friends that would’ve been willing to flesh out that sort of money, which only really left other Rocket loyalists who remained in contact with them. It was a lucky break, the idea of locking up five Rockets instead of two.

Looker wasn’t prepared for the way his heart lurched when he saw it was them. The three who had helped him fell Team Galactic, the three who stared down Reshiram from beside him. Somewhere deep down, he knew that their paths might have to cross from opposing sides one day. Realistically, though, the idea of locking them up was never something he wanted to acknowledge.

Ever the wildcards, however, there was something off about them. Their uniforms were missing—they were cloaked in the same black as the other two, but the crimson shock that normally rested at the forefront of their outfits was missing. What’s more, they didn’t seem themselves at all—tense, barely held together. Not at all the people Looker knew them to be at heart, the goons who did everything with absolute reckless abandon.

Both the terrible trio and the loyalists were seemingly on the same side. Yet, the more Looker peered into them, the bigger the divide between the lot of them as they walked seem to grow.

Seeing them in Unova all those years ago was a difficulty he was remembering with clarity, now. He’d heard tales of how savage Team Rocket as a whole had become since expanding there, and when he saw them way back when, fear flowered somewhere within him. The idea of them becoming half the criminals he’d heard stories of… well, he never wanted to see them like that. Not then, not now. There was a place in Looker’s heart for every face he’d met in his life, no matter how brief or how simple the meetings had been. He’d realized early on, it only takes one loss of that which you hold dear to treasure every memory you craft with the world around you.
The three of them—whatever he was to them—were people he would like to consider his friends. Looker wanted so badly to have faith in them, in what they were doing here, in why they had met up with these Rockets when the trio never seemed suited to the Rocket life themselves. Too good at heart, too kind to the pokémon in their care, far too strong in their own sense of justice.

All at once, the atmosphere of the clearing seemed to change. Looker stopped in his tracks as he watched from behind shrubs and trees, pulling his jacket up over his nose. They’d stopped walking, the duo imposingly turning to face the other three.

“What’s the matter, Jessie-Jess? Get cold feet?”

Even from the distance he’d been following at, Looker could hear her voice ring out in the relative silence of the coming night. Cassidy had her face nearly nose-to-nose with Jessie—the contrived sort of power stance of a caterpie trying to convince the circling pidgeot above that it was really an ekans.

With all she was, Cassidy was trying to make Jessie feel smaller. Looker watched as the redhead lost the tension in her shoulders, spoke with a serenity he wasn’t expecting, remembering what he did of her temper. With every word that fell from Jessie’s lips, the agent watched as Cassidy shrunk, and shrunk, and shrunk until she was nothing.

“—you want to know the difference between you and I, Cassidy?”

Minuscule as she was, the blonde bit back.

“I dare you.”

“I crawled out of the stinking sewers.”

He stood his ground as the former Rocket’s boots jaggedly swiveled around, as she began to walk away. Not once did she turn back toward the ghosts of her past—not when Cassidy had James’ face in her hands, not when the quieter of the pair taunted them with all the riches they were giving up, not when darkness blanketed the clearing and the night finally came. There was a strange twinge of guilt that struck Looker as the group split up, then—as though, perhaps, he should’ve had more faith in the hearts of his old friends.

Butch and Cassidy let their shouts dissolve into resigned grunts as they walked into the darkness, intent to see this to its end. Looker watched as his trio walked into the light of the setting sun.

Once was coincidental, Looker had reasoned. Twice... well, now, his curiosity had been piqued.

The aftermath of Team Rocket’s fall from grace had lead him all across the world in an attempt to snuff out what was left of the rotten organization. Even on their own, a number of the remaining agents that dotted the globe had managed to do some damage, and the most recent one in Saffron city had probably been the biggest loss yet.

He’d managed to tail the suspects to one of the massive properties on the outskirts of town, but getting in without compromising his own moral code was proving to be difficult. Still, he managed, tailing them through the garden gates, peering into the crystal castle of a greenhouse as the rogues worked their twisted magic from within it.

Finally catching them in the act, Looker was certain he had enough evidence of their alignment to finally make his move and apprehend them. What he wasn’t expecting was for someone else to do
his work for him, and when he saw the man’s face, he was certain he was dreaming.

James was on the other side of the divide, looking as noble as one could while still clad in pajamas. Looker couldn’t hear through the glass what it was he was saying to the Rockets standing opposite, but it was clear just based on his stance, his expression, his being—this time, he was not their ally.

Looker had questions, ever the inquisitor—how this former agent of chaos had made some sort of home in such a lavish estate, what kind of words were passing between him and his former comrades in arms as he watched James’ expression go from strong, to softened, to pitying. Most of all, why he seemed so intent to keep his chimecho in the background, rather than relying on its type advantage to carry them to victory.

Even with the barrier separating him from the scene as it unfolded, Looker found himself taken with it. The former Rocket was on the verge of tears with his heels dug into the ground below, heartbreak on his face at the thought of anything happening to this pokémon in his care.

It was the exact opposite of everything Team Rocket stood for, and the curious thing was that it was always who Looker knew James to be. For an organization that boasted the exploitation of these creatures for profit, James was always a man willing to risk his own life to keep the ones in his care safe, and it was even more apparent now—as the two of them fought with each other, like a married couple deciding on their dinner bill.

Eventually, Chimecho had enough, tearing out of James’ grasp and straight into the fray. The man closed his eyes and stood frozen, unable to watch as this pokémon in his care defended their shared home from that which dared to hurt it. There was something so tragic in how heartstick James became in the moment—the weight of empathy on his spirit framing him a coward, when in reality, it made him the strongest of them all.

Chimecho blasted the Rockets clear into the sky, and they twinkled to nothing while everyone dwelling in the world below watched. The job-oriented voice in Looker’s head told him to give chase, to remember the arch of precisely how they had sailed through the skies, calculate where it was they’d land and how quickly he and his team could arrive there.

A much stronger part of the man was taken with the scene in front of him, though—of James arguing with his pokémon for daring to fight a battle so dangerous, of the way the debate shifted and changed and ended with them embracing, of the curious ways fate kept pushing the lot of them into each other’s respective paths. Ducking back into the woods, he flipped on his PokéGear.

Call number one was simple, succinct—a tip to Saffron’s police station from an anonymous ally of the law. The second prompted him to pay the long distance, and he briefly considered if it was something he actually wanted to do, given the fickle nature of who was on the other end. Putting himself in the hands of fate, he dialed out, waiting.

Never on the first ring, certainly not on the second. Rarely on the third, more often on the fourth. Looker could picture the man there, dead-eyed as the phone rang incessantly, staring into whatever time waster children’s toy he’d taken to that month. He picked up on the sixth ring—impressive, all things considered.

“Ula’Ula Police,” Nanu drawled.

“Morning, Zeroes.”

Amongst distant, muted meowing, Looker heard Nanu shuffle a little in his seat. The sound of it was almost heart-warming—that anything could make Nanu move that much was certainly something
“What d’you want, Looker?”

“It seems I’ve reached a crossroads on a long-standing case,” Looker informed him. “And the spirit possessed me to ask your advice.”

“I ain’t your boss anymore.”

“Which is why I’m asking for advice, not orders,” the agent responded.

“You don’t have other friends?” Nanu asked. “Ones who aren’t busy?”

“Ah, yes! I offer my sincerest apologies for cutting into your undoubtedly hectic day,” he hoped his former superior couldn’t hear the tease of a grin in his voice.

“...but, unfortunately, you are the only immediate friend I have who spent time in Team Rocket.”

A brief silence followed, and if not for the sound of paws lazily pattering about on the other line, Looker would’ve thought Nanu hung up on him.

“Your knowledge of how they operate was one of the biggest reasons we were able to finally get rid of them,” he noted.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re welcome,” the older man responded. “Hey, the meowth are getting antsy. What do you really wanna ask me?”

Looker brought his gaze to the sunrise that was beginning to drench every inch of the forest around him in blue. There was an impulse he so badly wanted to follow, unsure if it was more important than the work he was doing here and there, how self-indulgent it truly was. He was supposed to be cleaning up what was left of Team Rocket, but his heart insisted that following those three wouldn’t get him any closer to that goal. He needed to be following those who clung to the organization, who were still out and about causing mayhem for the good in the quiet cover of the night. Whoever they were before, the trio he knew didn’t seem like that now.

Still, like some sort of twisted guardian angel... Looker knew if he didn’t get that answer for sure, his conscience would never truly rest. If his old friends had been born anew, he wanted to step away knowing it in full confidence. And if they were struggling in that metamorphosis, he wanted to be there behind the scenes, to gently nudge them toward the right path when they stumbled.

The sight of them following Butch and Cassidy back into a cold cell flashed again in his mind. How close they were, just barely swerving out of the way of that banana peel as it lay inconspicuously on the road. It didn’t sit well, and he looked to the fading stars, willing it away.

“Zeroes,” he started. “What was the turnover rate like?”

It was nearly sunrise when Looker heard the doors above him slide open again, and Meowth heaved a weighty sigh. Cianwood’s streets were still as the city slept, but the lights atop the pharmacy remained fickle in their presence. He’d been lurking beneath the balcony with a sort of apprehension for a few hours now, mentally debating with himself whether he should’ve run after Jessie and James or not. They left in such a hurried trickle, one after the other, completely unlike themselves. Try as he might not to, he was beginning to fear the worst.
The single denizen who had remained outside was Wobbuffet. Looker saw his tail hanging over the balcony’s edge, messily shuffled into a dark corner out of its unblinking eyesight. Other pokémon would come out from time to time, having conversations with him that ranged from frantic to solemn to just plain exhausted—but the language barrier provided no answers, and all Looker was able to gather from the aimless chattering was that something had happened that night to make tensions run high.

Wobbuffet made a quiet sort of hum when the cat shuffled out of the restless den, and a second, more settled one when he realized who it was. Wordlessly, Meowth sat with this tail and paws dangling beside the patient pokémon, and the two of them remained silent in the stillness of the night.

Could Looker see them in full, he would’ve witnessed Meowth raising his head to the moonlit sky above. The adoring swish of the cat’s tail was all he caught from his vantage point, sentimental all the same.

“Hey, Wobbuffet?”

“Wob?”

A pause. “Ya t’ink we done right so far?”

Bug-types chirped against otherwise quiet world around them. This was a time not meant for human eyes, and Looker was taken with how lucky he truly was to be able to witness it.

“Wobba, wobbuffet?”

“I dunno,” Meowth backpedaled. “T’ings just ain’t feelin’ da same as dey was in the beginning.”

“Wobb~a?”

“It’s like… y’know…” for once, the cat struggled to articulate. He zeroed back in on the moon, a single constant that always put words on his tongue and lyrics in his heart. She hung there, her light all around him, and he pushed on.

“Kinda feel like dis whole… backwards goody-goody joihney was somet’in’ we did more on a whim dan anyt’in’. An’ when we started, it was just a lotta prancin’ around like baby stantler, a little awkward on our feet, but… still gettin’ somewhere, yeah?”

Looker heard the dip in his voice as it lead to another soft pause, and Wobbuffet didn’t fill the silence with any words of his own. He was content to wait until he was certain the chattier pokémon had gotten his feelings out, said all he wanted to say.

“Everyt’in’ just seems a lot more murky, now,” Meowth noted, almost feeling bad for saying it. “I feel like I gotta pretty good grasp on da feelins of uddah people, even human-shaped peoples. But dose two… I been friends wit’ em for years, an’ I still don’t know what’s goin’ t’rough dey’s heads sometimes.”

“Wobbu~ffet?”

“Whaddy mean ‘does it matter’?!” Meowth said, suddenly. “C’mon, if eit’er of dose dolts was as real wit’ me as Jess is wit’ you, do ya really think da future would look so scary and uncoihtain?”

“Wobbuffet!”

“I know it ain’t why,” he responded, looking to his feet. “Yous patient an’ levelheaded and ya just
sit dere an’ let all of us messes use you as our big blue shrink. Here I am, keepin’ to it! I dunno how ya deal, buddy.”

“Wobb~ba,” there was a tone of amusement in the whisper of his voice, almost grateful.

Another reticent beat came over them, and Looker watched from below as the pokémon’s tails gingerly found a rhythm beside each other in the shadows. That of two friends who had long since grown together, roots under the soil, hearts beating in subtle sync.

“It’s bizarre, y’know?” Meowth finally said. “T’ink about all we’s done and seen. All da people we made amends wit’, an’ all da bad we replaced wit’ good. Dis t’ing… it’s almost over, right? We only got one region left ta scour, but…”

He swallowed. Behind him, his claws unsheathed quietly, a nervous gesture as he fought his more primal urge to knead them worriedly into the concrete below.

“Ah, who am I kiddin’?” he said. “You wasn’t wit’ us in Kanto, Wobbuffet. I dunno if I can even tell ya how terrible we was way back den.”

The guilt in the normal-type’s voice was something Looker couldn’t say he’d ever heard in all the times they’d met briefly over the years. It was far more existential, something he was certain could only have a place in these moonlit hours, where nothing but the hearts of the living and their deepest feelings existed. Where secrets were whispered and kept, where walls stayed down until the sun brought them back up alongside it. He was struck with the feeling that somewhere else, despite all his worries, the two human members of the quartet were having a softer moment to themselves, as well.

Looker heard shuffling on the slab of stone above. Angling his head inconspicuously, he watched as their tails moved closer together. Meowth made a soft noise of surprise that drifted into a calmer sort of cadence, and the cedar-singed fur on the tip of his tail went from standing to serene. Even with his view obscured, the man could tell that Wobbuffet had pulled the cat into a gentle hug. The two of them fell easily into it.

“Wobba,” the patient pokémon said, tone delicate and kind. “Wobbu~ffet.”

Meowth sucked in an unflattering sniffle, combining it with a laugh halfway to hysterical in his lungs. The sudden contact had loosened all he was holding inside, shoved the tension through tears and straight into a relieved sort of half-sob. The pair held each other, and Meowth thanked what few gods he knew—that a pokémon who never moved first in conflict could still take the initiative in love.

“You’s right,” he said, and Looker could hear the upturn lacing his words. “Guess wit’ all da bad we did den, we can only do good from here on out.”

Wobbuffet said nothing, moving his arm up to the spot behind Meowth’s charm and giving it a gentle sort of half-scratch. The cat fought two urges, then—the first to purr, and the second to fall asleep on the cold concrete, right then and there. He sighed, relaxed for the first time all night, and closed his eyes to enjoy the moment.

“Dis is us we’s talkin’ about, after all,” Meowth said. “Guess da only t’ing ya can do in the face of an angry rocket blastin’ at ya is face it head on.”

Below them, Looker let his footsteps reign quiet on the soil under his feet, stay quiet as he hit the cobblestone of the streets and retreated to kinder dwellings. This moment wasn’t for him, and he’d intruded on enough of it. His friends had changed so little, and they had changed so much.
“Meowth kept his eyes closed, unbeknownst to the third in this conversation between him and one of his dearest and longest friends. Behind his eyelids, he saw only white.”

“Hopefully you can forgive me, for all the behind the scenes lurking I did to people I thought my friends,” Looker said to them, genuinely apologetic for doing his job.

There were details he’d left out, things he’d kept tight lipped on so as not to embarass them, make them feel as though they couldn’t shake the ever-present feeling of eyes on them. These pseudo-stakeouts were far less braviery-eyed than anything else he’d done in his time with Interpol, but he’d also never run into the contradictory conundrum of stalking people he was rooting for the rebirth of, rather than the undoing. Usually, revealing his trail was a gesture of power, of justice, of righteous karma. This time, it was still that, but in ways he found harder to articulate.

“From all I’ve seen, you’ve done wonderful,” he smiled then, every part of his face glowing with pride. “I wanted to tell you all that myself—that I don’t think the streets need your faces on wanted posters, anymore.”

A warmth flowered in Meowth’s heart as the man said it, shining up through his dreary blues. He and Jessie shared an almost humbled look of hope, fighting the respective lumps that seemed to linger in their throats. Looker, like someone else they’d known, spoke with a conviction that made it hard to argue. Singing their praises, he carried on.

"I can tell this journey hasn't been without pain for you. All of you. Pain is a test to one's very soul, a trial by often the hottest fire, and a cycle you have to work to break,”

James shifted nervously in his seat at the word fire, living in a different world from his team. They stayed bubbly in their quiet hope, and he kept his eyes downcast.

“I’m happy to look at you three now and say you’ve succeeded.”

It was hard to quantify precisely the amount of pride as it hung in the room. With Ash and Delia smiling in agreement, with Looker absolving them of everything they’d known and seen thus far, it felt as though the gentle spirit who’d been guiding them all along had sent herself down in fragments, sewn those fragments into the hearts of all they’d met. Now, they were converging like the warmest patchwork quilt, keeping them safe and toasty through even the most frigid stormfront.

Grateful tears cropped up in Meowth’s eyes, and for a moment, he thought his team planned on joining him—but there was a telltale darkness in James’ expression, a pitiful sort of crease in his brow that spelled out the opposite of all he should’ve been feeling. Jessie had noticed first, her tone uncharacteristically soft.

“James?”

It startled him only half-way out of his racing thoughts, and he made an attempt to blink himself back. There was a heavy sigh on his chest he wouldn’t allow himself to exhale, held inside and bundled tight.

Looker couldn’t have been there that night. Not in a way that mattered. Couldn’t have followed their footsteps in the dirt up through the estate, couldn’t have seen what happened in the doghouse. Most importantly of all, Looker couldn’t know the home that made James flee long ago, the spirits that haunted the house and refused to stop haunting him too, long after he left them behind.

Friends or not, there existed few people in the world who James allowed so intimately into his past. There was no way Looker could’ve been there that night, because if he was, all he would’ve seen
was three hardened criminals breaking into a lavish castle, leaving it in shambles as they went.

“Hey, Jimmy, what’sa matter?” Meowth pawed at him, this time, equally concerned.

Desperate to rid himself of the feeling of being examined, James cleared his throat, a half-hearted attempt at sounding dignified, like he’d meant to zone out. He so badly wanted to leave all his memories of those hallowed halls in the ashes where he hoped they lay.

_I was abused_, he tried to tell himself. _A cornered rattata will bite a persian._

He let the exhale go. Smoother than he imagined, better than he thought it’d feel.

_The persian is still the predator._

“Are you sure you saw…” his words came slowly, “... _everything_ we did?”

Looker crossed his arms in thought, his expression far more curious than the authoritative gaze they were so accustomed to. There was a guilt-stricken hue lining every feature James wore, and Looker combed his memory in an attempt to know which potential relapse the other man could’ve been so torn up over. He tried his luck.

“You know, James, you strike me as sort of an affluent type,” Looker pried. “Tell me, am I off base?”

James swallowed, heart racing. “In theory.”

The agent nodded, almost as though the question were rhetorical.

“Cultured, at the very least,” he tried for the compliment. “So, tell me. Have you ever tuned into _Professor Oak’s Poetry Corner_?”

James blinked, a little caught off guard. That wasn’t the turn he was expecting, but anything that got them away from having to talk about his childhood and all revisits to it was welcome.

“Once upon a time, yes,” he affirmed.

“A man of taste!” Looker beamed, continuing. “May I recite for you one of his I’ve always been fond of?”

The angle he was going for was lost on James, but then again, so was a lot of how Looker operated. A poem wasn’t going to heal his trauma, provide the magic words his heart needed to undo all the twisted guilt that he’d been brainwashed into feeling. His optimism was better than it had been in ages, but there were some things a sunny outlook couldn’t fix. Still, he tried.

“By all means,” James welcomed.

As if waiting for a cue, Looker took a momentary pause. Then, he let his eyes flutter shut, a single postured palm in the air as he recited the haiku with a smoothness that offered every word of it weight.

“_Fast, the charred rose blooms_

_Ablaze apothecary—_”

He opened his eyes on the last line, letting them rest where James sat, silent.
“I roar, arcanine.”

Tears were threatening James, now—for once, he was the last to feel them. This was an impossible sentiment, something he couldn’t possibly comprehend from someone who knew so little. Looker couldn’t have known. There was no reason for his forgiveness, for the law’s forgiveness, for the world’s forgiveness.

Uncharacteristically, James tightened his jaw, tried to stop himself from becoming choked up. He wasn’t ready to invite everyone in the room into his demons, didn’t have within him the courage yet to navigate the potential conversations, knew he’d just end up snapping at all of them and undoing all the kindness he’d shown thus far, worked so hard to give out.

“You weren’t there,” James said, and his voice shook with tears despite himself. “You can’t know what happened that night.”

For the first time since they’d met, James was looking him in the eyes. The motion seemed involuntary, and James seemed paralyzed. Looker was the one who broke the direct contact, trying to welcome him back into a realm of safety and security. The look in James’ eyes, nigh identical to…

He kept on. There was a protective instinct within him, one he shared with Jessie, with Meowth. Whoever had convinced James of these things, it was clear based entirely on the fear that gripped him—they were more than wrong.

Looker couldn’t have articulated how he knew what night James meant. His heart refused to commit to logic or instinct, a fickle pendulum who’s questions changed and shifted as the circumstances around them did, as well. Somehow, despite everything, the two men were talking about the same incident, the same night, the same tensions.

“The consequences of that night,” Looker said, sliding a hand across the table to rest atop James’ own. “They’re not yours to bear.”

“How can you be so certain?” James begged.

“I can’t,” Looker smiled, infusing tenderness into the words. “That’s the beauty of good faith, isn’t it?”

James had started crying as soon as he’d felt hands on his own. Silently, and gently, and hardly the storm he felt raging inside of him. These tears were far kinder, as if they anticipated the anxiety that would come if they chose to be anything else.

There were so many insecurities, doubts, self-loathing observations on his tongue he wanted to voice. But their cadence wouldn’t have been productive, their logic easily shut down if only he thought about them for a moment longer. Bitting his tongue, he elected not to put that burden on the friends who had been so kind to him. Even if he couldn’t believe it, he wanted to do for Looker what Looker had done for him. He steeled himself, trying to find that good faith everyone around him knew so well.

“Thank you,” James said, fingers curled as he wiped away his tears.

Satisfied, Looker nodded warmly. He looked to the three of them, then—them as one, once more—and resumed his affirmation.

“I imagine that even putting a life of crime behind you, there’s been worries in your hearts,” he told them. “The law rarely seems to care about the capacity people have for change. Not unless that change is something profitable.”
You’re way too ethical to be a cop, Jessie’s thoughts shouted again. Meowth gave her a knowing look, riding her exact vibe.

“Thankfully,” he began, and then brightened his smile, teeth like a suburban stretch of houses.

“I am the law.”

Jessie crossed her arms, wanting to believe, but anxious still. “Is that… really all you wanted to tell us?”

“Indeed,” Looker said. “I wanted to be absolutely sure before I did. But it only seemed polite to tell you all in the flesh that I’ll be personally clearing your names.”

“Am I dreamin’?” Meowth whipped his gaze back to Ash. “Hey, twoihp, dis ain’t real, right?!?”

Ash laughed, waving him off. “You three are stubborn as ever.”

The former Rockets found their center, a cold hope within them that felt far too good to be true, despite everything. For the most part, they were beginning to feel a little more confident about their standing with the universe’s flavour of judgment. Still… a day where they wouldn’t be quietly tucked away in a sleepy little hick town, jolting a little whenever a Jenny passed through… it wasn’t something they ever thought to dream of, a fantasy that seemed far more unrealistic than anything they’d envisioned so far.

Finally, they seemed to be back in sync, fighting tears all at once as gratitude bubbled up somewhere inside them. The sight of them all in rhythm like that was a calm Looker didn’t know he was looking forward to.

“It’s been a pleasure, old friends, but there’s still justice to be served and evildoers to apprehend,” he said, standing up with a concise bow in Delia’s direction. “I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality while I’ve stayed here. Oh! I should probably pay that coffee tab of mine, shouldn’t I?”

Delia was going to answer him, but an energy in the general direction of the former Rockets snatched her words as soon as they came. She turned to look at them and made a quiet attempt to read the expressions on their faces—it was almost as though they were asking for permission, for what, she had only the fallest idea. Throwing caution to the wind, she humoured them, a faithful nod back.

“Not a cent!” Jessie ordered the man, a sharp fingernail pointed mere inches from his nose.

“Your food and lodgings have been paid in full!” James continued, pointing in sync with her.

“I’ll write da check myself, if ya don’t mind!” Meowth finished with a poised claw. “How’s dis sound: paid to da tune of t’ree beautifully built bento boxes in da paws of t’ree bereaved and broke bozos!”

“Wobb~uffet!”

Looker chuckled, flattered and unsurprised all at once. Karma, he mused, had the strangest ways of making herself known.

“An absolutely awe-inspiring amount of alliteration, I’d answer,” he told them.

“Ooh, he’s good ,” Jessie purred, elbowing James suddenly. “Hey, take some notes, note-taker!”
“I’m taking, love, I’m taking!”

A heartier laugh, this time—one Looker felt as though he’d been holding in for far too long, since he’d started following them all those months ago. As a child, he’d dreamed of growing up to be the world’s greatest detective, the pride he’d feel in making safer streets, tearing down the wicked for the good of both people and pokémon alike. Fate, in all her capricious nature, had other plans. This, it seemed, was the story he wanted told far more—of the ones he was wrong to doubt, of the people he let free.

As the sun set on Pallet, Looker took his leave. Briefcase in hand, he stood over its endless expanse of hills, feeling serenity wash over him as the gales gently sung across his face and shook the citrus-hued universe around. He bid the town goodbye, venturing off the unbeaten path back toward Viridian.

Gingerly, then, he reached into his pocket, unearthing the single ball that rested there, unexpanded in his palm. It hadn’t gotten much room to stretch its legs since he’d caught it, and he whispered a silent apology to it for that. There was an apprehension in his heart about letting it out while he stayed in Pallet, one he understood in full only now. Pressing the button in the Heal Ball’s center, he spoke with utmost care.

“It seems our meeting was destined after all, my friend,” Looker told it, a bittersweet smile tugging at his mouth.

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The forest was quiet, for what it was. Though the fire hadn’t spread much further than the property itself, Looker was still expecting some panic in all the pandemonium. In fact, in that moment the quiet was far more eerie than anything—it was nearly night. Nocturnal pokémon should have been waking up, mothers should have been calling their young back into their dens, butterfree should have been trilling up toward the coming moonlight. The forest was quiet.

Looker had followed the scorched pawprints as far as they’d take him. A police line could’ve offered some intel, but if the residents of the estate were sticking to their usual profile, there definitely wasn’t going to be one when he reached the gates.

He knew an arcanine’s tracks when he saw them, though—straight out the driveway, with a bounding leap over the barrier he was standing in front of, now. Then, far into the forest, where they suddenly disappeared entirely.

Looker had reason to believe, based on their trajectory, that it was the three of them who had been there, that night. Petty theft was their MO once upon a time, and an arcanine would’ve been a reasonable step right above petty. The lack of any other footprints in the dirt easily implied they rode the fire-type out, though, and the agent sincerely doubted a non-consenting wild beast would’ve done them such a favour.

The tracks didn’t vanish into nothing— they vanished into a pokéball. This wasn’t a robbery. It was a rescue mission.

Though Looker had known his share of coincidences, it wasn’t a fairly common last name, either. Spoken in hushed whispers of dreamlike wealth, more often than not. The man mulled over its characters, engraved on various items and plaques lining the estate, the same characters sitting like a brand beneath James’ case file— Sasaki.
“Rough family,” Looker mused, trying to connect points in his head.

A sudden rustle in the trees a ways off caught his attention, and he fluidly turned himself around, drawn entirely to the first real natural sound he’d heard all night. In the dying glow of the sun, he could see darkened silhouettes moving somewhere in the trees. Too many of them, in fact. Curiously, Looker kept his footsteps silent, moving off the path he came.

Following only the sounds of nature, he plotted a course through the dense forest. He could hear the voices of pokémon—mixing, shifting, their tones unable to commit to one single harmony. The closer he got to their source, the more he couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that the forest was so quiet because every single creature that dwelled within its walls had gathered here and here alone.

His suspicions were all but confirmed as he reached it—a small clearing, where the light of the sun just barely still reached, drenching every inhabitant within in a blooming orange light. The pokémon around seemed incredibly agitated—not a single one of their voices carrying a happy tone. Looker wasn’t sure what unnerved him more—their clear distress, the fact that not one of them noticed him as he entered their territory, or the fact that the unmistakable smell of death was hanging like a cloud over the place, radiating out of the crowded mob at the end.

A heavy pang of dread hit him, dredging up memories he was desperate to keep at bay. He steadied his heart, talking the intrusive thoughts back down, trying not to picture the face forcing itself back into his traitorous mind. His job was demanding. He was going to see death. Work and mourning needed to remain separate.

Looker exhaled heavily, then cleared his throat quietly, and then a little louder when it elicited absolutely nothing. The pokémon were utterly cacophonous—they had no mind for the whims of a human. At the end of the clearing, a hoard of them crowded around something, obscuring it from view. They stayed in place, with their backs to everyone else, unable to move forward. Looker tried another angle.

“Excuse me!” he said to the pokémon, and this time, they heard. The rattata and raticate stood on their hind legs, the pidgey and spearow ceased their fluttering, the parasect quieted the snapping of their claws. All of them let their eyes fall upon Looker, expressions every colour of the rainbow. Half of them looked hopeful at the arrival of a human, the other half fearful. Looker raised his hands, a gesture he hoped they’d understand.

“I come in peace,” he assured them, softening his form. “Tell me, is something the matter?”

The pokémon stayed pensive, and a cry from the end of the clearing caused several of them to swivel back around, their eyes on Looker, on its end, back on him like pendulums. The human tilted his head forward, curious. He was certain whatever was back there was a goner, and yet...

“How is one of you hurt?” Looker asked, concerned. “Please, allow me to help.”

He watched as they considered the words, a few of them casting nervous glances toward each other. To a wild pokémon, a human’s words meant little—still, something told Looker that their hearts could hear his. Reluctantly, he watched as the group of them at the end parted, revealing in slow snapshots the source of all the commotion.

The lone pokémon at the clearing’s end faltered, squinting a little as the sunlight hit it, and Looker felt relief settle comfortably in his chest. It certainly wasn’t the twist he was expecting, but it was one he’d gladly accept. Still, he scolded himself a little for allowing his buried turmoil to override his nose. There was an incredibly subtle distinction, of course, between the scent of death and the scent of a vileplume.
If he didn’t act fast, though, he worried there wouldn’t be a difference here at all.

This vileplume in particular looked furious, its eyes bloody pinpricks from behind heavy petals. It was injured—badly—covered head to toe in fresh burns, holes missing from its massive flower. Looker had to steady himself at the sight, not allow empathy to rule his heart. He didn’t have to zero in on the look in its eyes to know the pokémon must have been in incredible pain.

It had its cannon-like pistil pointed outward in a defensive stance, swerving to meet any pokémon who came near with a threatening growl of its name. Looker understood, then—the pokémon had gathered to help it, but whatever had happened, the thing was so traumatized it wouldn’t let any of them near. Wise pokémon knew not to try a vileplume on a good day—the paralysis it was capable of inflicting upon them some of the most potent and painful known to man and pokémon alike.

And yet… every single pokémon in the clearing remained—upright, breathing, alive. They shifted toward it, and it growled its name with a sort of seething agony, an empty warning.

Looker shifted forward, his hands back up in the air. Step by lagging step, he made his way toward the injured pokémon.

It pulled its mouth back into a makeshift snarl, training its pistil on the man as he neared. He watched as it faltered, stumbling down on one knee, its petals becoming too heavy for it to keep aloft in its weakened state. Some of the pokémon on the fringes made noises of concern as they watched the foolhardy human remain steady—even with the venom dripping from the flower pokémon’s words, even when its makeshift cannon began to glow in the dying sun. Looker persisted, unafraid.

“Whatever happened, I’m here to help,” he told it, and the words only seemed to infuriate the vileplume more. It thundered out more threats, tried with all it was not to shake and crumble on its feet. The man watched its pistil flicker—white hot to nothing, battle-ready to dormant.

A few things became more apparent, the closer he got. The shine of the pokémon’s petals despite the burns, the way the splotchy patterns on them arranged themselves like glowing constellations—this vileplume couldn’t have been wild. It was purebred to the highest quality, almost alarmingly so. It looked like it belonged in a contest hall, not fighting for its life in the middle of the forest.

The second, he realized in the way the heady pollen glimmered off its petals and to the forest floor. It wasn’t too weak to attack. The pokémon could have rendered every single patron in the clearing comatose with a single move. It refused.

It was a contradictory sight—so well taken care of, but so utterly paralyzed with its own pain. The apprehension, Looker surmised, couldn’t have come from the other creatures as they murmured around the vileplume. Even if it had lived the most sheltered life imaginable, a pokémon knows to defend itself when it feels threatened.

The emotion mounted to its apex when Looker was eye to eye with the grass-type, morphing his sluggish stride into a kneel. The pokémon seemed to soften a little, its anger turning in on itself, back to what Looker knew it to be all along—cold, insurmountable fear. Calmly, he brought his hand up, off the forest floor and to the vileplume’s cinder-struck face.

All semblance of intimidation left it—he watched as the pokémon seemingly crumbled to nothing. It shook its head, terrified, and some braver pokémon who had gotten close reeled back a little as more spores flitted off it. Tears lined the grass-type’s eyes, and it took a nervous step back from Looker, its berry-coloured gaze twisted up in agony.

“I see,” he said, folding his hand back over his knee. “Are you afraid you’re going to hurt me?”
He watched as it scrunched its eyes shut, as though it had been hit. Looker willed himself not to antagonize it, tried with all he was to let his human heart lead his words, rather than his scholar’s soul. There wasn’t a kind way in his mental index to phrase the question, one he feared was too much to ask. Still, he infused all the softness he could into it, turned curiosity to concern.

“Vileplume,” he said, and it looked back up at him like a lost child.

“Where’s your trainer?”

The flower pokeémon peered into him for only a moment before faltering, its expression coming undone entirely. It fell completely to its knees under the weight of all it had known, arms balanced on the forest floor as it wept. Looker had met many a pokémon in his life, but the sight of any of them crying—especially like this—never got easier to witness.

Lost in the moment, he neared it even further, inching to close the space that remained between them. His palm found its place back on the side of the flower pokémon’s face, and he spoke softly, inquisitive, kind.

“There, there,” he told it, strong voice lending itself strangely well to the warmth. “You must feel so lost and alone.”

It jolted at the contact for only a moment before collapsing all over again, and the man turned the touch into a stroke, gentle and patient.

“I want to help you,” Looker said. “Your trainer. I can help you look for them.”

Its tears calmed themselves for a moment as he said the first part, unearthed themselves again when he uttered the second. The pokémon on the fringes whispered to each other, otherworldly gossip-mongers. Looker furrowed his brow, trying with all his power as an investigator to reason out the vileplume’s reaction. Up close, he could see it even better—the way its indigo skin bloomed beneath soot and ash, how sturdy and beautiful its petals would be, were it not for the violence they’d seen. Abused pokémon so rarely looked this loved. He pressed on.

“Do you want to see them?”

It looked away from him, heart-wrenchingly silent. Looker knew what it meant—I don’t know.

He considered the pokémon, one more time, tried to envision what it would be on its better days. Prim and proper, not a speck of pollen atop its flawlessly pruned, rare-patterned petals out of place. Shining eyes, bright blue complexion. Not only was it a pokémon well-taken care of, it was a pokémon near impossible—one you likely won’t ever see another like again. One that belonged in a lavish mansion, not wounded and starving in the sunlit wilds.

An air of luxury seemed to hang around it still, but despite everything, there was a despair in its eyes Looker surmised had been there long before its home burned along with it, long before it ran. The sun died around the lot of them, its quiet finale beaming a cursory shade of green across its crimson gaze.

The man found words bubbling up in his throat, musings he didn’t have the time or the articulation to put words to just yet. Whoever this pokémon was before, whatever things it had known and seen—right now, it was alone and afraid and defenseless, paralyzed by the weight of its own power. He took his hand from its face and reached into his pocket.

Looker held the Heal Ball up to the flower pokémon’s line of sight, center poised toward the stars as they began to wake up. There was a wordless language in the way humans presented pokéballs to
pokémon—nuance to how you pointed them, the position you took before throwing. On its side, gripped loosely in Looker’s hand, the ball silently asked consent with the promise that refusal was to be respected.

“I don’t know what you’ve seen, Vileplume,” he said. “But I think you deserve to see a lot more.”

He watched as the pokémon marveled softly at the ball, its gaze unable to decide whether or not it wanted to stay on it or him. Tears welled back up in its beady eyes, its mouth wobbling in quiet pain.

“Vile,” it protested. “Vileplume!”

Looker eased, a little, unprepared for the pokémon’s tone. Its words were unclear to him, but there was a questioning sort of misery in every syllable of them.

“Are you asking me why?” Looker inquired, and it nodded, anguished. “Well, why not?”

“Vileplume!” it kept on. “Plume! Vile~plume!”

It had worked itself back up, practically reeling as it spoke, as though its own words were lashings at its back. It was only then, in the confusion lining the pokémon’s face, that Looker was truly able to latch onto the single emotion ruling every inch of it—what caused it to run, what caused it to put up walls, what wouldn’t let it attack, what made it content to go against its survivalist nature, to die alone and forgotten in the forest. Not mourning, not anger, not pride, not fear—guilt. Utter, complete, unadulterated guilt.

Looker’s heart struggled not to break, staring long and deep into its eyes. This pokémon was used. This pokémon was someone’s weapon.

He steadied himself, finding a calm center, searching deep down for the words he hoped it needed. There was no way he could understand, even in all he’d known, what the grass-type must have been feeling in that moment. He tried anyways.

“It must feel like you’ve woken up from a bad dream,” he said, lowering the ball to the forest floor as he did so. Looker didn’t want this to feel like a case he had to make to convince this creature to be controlled by one more human. More than anything, he didn’t want its final moments to feel so brutal, so powerless.

The sentiment of what he said sunk in a little, and he watched its tears become less raucous, settle back into quiet sobs.

“But, little one, I have seen quite my share of the wicked,” he continued. “Both human and pokémon alike. Do you know what they’ve taught me?”

It was quiet, now, the leavings of tears still trickling down its face, watering the sleeping earth below.

“It’s never too late to start again,” a warm smile. “So, why don’t you come along with me?”

To punctuate it, he raised the Heal Ball back up toward it, giving it the final say.

Vileplume willed itself not to dissolve once more—it was so, so exhausted. There was too much in its head to begin to feel, too much in its heart for its tiny body to be able to process. Its master was gone, and with her seemed to die the disconnected way of living the pokémon had used to keep itself safe from its own conscience for so, so long. Its master was kind, it was sure of it, it was sure. It was her lousy mate who was wicked, leaving her abandoned with a ring on her finger and a pit in her shattered heart. She was kind, her sugar-sweet drawl and her confident stride. She was kind. She
Growlie talked to the bellsprout in the garden, the pidgey in the trees. Growlie talked to the rattata that rooted through the garbage, the fearow that dive bombed the berries growing around its doghouse. Growlie talked to the magikarp living in the pond, talked to the beedrill that its cowardly caterpie of a master hid from. Even the beedrill, Growlie barked hellos to. Growlie did not talk to Vileplume.

The flower pokémon tried to push the night from its memory—how strong the fire-type and its master looked in the darkness of the doghouse, far grander than they’d ever been inside its walls. Did the outside world turn him into that? Or was that who he’d been all along?

Easier to be good, to transform when you know you’re rotten. Vileplume didn’t know how to cope with only now finding out—all it had been, all it had done.

It peered into Looker, the moonlight haloing him. Death seemed so much more preferable to the weight of everything, up until that moment. The pokémon’s vision blurred, and it willed away the phantom sound of flames crackling at its backside. The forest was so beautiful, the trainers and pokémon passing through it so free to be who they wanted.

“You just wanted to protect your trainer, didn’t you, Vileplume?” Looker said, understanding heavying his heart. The pokémon’s tears were silent this time, completely awestruck at how easily this stranger had read its own.

Of course, it wanted so badly to say. Of course, but at what cost?

Looker held the ball up once more, trying not to beg.

“I think it’s time someone protected you.”

“The past is in the past, all its chains included,” Looker said as he left Pallet, footsteps crunching on the dirt path below.

“This time, you set him free.”

Jessie stood in the far corner of the store, a futile attempt to find a quiet moment in all the bustle that was shopping in Celadon. It amazed her how even the least populated floor could have so much traffic on such a sleepy weekday, prodded at her impulse control even further. The allure of it all, the sight of patrons skittering here and there with massive bags of clothes hanging from their arms like scrumptious fruit on attractive vines—it almost made her forget entirely what she’d come here for.

She traced over the object in her hands, its rugged finish infusing her with a strange sort of warmth. The department store was closed off entirely from the rest of the universe, its fluorescent glamour lighting its own sort of indoor sun. Holding the craggy thing, though, Jessie swore she could feel it like the sweetest song—summer’s coming embrace, fluttering down comfortably on her back.

It felt a lot like the fire stone. Less… passionate, perhaps. Far more like a nap under blue skies than a drunken bonfire with one’s closest friends.

She’d stalled on this floor, where there wasn’t a lot to test her—the floor she had the least use for, and thus, the lowest risk of clearing out her entire bank account. Like a parent setting boundaries for
a child, only she wore the burden of both parties.

Sighing, Jessie swiveled on her feet to leave, willing herself to not be the easily distracted creature that she was—to take the elevator up to the next floor, to buy the gifts she was planning on gifting, and to maybe, maybe allow herself a single sequined dress, a single bejeweled accessory. A woman of many talents, where her ability to behave like an adult faltered, her phenomenal grasp of mind over matter could still prevail.

James let out a soft yelp as she collided with him mid-turn, practically dropping his bag as he did so. It was mirrored by an equally undignified sort of half-shout from Jessie, who more or less fell backward at the impact. She nervously shoved her recent purchase into a bag of her own, praying to every god she didn’t believe in that James hadn’t seen it. For a moment, neither of them spoke as they stared the other down.

“Why are you here?!” she shouted, above the murmur of the crowd.

“Can a man not shop when he so desires?!” James retorted.

Jessie gave him a quick up and down, a narrowed gaze as she took in the pink lip shade he was wearing, how short his skirt was despite the breeze in the air.

“That depends,” she grinned, crossing her arms. “Are you a man?”

He huffed indignantly, mirroring the gesture. “Only in the unfortunate circumstance where my options are limited.”

Jessie laughed, genuinely, with that sharp sort of lilt that made his heart float inside his chest every time he heard it. The stone slept in her bag, unnoticed by her partner. A silent sigh of relief hit her, one she did not exhale.

“No, but seriously,” Jessie kept on. “You weren’t going to tell me you were spending the afternoon in Celadon?”

“It didn’t seem particularly pertinent.”

“Did you take the balloon?”

“Heavens, no. I’d prefer to get here before the date of my own death.”

Jessie frowned. “I didn’t see you on the train. We could’ve rode together.”

“As if I’d pay!” he waved her off. “I took Growlie.”

“Oh,” she said, looking a little down. James peered into her, trying to identify what it was he’d said. He wasn’t given long enough before the emotion flickered out, replaced by the fire she wore far better.

“Hm,” she pressed a hand to her chin. “James, why are you on this floor?”

She watched as he jolted a little, nervously mussing up his hair.

“I—just passing through, Jess!” he sputtered, trying to regain his charm. “Or perhaps… because my heart felt a certain pull toward the brightest jewel in all of Kanto?”

There was colour on his cheeks as he said the words, a nervousness that was far too endearing for someone who had spent two thirds of his life beside her. She drew herself closer to him, tangling her
index finger down his collar and pulling him toward her as though he were feather-light.

“You,” Jessie accused. “Are flirting with me.”

“I… is that okay?”

They were standing almost nose-to-nose, a quiet cloud of PDA in the corner of the store. Jessie willed her heart not to melt at the question—they’d been flirting since they were children, and now that they were romantic partners he had the audacity to ask—

“One condition!” she said, breaking the embrace to swivel back around, her hair practically smacking him in the face. She let the silence hang for a moment, suspenseful and heavy. Then, once more, she turned to face him, fluttering her sparkling blues upward as she knit their fingers together.

“This is now a date!” Jessie declared, grinning deviously up at him.

James blinked a little, wondering why she was stating it as though it were a punishment rather than how he wanted to spend every waking moment for the rest of his life.

“Perish the thought,” he played along, wrapping his free hand around the small of her back.

“Tell me, James,” she inquired. “What are your thoughts on the prospect of eating dessert for lunch?”

“I may or may not have scoped out a café downtown,” he answered far too immediately. “The Skrelp reviews are swearing by their crème brûlée.”

“Date me harder,” Jessie purred.

“I’m trying .”

The pair had absconded from the city itself long before the afternoon traffic started and the streets grew busy and impossible to navigate. On its outskirts, now, they aimlessly waded through nostalgic small-talk, procrastinating wholly on returning home, having to acknowledge anyone besides each other.

“That barista acted like I was an absolute loon,” James pouted, sipping at his drink.

“Have you tried toning down your dazzling eccentricities, James dear?”

“Eccentric my foot! It’s a Galar Fog! I refuse to believe the common-folk don’t know its kind embrace!”

“Yes, but you asked for it iced,” Jessie pointed out.

“Is that such a crime?” he said. “This heat calls for nothing less!”

Mid-way into his rant, Jessie had stopped walking, and he noticed only a moment too late. She was staring up at… something in the forest, but for the life of him James couldn’t seem to figure out what. The scenery was as one would expect it on a spring afternoon outside Celadon—rattata in the bushes, spearow in the trees. A breathing forest, with nothing particularly out of the ordinary. Jessie stared at the treetops only for a moment, then broke back into her stride with a laugh far more muted than her usual singsong.

“What?” James asked.
“Oh, I just remembered,” she pointed. “That’s the tree they tied us up in after we tried to snatch that gloom.”

Her partner blinked a little, unused to her memory being so crisp. Now James was transfixed, staring at the space where they’d been hanging all those years ago before the twerp had come to their reluctant rescue. He followed his thoughts, moving his line of sight back to the city below. Sure enough, the gym was where it stood before, except. Except.

The buds and curled leaves that served as its ceiling—made in the image of Erika’s partner pokémon, of course—had long since been resurrected. A pang of guilt hit James when he remembered it—that it was them who had nearly burned the building to the ground. Something else overtook him entirely when he noticed they were unfurled scarlet petals, now, festooned in splotches of white as their shade offered respite from the scalding sun above. He stood frozen to the ground, and where normally the likeness of the pokémon rendered him uneasy, there was a blooming in his heart that left him oddly inspired.

“James?” Jessie’s voice shook him from the trance, as it so often did. She followed his eyes, curious as to what had him lost in his thoughts this time. Long before he could wave the spacey look in his gaze off, she spotted the gym and understood.

She balled her fist—softly, for such an aggressive gesture. James noticed, anxiously awaiting any explanation as to what the sudden burst of passion meant. With Jessie, it was usually always something beautiful. He wished it was easier to convince his racing heart of that.

Jessie turned to face him, her ocean eyes uncharacteristically maternal, features soft in the light of the sun filtering down through the trees.

“Sit with me?” she said.

Wordlessly, James nodded, lips pulled apart in curiosity.

She adjusted her sundress with a grace he half-mirrored, the two of them silently finding their famous sync once more. The fog that hung around James as he sat beside her wasn’t the one he was used to, and it perplexed him in a way he wasn’t sure was welcome. Where normally he felt pulled out of his body—robotic, quietly observing—this time, he seemed to swim through honey, a bug in brandy. Sweet scent where he was so used to stun spore.

Jessie always took the initiative, something he was sure the universe had known, planting her beside his passive heart. Naturally, she spoke before him.

“I was shopping for gifts, today,” she said, oddly unashamed. “You know, for… for the twerp and his surprisingly non-twerpish mother.”

Pink tinged her cheeks at the mention of Delia. James wondered if it was because Jessie’s affection was something she struggled to articulate, or if there was something more, there. He wasn’t sure which thought was cuter, and her blush seemed to migrate to his face, as well.

“Anyways, I wound up on the fourth floor because it seemed the least tempting to my sensibilities,” Jessie continued. “And… well, like most things, I was technically correct.”

She’d placed her bag on her lap, now, readying it for whatever she was going to say next. There was a sort of apprehension in her eyes James wasn’t used to, as though she were scared of how he might react to whatever she wanted to say. He leaned into her, a wordless gesture of comfort and assurance. Her breathing settled, and she pressed on.
“There wasn’t much there that spoke to my heart on its own,” she told him. “But there... was something I wanted to get for you.”

Mid-sentence, she’d reached into her purse, cupping something small in her hands, holding it close to herself as she spoke. She met James’ gaze at the angle she knew he was most comfortable at—not dead on, eyes off his own, staring just a little past. As gently as she could muster, she unfurled her fingers, moving her eyes down to the precious thing.

James’ heart hammered in his ears as he took in the sight of the sun stone—its orange finish positively radiant, speckled with solar pinpricks of light, as though it did hold a piece of the cosmos within its core. It was warm as he touched it, a warmth far more serene than the one he’d known before Growlie had transformed beneath his fingertips. Atypically nervous in the silence of the gesture, Jessie jumped to explain herself.

“I figure, you know, if you ever want to evolve that gloom of yours, well, you probably wouldn’t favour a—” she sucked in a breath, fire returning to her tongue. “It was an impulse buy, okay?! Honestly, you with your stone evolutions, how on earth do you keep getting saddled with—”

She stuttered to a sudden stop at the sight. James was curled in on himself, a desperate attempt not to double over, a hand firmly over his mouth.

“Are you gonna puke?” Jessie raised an eyebrow. “Not on my dress.”

The statement just made him lose himself more, and it wasn’t until he took his palm away from his face that she heard it—he was laughing. Desperately trying to remain polite, practically wheezing through clenched teeth.

“James!”

“I’m sorry!” he cried. “I’m sorry! It’s such a lovely sentiment! I love you, Jess! I’m sorry!”

She tried to bank her anger with eyes wide and cheeks flaming, a gesture that remained futile despite the sweet words. He could see how unsure she was about the gift, and yes, he was trying to control himself, but—

“For the love of god, James,” she said. “What is so funny that it can’t wait?!”

Wiping a tear from his eye, he wrangled himself back to the sentimental moment his partner was trying to share with him. A shaky exhale left him, and he dug through his own bag, presenting the source of his amusement to her in a gesture far less grand, far less poetic.

“Look.”

Jessie tried not to go completely agape at the sight of it, but if there was a way to make the situation any less ridiculous, she wasn’t sure it was a timeline she was privy to. Of course. Him being on the fourth floor of the department store wasn’t just some serendipitous coincidence—knowing him, he probably traveled to the city for this purpose and this purpose alone. Kept it from everyone so he could casually reveal it later—oh, no, friends, nothing to see here! Just quietly courageous James and his unexplained leaf stone.

“Are you joking?!” she asked, genuinely, and James could only offer a bittersweet sort of grin.

“There are some who would describe me as quite the joker.”

“Well if you’ve already made up your mind,” Jessie said. “I am keeping my sun stone!”
She jerked her arm back from him, a gesture she meant to be playfully aggressive before she remembered she excelled more in the aggressive than the playful. He seemed far more composed than even she was, and it was a feeling Jessie wasn’t sure she knew how to cope with. If James wasn’t an anxious wreck, it usually meant things were so bad he’d drifted off into some distant galaxy where harm wasn’t a factor.

Jessie softened herself, placed the stone on the minuscule space in between them, her palm leaving it and finding a comfortable spot on his shoulder. The tone of the conversation took a turn, it’s jest leaving the room for a moment as she attempted to reach her partner where he was.

“Hey,” she said, gingerly. “Is… is that really what you want?”

James melted alongside her, his heartbeat evening at her touch.

“Jessie, it’s not just about what I want,” he said. “Gloom’s feelings matter too.”

“Of course I know that,” she said, a little more sharply than she wanted to. “But you should know better than anyone, James—pokémon respond to our feelings.”

“I know,” James regarded the stone in his hands. “To be honest, I don’t know what it is I want. I want to hope more than anything that Gloom knows my heart better than I.”

“It doesn’t have to evolve,” Jessie reminded him.

“It doesn’t,” he mirrored. “But I… I still want it to know it’s permitted. I don’t ever want it to feel shackled because of me.”

He swallowed the darkness that had seeped into his voice. Golden spores ghosted the bare skin of his arms, embers singed them away as he breathed deep.

“Those first few weeks, it must have been so lonely and lost wondering why I couldn’t bear to look at it,” James said. “I never want it to feel so stifled in my presence again.”

Sick of the tremble in his voice, Jessie trailed a palm up to his cheek, cupping it softly in her steady hold and wordlessly kissing him. He’d known it was coming in the way her eyes grew light and longing, tapered off his sentence to allow it to happen. Her touch felt so immovable, and in her arms it was as though nothing could ever fathom knocking the two of them down. Jessie did everything with such reckless abandon, her fears inspiring her to be greater instead of holding her back. James pressed his lips hard into hers, wishing on their shared star to borrow even a fraction of the strength she lead her life with.

There was a whimper on his tongue when she pulled away, that of a child who’d just woken up from his dream in a candy store. He held it back, willing himself not to ruin the moment they were sharing a second time. Jessie fluttered her searing eyes back up at him, her voice gentle in a way he knew only from time to time—the way it sounded beneath flickering stars, secrets whispered away from prying ears.

“It’s not your fault,” she said, sounding almost heartbroken. “Please tell me you know that. All the things that keep you up at night… please tell me you don’t blame yourself for what they did to you.”

There was a painful lump in his throat. It killed him to hurt her with what he couldn’t help.

“I know. Logically, of course,” he assured her. “But my brain and my heart work opposite, most days. Surely you understand?”
Jessie fought with all she had to not look utterly crushed. “Unfortunately.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke a word, a quiet understanding passing between them. Jessie palmed the sun stone once more, staring at its finish in her hands. It looked so bright in comparison to the earhtones of the stone James was holding beside her, a golden sun up against a silver moon. She motioned it toward him once more, and he blinked a little before following her lead and taking it from her hand.

A stone in each, now, he tried not to become lost in the possibilities of it all. One option was so easy—a life in the sunshine, a flower-dappled path, a respite from the hardship him and his pokémon had known as they tried to bond despite the wall between them. The other far more tumultuous—a moonlit walk through the open fields, where every rustle of the wind through the grass could mean danger, where the light of the cosmic cauldron swirling above was all they had to guide them.

Still, the stars were beautiful, hanging above. Without the blackness of the night around them, they remained hidden, impossible to see.

“Hey,” Jessie said again, and James swiveled to face her, stones still poised in front of him. With her determined brand of grace, she placed her palms beneath his knuckles, folding his fingers to a gentle, protective curl over the objects.

“This problem will have its place in time,” she told him, suddenly bright. Her smile was hard not to mirror.

“And whenever it does, however it does, you know I’ll be right beside you.”

The sentiment was so simple—not anything revolutionary, not anything particularly personal. It didn’t need to be, though—it was the same one that kept them going forever, unbroken in its meaning. Not a word of it needed any tailoring, its kindness always there.

The sun began to dip in the sky, and James held the stones to his heart, two paths carefully considered, dear to his weary soul. His demons had so little place in a world where his pokémon was happy. He wished reality could be as kind to him as the hypotheticals he dwelled in, unspoken words on his tongue.

“Thank you, Jessie,” he sighed contentedly, leaning into her shoulder, a second home after so many years. “I love you.”

She snaked an arm around him, dissolving into the embrace. In the low light of the world around them, surrounded in the dizzying scent of perfume that wafted from the earthy city, they looked like one single entity, breathing in harmony.

“I love you, too.”

Meowth gave his guitar a noncommittal strum, far more with the intent to bring words to his tongue than anything. Incineroar shifted beside him, and he couldn’t help but take in for the first time precisely how small he felt beside it. There was never a day he could recall where he looked upon the fellow feline without pride swelling in his heart like a church choir—but now, it was so palpable, the change the younger pokémon had made. Meowth could recall easily how small it was when they’d met, a loner wandering beaches and boardwalks. Now it nothing short of towered, fur blending into the darkness, rendering it a glowing silhouette in the moonlight.

“Dere’s somet’ in’ t’ be said for folks like us, I t’ink.” Meowth continued his thought after the silence, turning back to the stars with a smile. “Maybe… maybe we was left t’ wander like dat for so long
so’s we could appreciate da families we got twice as much.”

“Tch. Wandering.” Incineroar nearly huffed, and Meowth backpedaled.

“I mean before you was wit’cha old man,” he said. “Didn’t ya ever get lonely? Didn’t ya ever feel like… I dunno, like you was longin’ for a home you wasn’t sure existed?”

The fire-type was quiet for a moment, considering the smaller cat’s question. It made a point to not think of the days before it met Stoutland, before it met Ash. There was only so much pain a pokémon could handle, even the strongest had their limits. It loosed a breath it didn’t know it was holding, heavy and pensive.

“This region’s different,” Incineroar growled.

“Huh? From what?”

“From Alola,” it said. “In Alola, you share. There’s no greed, no fighting to stay alive. You spin these stories of chasing the streets with stolen food in your teeth. I never stole a day in my life. Alola provided.”

“Dat’s funny, ‘cause I seem to recall hearin’ dat you stole da twoihp’s sandwich an’ made him ditch school,” Meowth grinned.

“That,” it said. “Was revenge for stepping on my tail.”

“Ha! You’s a riot, Litty.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“S’what my boss calls ya.”

“She is an angel with magic hands,” Incineroar defended. “She can call me whatever she wants.”

“Fair’s fair,” the normal-type relented. “So ya really never felt like you was soihchin’ for dat security? Sure, ya had food, but…”

A few clouds drifted over the moon, the momentary darkness they caused oddly contagious to Incineroar’s stormy heart. It and Meowth had always had a lot in common, and the bigger pokémon couldn’t have told anyone why that thought made it close itself off even more. Before, it was convinced it was because Meowth was some kind of twisted alternate path to what it could’ve ended up being in a lonelier life. Now, though, he was nothing but a kind soul—a little mischievous, but no more annoying than any of Ash’s pokémon.

“What was hard wasn’t finding a home,” it finally said, heart in a vice, and Meowth shifted onto his paw at the dark in Incineroar’s voice.

“It was believing there could ever be another after I lost the one I had.”

The larger pokémon closed its shining eyes, and the sound of rain echoed in the back of its mind, desperate to snuff out its flame in the downpour. It faltered and flickered, burning all the same.

Meowth brought his gaze from the fire-type back to the stars, trying not to succumb to the hiccup in his heart. Claw-marked book pages, aching legs, sputtered half-meows that rattled in his throat, incomplete. Whiskers adorned with cerulean ribbons, their satin shining in the sun as it filtered through glass that felt like a prison. Warm, cream-coloured bodies, pressed together in a tight
embrace, a chorus of purrs soothing him to sleep.

Pawpads ached on the scalding concrete sidewalks, and he bid the city farewell.

“Yeah,” he uttered, finally, and Incineroar seemed surprised by how little he’d said. “I understand.”

And the two of them said no more for a long while, sharing the olive branch in silent solidarity.

Gloom had been sitting on the hill directly below them, its torpid eyes unmoving from the stars as they twinkled without rhythm, utterly silent while the cats talked. Meowth had long since grown used to its nocturnal tendencies, but it was exhibiting a vitality to stay awake into the night that was starting to outlast even him. Perfectly on cue, the normal-type lost himself in a noisy yawn.

“I’m beat,” he announced, guitar at his side as he rose, and Incineroar followed his lead with sleepy stretch halfway between human and feline.

“Ya comin’ t’ bed, kiddo?”

Gloom half-turned to face him, willing its apathy not to come across as rude. The moonlight was too intoxicating on its leaves, the song of the bug-types in the bushes too dreamy. It wasn’t ready to bid the night farewell just yet.

“Is it okay if I stay?” it asked.

“Yous old enough t’ do whatcha want widdout askin’ me-owth about it,” the cat told it. “Just don’t stay out too long, capiche? Y’know how Jimmy boy gets.”

“Mhm!” it said, turning back around, relieved. “Goodnight, Meowth.”

“Night, lil buddy.”

When the sound of paws on grass petered out into the stillness of Pallet’s night, Gloom let itself release a shaky breath, whispered anxieties to the stars above. One more cursory glance backward to make sure the other two were gone, and it leaned back on the arms it was still getting used to, centered itself with the feeling of its roots on the steady earth below.

The scene replayed in its mind over and over—James with the stones in his hands, speaking words that made Gloom’s mind spin in a way it wasn’t sure it could halt. The word evolution lingered most of all, a word the weed pokémon had been prying apart syllable-by-syllable ever since it’d first heard it spoken.

With how little of the world it had known, evolution was a foreign concept. He’d heard Chimecho speak of it in bits and pieces, gossiping with Growlie about how different Cacnea—oh, Cacturne!—looked, Growlie rolling its eyes with a low bark, you weren’t this stuck on seeing me an arcanine.

Even having experienced it, Gloom found the situation hard to grasp. All things considered, it shouldn’t have been that difficult. Oddish wanted… to be stronger, to transcend all it was, to protect its master, to make him proud. That’s exactly what happened, too—the desire was so overpowering, the tiny thing had no choice but to become bigger, stronger, sturdier. The sensation was absolutely euphoric, something Gloom couldn’t fathom itself articulating even if it tried. In that single moment, one which lasted only in the blink of an eye, the pokémon felt as though it contained within it the force of every star in every galaxy spanning forever.

James had sat beside it, his green eyes resolute as he held the stones like precious treasures in his hands—
“Most pokémon, they evolve when they’re ready, if they’re ready, into whatever the universe decides they are to be,” he’d said. “You, though. You’re phenomenally unique, Gloom. You get a choice in the matter.”

The grass-type wracked its brain, wishing it knew what any of that meant. It was just like any other pokémon. What did he mean it got to choose? Did it choose to be a gloom? Were there other gloom out there, even?

It was so lost in its tumultuous thoughts, it hadn’t even noticed that it had company once more. How many hours it had lost to the hurricane swirling within its heart, it had no idea. It wasn’t until it heard Growlie’s low rasp of a bark that it snapped back to Pallet’s hills, an ungraceful sort of whirl around. For a moment, the weed pokémon feared it was in trouble, and its senior had come to reprimand it.

“Late night, eh?” the dog said, a canid grin tugging at its snout.

Gloom was quiet, a relieved sort of reality check settling over its sleepy features. It rubbed the line of nectar that had pooled at its mouth away, trying to compose itself. Growlie knelt in the grass beside it, two smaller pokémon jumping from its back.

Mareanie and Inkay had been so buried entirely in the fire-type’s fur that Gloom couldn’t even see them in the darkness of the night. Not until they leapt to the floor beside their ride. Mareanie bobbed over beside the weed pokémon before settling herself into a self-made sort of tent, and Inkay gave Growlie a gracious bow, his eyes shut in reverence.

“Merci, mon chauffeur,” he said, and Growlie shot him a narrow-eyed look, pushing him out of the air with a paw.

“Stop pretending you have manners, Inkay.”

The psychic-type made an undignified sort of trill far more akin to his usual ways as he toppled, and Mareanie stifled a snort of dark laughter into her tentacle. Twisting in mid-air, he regained himself almost immediately, and lowered his hover to a sit beside the group.

“Excuse the dreadful duo,” Growlie told Gloom. “They insisted on coming with.”

“I don’t mind,” said the grass-type. “More the merrier.”

“See? I like this one,” Inkay pointed to the younger pokémon, grinning through his beak.

“Gloom and I like to talk beneath the stars,” Growlie said, sounding authoritative. “About genuine sentimentalities, usually.”

“Oui, oui, c’est la vie, and all that,” he said, apathetically waving a tentacle.

“Kalosian sounds especially dirty on your tongue,” Growlie sighed.

“We can be sentimental!” Mareanie chimed in. “I’m a multi-dimensional pokémon! I’m full of all kinds of love!”

“You’re full of poison.”

“Love arrives in many forms.”

Growlie was about to turn to Gloom with a desperate look on its face, begging it to say something to turn the tides of this conversation. It wasn’t sure what it felt when it saw the pokémon stifling giggles.
into its hands—relief, or betrayal.

Disregarding both, the dog heaved another sigh, snuggling close to the grass-type. Its laughter
dropped out softly, and for once, the miniature eldritch squad at their flank was quiet. Gloom kept its
eyes on the stars, lost in thought.

“What’s on your mind, little one?” Growlie asked.

“Being not so little anymore, mostly,” Gloom said.

The words took a moment to sink in, the snark of the other two proving to be a little too catching to
the young pokémon. Growlie tilted its head a little, wondering how much it was allowed to pry.

“Right. How’s the new body treating you?”

“I don’t know how to answer,” it told the dog. “I feel like the same old me.”

“Really,” Growlie said. “You don’t feel stronger? Maybe a little awkward on your feet?”

“Well, I guess so, yeah. I don’t know. I don’t really understand… this.”

“And what is ‘this’?”

Gloom looked at its hands, ones it didn’t have a month ago. It felt the heaviness on its head, so
different from the ease of the leaves it was used to. Though its legs had grown stronger to support all
the additions, there was still a disoriented haze it couldn’t shake.

“No one ever really told me,” it said. “What this whole evolution thing even is.”

Growlie meditated on the sentiment, watching as Mareanie and Inkay shared a quiet, pensive look.
Though it hadn’t been there to witness it, the information had been relayed to it in bits and pieces as
time went on—Gloom was hatched in James’ arms, and since then, life beside him and his team was
all the little one had known. Pokémon weren’t born understanding that they had the capability to
grow and change, and no one had bothered to tell Gloom until Oddish was but a memory.

“This world is vast and beautiful,” Growlie said, a little suddenly, and Gloom peered into it, always
entranced with the wisdom it seemed to carry. “It holds within it a plethora of wonderful creatures,
all of us capable of reaching new heights in our own ways.”

“Yeah, but what’s that really mean, Growlie?”

“Oftentimes, we evolve in mind only. We cry a little less, defend ourselves a little more,” the dog
explained. “Sometimes, though, people and pokémon alike are given the opportunity to change
almost entirely. In mind, in body, in spirit. That’s evolution.”

Gloom leaned forward, curling in on itself to a degree. It didn’t feel any less lost, and its senior knew
this, pressed on. A question this time.

“What were you feeling when you evolved?”

The pokémon didn’t have to think much about it. “I guess… inspiration. Master is so strong. When I
met him, it was like he couldn’t even look at me. But all on his own, he rose above it, and now he…
he loves me the way I always wanted him to love me. He takes me out into the gardens every day.
Talks to me about how the flowers grow, about how even the weeds he pulls are important. Even
when he’s not having a good day, he takes me to the gardens.”
Wind shook the hilly expanse around them, and it was a dizzying sort of song, the windchimes on porches in the distance, lights blinking off in houses. Mareanie let out a lovesick sort of sigh, and Gloom pulled itself back to the matter at hand, trying not to lose itself in the adoration that dripped from its mouth like nectar.

“What have I done for him, Growlie?” Gloom asked rhetorically. “He called out that Stun Spore, and something about the way he said it told me that it was time for me to glow brighter, too. So I focused everything I had on the feeling of it, and before I could catch my breath, this is what I was.”

Growlie shifted a little where it was, a rumble in its chest it was fighting to keep at bay. “He commanded a Stun Spore?”

The grass-type nodded, a little apprehensive that it had said something inappropriate. It watched as the expression on Growlie’s face shifted—from fear, to disbelief, to complete and utter pride. Gloom dreamed of a day when it knew half the things about its master that the fire-type did, but at the very least, it seemed to reaffirm what the weed pokémon suspected all along. That had been a moment. Its instincts were right.

“Master and I talked, after I evolved,” Gloom said to the silence. “He seemed to be saying… it could happen again.”

“It…” Growlie’s eyes went slightly vacant, an uncharacteristic tremble at its paws. “It can.”

“But he said this time, I had a choice,” it continued. “And he showed me these rocks. Told me that whenever I was ‘ready’… whatever that means… he’d be right beside me.”

Growlie steeled itself. This was no time for its protective instincts to be ruling it, as much as that was all the pokémon had really known. It had to trust its master. Pawing at the ground beside Gloom, it asked.

“Did you feel a pull toward either of the stones?”

The weed pokémon shook its head. “They just looked like rocks to me. I just cuddled up to Master. He’s the only thing I felt drawn to.”

The dog considered the words for a moment, contemplative, quiet. It was a dampened prod at its side that made it stop, sheepish and silent. Mareanie looked unbelievably small at Growlie’s flank, staring up at the dog with oceanic blues that asked permission. Most nights, its better instincts would have told it to shake a firm no at her. Tonight, it let her try.

“A boy broke my heart, a long time ago,” she said, a little suddenly. “His smile made me forget my name, and the purple of his crown was a shade I still see in my dreams, sometimes.”

The brutal star’s voice wavered, but the lilt she spoke with was one neither Gloom nor Growlie had heard on her tongue before.

“And when I met Master, I saw him, too,” Mareanie smiled, bittersweet. “So cute with that purple pallor across his skin, those soft lavender locks in utter disarray… I never knew a human could look
so scrumptious.”

“Down, girl,” Growlie sighed. “Dangerously close to losing your speaking privileges.”

“You familiar with type advantages, Growls?”

“Finish the story, Mareanie.”

She grinned a sharp-fanged grin, carrying on with an innocent flutter of her lashes.

“Anyways, Master looked just like the boy who broke my heart,” Mareanie said. “But he was different. He was kind, and he loved me, in a way no one had ever loved me before.”

She turned to face Gloom, an almost playful glint in her eye. The poison-types held the shared gaze for a moment, a solitude in their silence. Mareanie seemed to be searching the other pokémon for something, and it wasn’t until she voiced it that Gloom started to connect points in its head.

“I dunno, Gloom,” she said, suddenly far less articulate. “Are you getting where I’m going?”

Two blue bodies swirled in the back of the weed pokémon’s head, their tails in gentle rhythm as light filtered down from the aquarium. The stones were split pathways, it realized. Their results could never co-exist.

“Did he…” Gloom began. “Did he tell you? About… whatever happened to him, long ago?”

Mareanie looked to the terrain below, drawing circles in the dirt with a spiked arm. She picked her words, traveling back to the sunset walk she and her beloved had on the beach where they’d only hours before nearly parted ways.

“He told me he was sorry for almost breaking my heart in the same way,” she said. “And he told me... that he understood more than I could ever know. I didn’t know what that meant, so I asked him.”

Gloom was entranced, now—obsessed with learning its place in James’ life. Where Growlie spoke in packaged riddles, Mareanie seemed far blunter, despite her romantic tongue. She kept on.

“Master said a long time ago, a girl and her pokémon broke him apart, too,” Mareanie continued. “And that he found a second chance with that girl he’s always with.”

The younger pokémon leaned in, a little lost. “Second chance?”

Mareanie nodded. “He told me the two of them could pass for twins. And so he understood how I felt. He said that one time, she tried to tell him to go home to his first the same way he did to me. And he said... that he couldn’t forgive himself for making me feel what he felt, back then. Master and I... we had more in common than I ever thought we could.”

Growlie kept its eyes on the town as it slept below, surprised at how much the water-type knew. Their master wasn’t the type to speak of those times often. It wondered, for a moment, how much James and Mareanie had seen in their time together.

“Mareanie?”

She brought her perpetually shy gaze back up to Gloom’s, the gesture a wordless acknowledgment.

“Did he ever talk about the pokémon?” Gloom asked. “The one the girl from his past was always with?”
Mareanie shook her head. “Never. Something tells me he didn’t get a second chance on that one.”

The words felt like kismet as they drifted in the night air. Gloom let out a shaky exhale, perfume-y and soft.

“Yet.”

Where Growlie stole another soft and contemplative look at its paws, the smaller two wordlessly let their thoughts mingle. All different players in this single human’s life, they sat beneath the dying stars and tried to stitch a map together with the bits and pieces of scrap paper they’d been given. Connecting points in its head, Gloom filled the silence.

“So I can decide what I become,” it said. “And one of those decisions... it’ll make me look even more like the pokémon that hurt him.”

Growlie tried to keep its voice even, unbiased. “Yes.”

“And the other will make me into something completely different.”

“Yes.”

“Kay, ‘cept,” Inkay interrupted. “There’s a third option, too. I mean, who needs evolution? You can stay the way you are. Nothing wrong with that.”

The grass-type considered his words. Mareanie and Growlie punctuated it with a pair of equally sage nods, and though it was a truth Gloom didn’t personally know on its own, it trusted the judgment of the two. Still…

“I do like the way I am just fine,” Gloom said. “But... if I close my eyes and picture the future beside Master...”

Gales sung around them once more, shaking cherry blossoms from the trees that framed the hills. They drifted to the skies, starlight all their own.

“I’m a lot bigger,” it continued. “Brighter. Stronger. I can’t describe what I see. Just that... it’s not this.”

From its side, Growlie raised its nose back to the cosmic painting above. More than anything so far, it understood. Like an itch under its paws, the feeling of being too large for your own existence. A wildfire trapped atop a candle, doomed for too long to watch the wax drip down.

“But I... I don’t know what the right choice is,” Gloom said.

“Whos says there’s a right one?” Inkay asked. “Sounds to me like he’s leaving the call up to you. Like he couldn’t care either way.”

“I guess in theory, that seems like the truth,” the grass-type noted. “But, knowing him...”

“He’s probably just shoving what he wants into some metaphorical box and throwing it in the ocean? ” Mareanie grinned.

“Oh, Inkay! My happiness doesn’t matter! It’s only you I care about!” the dark-type threw a tentacle out, dramatically.

‘Go, Mareanie! Be free! Go be with him!’” she continued, before the two of them dissolved into laughter.
Moment wholly destroyed, Growlie struggled not to encourage them, its smile betraying its heart.

“‘Please don’t cry, Growlie! It’s hard enough to leave you!’”

Gloom snickered, suddenly wondering if a self-sacrificial gesture of love was a right of passage into the family it simply had to get through. The more of James’ pokémon it got to know, the more it seemed like a trial they’d all been through beside him.

“Yeah, see? You guys know,” it said. “So... what did you do? All those times he tried to sacrifice his feelings for yours?”

The three of them shared a look, speaking with a sync that was almost comedic, given everything.

“Cried, mostly.”

Gloom blinked a little, back to square one. It could definitely try that, but this issue was a little more complicated to solve. Less of a goodbye, more of a hello. Across the sky, the sun was beginning its rise, turning everything around them an unseen shade of blue. It was Growlie who spoke again after the comfortable silence, wrangling back the sentiment of what it’d wanted to say all along.

“Right now, I think all he wants is to let you know that you’re free,” it told Gloom. “Free to decide who you become, free to be that person alongside him, and free to want what you want. If you don’t want anything right now, it’s okay.”

Gloom peered into it. “It is?”

“It is,” Growlie said. “Evolution is not something you do. It’s a moment you live through. Oftentimes... we don’t know who or what we want to be until that moment arrives.”

“How will I know?” the grass-type asked.

“You’ll know,” the dog said, without hesitation. “You’ll know.”

“The two of you trust one another,” Inkay added. “Which means that when the time comes, you’ll find your answer.”

“No matter what,” Mareanie sighed adoringly. “Love conquers all.”

More than anything, Gloom wanted to believe them, a quiet observer as the world slowly became illuminated around it. The watchful glow bled over its heart, as well, and it leaned into the feeling, grasping for the serenity it offered. Taking in the dawn of sunshine as well as the kind words of its friends.

The first ray of light shot over the horizon, where it landed on the grass-type’s sleeping buds, whispering a prayer of the future to it. Whatever it became when and if it bloomed, whatever its master wanted up against whatever it would find it wanted... there was a hope in its core, steady like a stone—that the two of them would find compromise and harmony in however they existed.

They had before. They would again.

Delia was about ten seconds away from pulling a sewing kit out of hammerspace and stitching up every loose thread of Ash’s current getup, and in turn he had a quip on his tongue about why she hadn’t just done so last night as per the norm. He knew what she’d say, after all these years—that it was because she was in bed the night before her pokémon journey, like responsible trainers are. He
wisely kept his mouth shut, electing instead to lean forward and adjust her hat.

“Now, mom, remember what I told ya,” Ash said, arms crossed in faux wisdom. “Make sure to brush your teeth before crossing the street—”

“You know, Ash, Mimey and I were just talking,” Delia smiled sweetly. “About how hard it would be for you to win the league if you were grounded.”

“Mime!” her Pokémon mirrored her saccharine grin, eyes bright as ever. Ash wilted a little, wondering how he momentarily forgot who he was dealing with.

“Ma’am,” he near squeaked out, and Pikachu let out a giggle he couldn’t suppress.

The sun had only just started its ascent in the sky, and Ash was awake with the dawn despite his tendencies, eager to start Kanto fresher this time than he had before. The re-do was far less grand on its surface, he noted—no crowd of childhood friends and family to see him off, no banners with his name atop them, just him and his mom and his former enemies and the quiet of Pallet—somehow, this felt more true to what should’ve been. The dreams of extravagance weren’t ones he needed to keep him safe, any longer. He was grateful for everything he was, grateful for everything he wasn’t.

Meowth had ungracefully climbed atop Wobbuffet, standing at his full height on the patient Pokémon in an attempt to reach the pair’s eye level. The banter petered out, a little, and the cat took the opportunity to turn the tides slightly sentimental, a hope to articulate the strange sort of pride he’d always felt, trailing behind.

“Twoihp, y’know…” he started, a sheepish paw at the back of his head. “We’s rootin’ for ya, okay? Makes for a much bettah story t’ tell folks we spent our lives on da tail of a genuine Pokémon Master.”

Ash gave him a warm smile, one Pikachu mirrored, this time. “Y’sure that’s the only reason?”

“Don’t make me say it again, kid.”

Were Delia not distracted, she might have made a choice comment in his direction about not rooting for his employer. Jessie had her hands clasped around the older woman’s, though, an uncharacteristic tremble to the contact she tried with all she was to quiet.

“Did you notice?” Jessie whispered, sounding a little vulnerable.

“Oh, the new corkboard?” Delia said after a moment, and her heart swelled at the light in Jessie’s eyes. “Of course! It’s a lovely addition, dear, thank you. Fill it with photos for when I get back, okay?”

The redhead leaned in, spirit aglow. “You have my word.”

Ash had his head angled toward the pair, and Jessie stuttered a little and broke the forwardness of the gesture in his wake. She was certain in all she knew of the twerp that he wasn’t picking up on anything she wanted to keep hidden, but still, his eyes felt oddly prying in the moment. Jessie pivoted, a far more domineering step toward him than her doting fumble toward his mother. There was a twinge of red on her cheeks as she regarded him indirectly, one he recognized like an old friend.

“Gonna ask for another battle?” he bit.

“Please,” Jessie said. “That line is so twenty chapters ago.”
She dug through her bag with an unprepared sort of ferocity, one that lasted just long enough to bring a quip to the boy’s throat, just short enough to not completely kill the beauty of the moment. It wasn’t long before Jessie produced the object—plastic film still stuck to the glass of it, sheen iridescent like oil slick as the sun hit it. Its deep yellow finish was near gold in the light.

“A PokéNav?” Ash asked, blinking up, mystified.

“It’s yours, twerp,” Jessie told him. “We got lost with you a fair few times, and if you do out there again, hopefully this’ll help you get on the right path.”

James had pulled a rose from somewhere. Ash never figured out how he kept doing that.

“Just like you helped us get on ours,” he finished with a warm smile.

Delia shifted a hand over her heart, silently, and Ash hesitated only for a moment before gingerly plucking the device from Jessie’s hand. There was a feeling flowering from deep within him he found it hard to put words to, the sentiment of a circle finally meeting its completion, greeting its other end with a kind hello. He remembered cold and lonely waiting rooms in Viridian’s Pokémon Center, the smell of smoke and the roar of thunder all around its walls. His favourite memory of all, though, the words as they fell off the stranger’s tongue—Pikachu? We’re not interested in your precious electric rat.

She ate those words—once, twice. The strongest roadblock of all, paving the way for his future. From Jessie, something material in your hands was the closest you would ever get to a declaration of outright love.

“Thanks,” Ash said, a loving kind of weight in his voice. The same tone Delia used when she was congratulating the quartet on a job well done, dizzying in its faith.

It was with a dreamy lack of grace that the lot of them parted ways, neither party having the heart to say goodbye despite countless years on earth forcing them to, time and time again. Regardless of how their paths would twist and split on the path to the league, Ash and Delia resolved to leave their home side-by-side, hand in hand. Two sharpened silhouettes up against Pallet’s sprawling expanse, mother and child.

All at once, the former Rockets felt as their collective heart began to loosen and shift at the sight as it slowly vanished into the green horizon. The pair carried on, leaving the comfort of home for an entirely new adventure, one that in Delia’s case would’ve seemed nothing short of impossible a mere year ago. None of them had to voice it to know what they were all thinking.

Is this how he felt? They collectively wondered. Watching us go, all those months ago?

In their memories, the darkness painted them in its inky black, viciously silent and desolate. They could barely see one another as it closed them in, choking them like smog. Ash was the one who held his torch softly to the ground below their feet. Look, he’d said. The path is here, even if you can’t see it.

Why don’t you borrow this, he’d said.

They’d clutched at the worn leather of its handle for the better part of a year, its light leading them through twisting caverns and open plains, where even the night sky often remained starless above. Passing it on felt more like home than anything they’d seen thus far.

The boys felt it like a song in their heads long before Jessie pitched forward with a heavy step, determined and grateful. She cupped a single palm at her cheek megaphone-style as she shouted the
sentiment toward the two, waving dutifully with her other hand.

“No matter what you see,” she yelled after them. “No matter what you face out there! Make sure you’re prepared for trouble!”

The rest of her team was clockwork, methodic as ever despite the rush of emotion absolutely pouring from their eyes.

“And don’t forget to make it double!”

“Dat’s right!”

“Wooobb~ba!”

Meowth toppled off of Wobbuffet at the sheer force of the patient pokémon’s hearty salute, far too taken with the sentiment of the moment to really bother scrambling back up off the dirt path below. As the former Rockets became a mess of tears and pride, the Ketchums seemed to snatch their flawless sync—twin swivels around, smiles putting the sunlight to shame as the both of them waved back to the group one last time before pressing on.

Delia carried the torch in her hands, trying to memorize the feeling lest she had to part ways with it once more. It was strange, holding it again. She’d given it to Ash so many years ago, bringing it close to him for warmth as he shivered in the cold, face tearstained and small. She’d done so with the intent to give it to someone who needed it more than she did, never expected it would somehow, a decade or so later, find its way back to her.

In her mind’s eye, she held it with both hands, close to her heart as it flickered and crackled at a frequency that soothed her worries to bed. Every lonely night and tear shed worth it, the universe’s kindness recycled in her palm.

At her feet, gracideas bloomed.
Misty and James were just short of making a scene adjacent to the buffet table, but Jessie had her eyes so heavily trained on the outdoor screen she hardly had time to make herself a part of it. Meowth was similarly distracted as he grilled burgers, a rare lapse in the battle allowing him a moment to messily adjust his apron with his free paw.

All of Pallet had gathered to Oak’s ranch to watch the spectacle—after all, nothing quite so celebratory had happened since the town’s last Pokémon Master. There in the fires of the Indigo Plateau, Pallet’s Flower faced off against her son, a boy who had come close enough to champion often enough to keep everyone who dwelled there on their feet. They clashed and stood on shockingly equal ground in the stadium, the roar of the crowd absolutely deafening both there and in the sleepy little town.

Tracey was making a genuine attempt at calming tensions, his hands thrown out half-heartedly in an attempt to de-escalate. There wasn’t much to calm given the half-alive state James was in, but Misty’s fire nearly provided enough vitriol for two people.

“If you’re up to no good again don’t think I won’t, James!” the girl shouted, clutching her corsola with a ferocity. “What do you have to say for yourself?!”

James stumbled on his feet, willing the static in his head to stop as venom pulsed at his temple, behind his eyes. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Ree,” Mareanie told him, tears forming in her lidded stare.

“Hungry is no excuse! There’s a whole buffet for you!”

“Ree-nie!” she sobbed. But I want THAT one!

“Please don’t cry,” he whined, tearing up himself. “Come on, dear, it’s okay—”

“IS IT?!” Misty interjected. “Maybe she can try eating Psyduck for lunch next!”

“Hey, Misty, I don’t think—” Tracey started, but stopped himself when the poison finally took James and he fell backward with a thud. “…seriously, is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Jessie said, half-eavesdropping from across the divide as she waved the scene off. “Tall twerp, put more of that emotional support casserole in my hands before the commercial break ends.”

Brock looked up from his notepad, half-scribbled hypotheses about how to simulate the texture of corsola branches in pokémon food that he would quietly slip into James’ hand at the end of his stay in Pallet. Him and Meowth shared a look—two craftsmen regarding each other in respect—before shooting Jessie a solid affirmation and throwing together a second batch.

Ash and Delia were soaring through the finals, both on their last pokémon, and when the screen flashed back to them in the throes of it, it was like a wave passed over the entire gathering. The grill’s unsteady sizzle and the hum of dodrio on the hilltops remained the only sound for miles. Wordlessly, Oak strode over to the speaker and turned the volume up high.
“Absolutely incredible, folks!” the announcer jumped right back into the action. “Incineroar took that Electroweb and threw it right back in Pikachu’s face!”

The moment had almost been too quick to catch—Incineroar rising like an eclipse with a glittering uppercut from beneath the crackling net, its fist an absolute livewire as it connected with Pikachu’s body.

“It used the force of that Thunder Punch to bust right through it! Can Pikachu come back from having its own element turned against it?!”

From one side of the rock field, Ash stood his ground, a lapse in composure smothered by a steely grin. Pikachu tanked the hit, trying to find his center in the surge of electricity that came. His tail lit up before his trainer opened his mouth.

“Iron Tail!”

The mouse swiveled off the force of the hit in an attempt to reach the heel pokémon in close quarters—but Delia knew her son, in life and in battle. Even with speed on Pikachu’s side, she spoke like an omniscient sort of seer, two steps ahead.

“Dodge it!”

Its feline grin a taunt all its own, Incineroar jaggedly tore out of the way, and Pikachu’s sharpened zigzag slammed hard into the ground, sending rocks and dirt flying. Ash watched with fists balled hard as the mouse’s tail got stuck, the force it had put into the attack now it’s downfall as it struggled to dislodge itself. All things considered, it was a good move.

Back in Pallet, Misty was throwing popcorn at the screen in near-fistfulls, unamused. Jessie, a creature of chaos, eventually joined in herself—stealing the younger girl’s popcorn for the sole purpose of materializing their shared rage.

“What are you doing, Ash?!” Misty yelled, slowly coming to the realization that Delia could actually win this.

“Pull yourself together, brat!” Jessie shrieked in agreement

From behind the redheads, James, Brock, and Tracey were watching, their words nearly at a whisper for fear of invoking the girls’ ire.

“...weren’t they rooting for Ms. Ketchum ten minutes ago?”

“I don’t think they’re rooting for either, Vincent Van Twerp.”

Brock crossed his arms, grinning. “Or maybe they’re rooting for both.”

Onscreen, Delia had her knees half-bent in a childlike sort of power stance, excitement within her heart utterly bubbling over. Without giving Pikachu a moment to unstick itself, she pumped a fist forward, completely unrelenting.

“Now, Litty!” she called. “Fire Blast!”

The cat let the cadence of the command melt deep into its heart, a song it loved like no other. It sounded so lovely on Delia’s tongue, on Ash’s. Finding its fire was no issue at all, heat bubbling and searing within its heart, warmth like fur against fur beneath a bridge on a cold, overcast day. Flint sparked at its throat, and it sent the wildfires within it barreling toward Pikachu.
“Pikachu, you gotta get outta there!” Ash called. “C’mon, see if you can’t start up a Quick Attack!”

As though the words were some sort of magic incantation, he managed to get his tail free of the ground the second they left his trainer’s mouth. Heatwaves brushed his fur, a comforting sensation that quickly turned dire as the flames closed in. In the fastest motion the electric-type could muster, he made an honest attempt at darting to the side and out of range. Pikachu held back a cry as he just barely escaped, the fires singing his side as they clipped him.

“It’s really coming down to the wire for Ash, folks!” the announcer boomed. “Looks like that Fire Blast left Pikachu with a pretty nasty burn!”

From behind the divide of the field, Ash sized his partner up. Pikachu was hardy, but he had his limits all the same. The boy grappled with his composure, considered the facts from both sides—yes, he was struggling to gain footing, but what the crowds around them couldn’t see was that Incineroar wasn’t much better off. Where Pikachu wore his wounds like any badge, the fire-type was a lot more muted in the pain it felt in all regards. Its fanged smirk betrayed what Ash knew it was within—cracks in its veneer, ominous and hidden, black on black.

Delia’s confidence was a gift, one she shared with him at birth and never stopped tending to, building it like the literal flames that now rested at her command. There was no telling who would win this fight based solely on what anyone including the two of them could see. Their wills were a perfect pair, strong and unrelenting. The crowds sat in hushed anticipation where the brown of their eyes met across the divide—honey on night sky. Ash adjusted the ring as it hung on his wrist, snapping the yellow crystal into position.

“Pikachu!” he called, tossing his cap toward his partner pokémon. Despite the pain he was feeling, Pikachu had read the impulse in his trainer’s heart long before Ash himself had come to it. He caught the bill of it in his teeth, weakened reflexes be damned. In one swift motion that signaled consent to proceed, the boy watched as his pokémon tossed it in the still air above, letting it fall atop his head and flatten his ears.

“Let’s finish this in style, mom!” Ash called across the divide as he crossed his arms and let light bleed from his hand.

“I thought you’d never ask!” she responded as she mirrored the motion, her voice like thunder that put the gathering clouds above to shame.

In Pallet, the party was in hysterics, now—voices layered atop each other, a cacophony of conflict as patrons desperately tried to figure out who to root for as the league neared its inevitable end.

“When did Ms. Ketchum get a z-ring?! ” Tracey had taken his headband off and was ringing it out in a semi-nervous fashion Oak hadn’t often seen the likes of. The older man laughed a hearty laugh, face half-buried in one hand. How did it take her this long to get one, was the real question.

“What, like it’s hard?” James said nonchalantly, going to take a bite of his burger but biting hard into still air as it was swiped immediately from his hand. He blinked a little, confused, and Inkay innocently chirped his name.

When a battle came down to the wire, Ash would be the first to tell you that what he felt in those final moments was impossible to describe. He’d sputter through sound effects with his arms thrown about, trying to catch the tempo of his heartbeat and share its intensity with the world. The last few minutes of any battle were the reason he strove to be a Master, the last few minutes of a league battle were the reason he’d never stop long after the title was his.
There was an odd quiet to this one, though. A sense of serenity he wasn’t expecting to find pleasing, the more he reflected on it with thunder in his lungs. He realized, then, that if he lost to his mother, it would be the kindest and proudest loss of his entire life.

Ash planted his feet firmly on the ground, intent to make her proud, regardless.

“Much bigger than a Thunderbolt…”

Pikachu mirrored him entirely, light flying off them and connecting like a shining string of fate. Up against one another, they were one single soul.

“Much, much bigger!” Ash roared above the crowds. “At super-full power!”

Pikachu’s cheeks itched and sparked, voltage held together with a series of rubber bands that snapped, one-by-one, with every second passing. The crowd sung a crescendo of cheers, bustling in their seats as the spectacle unfolded.

Across the divide, Delia’s movements were a mere image—her stance the same, confident and statuesque. Where Ash and Pikachu moved loosely, fluid, unable to stay in one place but in perfect sync all the same, Delia and Incineroar were a sturdy machine, calculated and choreographed. The wind against the hills, coexisting for the moment.

“This is your lot in life, Litty!” she called, her shoulders in a proud hunch as she finished the pose. Purple and black flames crackled at her feet, ones that caught Incineroar and lit the stadium ablaze. The fire-type tore forward with a run, claws dug into the ground.

“It’s over!” the two trainers declared in perfect unison, as Incineroar leapt into the air, as Pikachu met its eyes there.

“Malicious Moonsault!”

“10,000,000 Volt Thunderbolt!”

Like two old friends engaging in a mere handshake, a moment transpired, there in stadium skies—where the cat looked to the mouse with a knowing grin, where Pikachu responded to it with one of his own. It was the look of two pokémon who knew that the winner of this battle was up to the fates, now.

Incineroar barrelled hard into Pikachu with a deafening roar, just as the electric-type took the thunderclouds above as his idle playthings. Every colour of the rainbow shot off him to meet the twisting and shifting fires that enveloped Incineroar beyond recognition. The two pokémon collided in a blinding clash of light and darkness, heatwaves and static fluttering the clothes of the onlookers, sending hats flying off people’s heads. The sonic force of the explosion enveloped the entire field, leaving nothing in sight.

It faded to an apprehensive silence. Where no one wanted to loosen their flinch, open their eyes, learn its end. Though everyone here had come to see a winner, somewhere between then and now, the lot of them had realized all as one that perhaps they weren’t truly ready to accept one.

Back to back on the dirt, the pokémon let a few ragged, searing breaths pass through their lungs. Ash looked to Incineroar, Delia to Pikachu. For a moment that lasted a century, not a single soul spoke.

One last shuddering inhale came from behind the mouse, and Pikachu felt his own form give way as Incineroar collapsed behind him.
“Incineroar is unable to battle!”

Ash’s heart fell out of his chest. Frozen to nothing, he didn’t have the time or mind to pick it back up.

“The victory goes to Ash Ketchum of Pallet Town—”

Cheers were building. A white noise unlike anything he’d heard before.

“— *Indigo League Champion!*”

The screams that rang out morphed and shifted in the stands—from disharmonious thunder to the proud, single syllable of the boy’s name. They chanted it like a song, and it was only then he remembered the victory was not only his.

Ash tore forward to Pikachu’s side, a kneel and a cradled set of arms that the electric-type had come to know as home. He squeaked a breathless *chaa* at his trainer, who responded with a gentle head-stroke.

“Pikachu,” he said, voice waterlogged. “We did it, buddy.”

“Pi-ka-chuu,” he whispered, drifting off in Ash’s arms.

The storm in Pallet had turned to a hurricane. If the cheers at the Indigo Plateau were a loudred, the ones back in town were an exploud that had swallowed an entire music store full of amps. Things were being thrown, tables were being flipped, pokémon were shooting elemental attacks into the sky like fireworks. At the back of the chaos, Oak had his arms crossed serenely, two sentiments battling for his heart—of the two brightest stars he knew, exploding into beautiful supernovas.

The former Rockets were one unit again, their arms tangled like vines as they soaked themselves in the ugliest, least coherent tears anyone who knew them had ever witnessed.

“What’d I tell yous?!?” Meowth bawled. “What’d I tell you two dopes all dose years ago! Dat Pikachu’s strongah dan anyt’ in’ I ever seen!”

“One of a kind!” James agreed, clutching the cat tighter. “No other like him!”

“Oh, that’s *our* Pikachu!” Jessie mirrored them. “That’s *our* twerp!”

In the center of the stadium, Ash met his mother’s smile—the fringes of her warm gaze, as much as he could find comfort in looking toward someone that directly. In one swift motion, she put her hands firmly on her hips, leaning forward with a crease in her brow.

“Ash Ketchum, you are in a whole world of trouble!” she said. “Beating your mother at the Indigo League! You’re grounded, mister!”

An exasperated sigh left him, the only thing he knew safe to manage in the wake of Delia’s sense of humour. Jokes and sentimentalities all existed in the same realm, to her, trying to guess which one you’d get was like trying to hold onto moonlight.

This time, though, the facade vanished rather quickly. Ash felt himself panicking as he watched it—Delia’s expression dissolving atom by atom as she tried and failed to keep the tears forming at bay.

“Your father would be so proud, Ash,” she said, softly.

He looked to his feet, and in the moment, Delia saw him not as a strong and fearsome Pokémon Master, but as the kind sanctuary of a boy she’d always known.
“...and you?”

Without giving him a moment to breathe, she stepped forward to hug her son. A warmth flowered inside him, and he tried with all he was not to weep alongside her.

“Oh, honey,” Delia said. “Some things go without saying.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, mom,” Ash said, clinging to her with his free arm, as much as a boy with pride like his could. “Y’know that, right?”

With the ball of her palm, she wiped one last tear away, putting her brave face back on to face the world.

“Yes, Ash,” Delia said. “Thank you.”

They broke apart to shake hands and formally end the tournament—strong armed and proud—before hugging once more. Firmer this time, with purpose in every inch of the embrace. The stadium erupted as the two of them became its beating heart, the most exciting and significant battle the arena had seen in years—easily.

Delia had been here time and time again, in her dreams, in visions of her future. Her feet in the dirt as crowds cheered her name, a trophy in her hands and a fire in her blood. The dreams always went the same, the metaphorical life she became lost in—she tasted victory, and the Plateau went up in flames. Beams burned broke around her, crackling and bursting, heatwaves singing her cheeks. Too hot to hold, she dropped her prize to the ground, where it shattered and melted to nothing. In all of them, she survived—the fire inside her always burned hotter than the one surrounding her.

The embers that remained grew into a wildfire a million times more potent than the one that snatched victory from her hands. The embers she fostered, the ashes she set back aglow. They caught and found their way back here, tearing through the stadium just as the fire had long before. This time, though, the cheers never ended, the arena never fell. This time, Delia had not lost.

She was not the Indigo League Champion. A victory in solitude, however, was nothing compared to a loss at the hands of the spark she’d protected long before she ever knew if it’d be worth it when the blaze finally caught.

Delia hugged her son. The crowds cheered his name.

It was.

In Delia’s absence, there wasn’t one, but two gardens that needed tending to. To any normal person, this would be unnecessarily extra workload. To James, it was a sort of heaven he found himself looking forward to, day after day.

Though summer was allegedly present, spring hadn’t yet seemed to have decided itself done with Pallet town. The overcast hung despite the change in seasons, a light dusting of rain drifting down from the grey and awakening the intoxicating scent of dirt and grass. Jessie had taken to cover alongside Meowth, the two of them ambivalent about the state of the weather. James adored it, though—clung to it even harder with the coming threat of summer and humidity and sweat. With moments like this one soon to become rare, he knew he’d have to treasure them all the more. Usually, Jessie had a quip on her tongue about how he’d catch his death if he stayed out too long. Today, she was strangely quiet, lost in her own mind about something he couldn’t read.

Gloom shuffled a little beside him, stumbling on its feet as the weed it had in its hand finally loosed
itself from the earth. With spring vanishing in small bursts around it, it was struck with a pang of nostalgia. Early in the morning as the pidgey woke up before anyone else, as the dew sparkled on the grass and never quite dried—it had been a year since it evolved.

A year since James showed it how to yank weeds from the soil, patient and understanding as it got used to having arms. A year since the two of them had really started to get to know each other. A year since its trainer had placed two stones in front of it and told it that if it wanted, it could be whatever it desired.

The words between them were still muggy, at times. But James heard them, often enough. And where words failed, feelings seemed to flow freely between the two of them.

Gloom watched as he turned, a light chuckle rising in his throat as he placed a hand on the pokémon’s back to steady it once more, utterly endeared. It was raining, but James was warm as ever.

“Careful, there,” he told it, and it shook off embarrassment, a thankful smile on its face.

James turned back to his work, sweeping the garden of anything that didn’t belong. This was routine, and yet every time the man found himself laughing in the secrecy of his head at the idea of the weed pokémon helping him weed the foliage. He could turn it into a joke if given more time, he knew he could—irony just his brand, begging to be crafted if. If.

If the circumstances stayed as they are, his mind wandered.

The thoughts crept into his head, the way they so often did, nowadays. There was a longing in the way Gloom had been looking toward him lately, a sort of cloud that hung over all his pokémon. James knew they were talking—about him, what else?—but not even Growlie spoke a word that suggested anything of the conversations as they happened in secret.

The man had been building himself up to it. He knew what it meant, of course. But Gloom was far too scared to ask the question, and James himself wasn’t even sure the pokémon knew what to ask for. So much time had passed, maybe it had even forgotten the offer stood at all. All he could see in its eyes was a nostalgia he couldn’t parse. James dug his hands into the dirt, letting the earthy scents hanging around them take him somewhere better.

This pokémon was in his care and his alone. It was his job to make it happy. He opened his eyes, continuing his work as he spoke to it.

“Nanny always used to tell the silliest old wives tales to me as a lad,” James said, a little suddenly. “Gloom?”

“She’d tell me that even if the weeds were pretty, it was important to keep them from the gardens,” he continued. “Said that if you kept too many weeds around, before you knew it you’d have rafflesias.”

Gloom peered into him, perplexed by the bittersweet song in his voice as he spoke. When James told stories of his life, they were so often with a softness even in hard times. There was a quiet to this one that rang a touch different, though, one that the grass-type found itself inexplicably drawn to.

James stood, wiping the dirt from his hands on the back of his work pants. “Gloom, why don’t we take a little break?”

“Glo… gloom,” it affirmed, after a pause.
Jessie shifted her gaze from the puddles gathering like tiny lakes on the patio edge. James lead his Pokémon up one of the many hills that sheltered the diner, his ever-present handbag hanging at his side. His team quirked a collective eyebrow as he sat beneath the single tree on the hilltop, and Gloom followed suit. There was still a decent amount of work that needed to be done, and prying James from the gardens was near impossible most days. Their curiosity fired off, but it was as though there was a forcefield that prevented them from intruding on the moment. Something was off, and not in a way they could fix or put logic to.

Under the verdant sanctuary, James and Gloom existed on their own personal sort of island. The rain fell around them, picking up only a little—pattering the ground everywhere they weren’t, leaving them in a serene bubble where the sound was a distant rhythm, soothing and kind. They enjoyed the quiet of it for a few minutes, side by side and hip to hip.

James held his bag, his dirt-caked manicure half-tucked into the breaking leather of it. Gloom noticed the tenseness in him, but it was one so unlike what the Pokémon was used to from its trainer. On a good day, he was shaky and tongue-tied, a worrywart even when it was hardly called for. On a bad day, he froze completely—staring everyone in the eyes, nearly catatonic with a fear he never explained. Right now he was like a boy about to ask the student he liked on a date to the dance, like a kid on Christmas Eve who wasn’t quite sure if he was on the naughty or nice list.

The man lowered the bag from where it rested at his torso, loosed some of the tension that hung in his frame.

“Gloom,” James said. “Do you like being my Pokémon?”

It took a moment to answer, only because the question seemed so absurd.

“Gloom, gloom!”

“I’ve enjoyed our time together, too,” he smiled, placing his hand tenderly on the grass-type’s.

On the fringes, flowers shuddered as drops pooled and fell from their petals. With a fluidity that betrayed his nervous heart, James turned so that he was facing Gloom head-on. The Pokémon was unsure what it was he was looking for as he gazed it up and down, love in his voice like a song.

“You’ve grown quite a bit, haven’t you?” he smiled. “I’ve… tried my best to keep at that pace myself. I’ll admit, it hasn’t been easy.”

Gloom wanted to tell him the roles were opposite. That it was him who had done most of the growing, that every experience point and new attack and brilliant transformation the Pokémon knew was only because it wanted to meet James where he was. Its voice couldn’t always reach him in the ways it dreamed, some barrier over James’ heart not allowing him the ears to hear it. Bit by bit, Gloom was intent to chip it away, however long it took.

“Gloom, I was thinking, well—” he kept on. “You know, I, ah—”

James sighed, cutting himself off. This wasn’t as hard as he was making it out to be. He knew, deep down, it was what the both of them wanted, what would vanquish the overflow of emotion that buzzed like Beedrill in their hearts.

“My eloquence seems to be failing me,” the man resigned himself to it. “I’m going to stop my frivolous pedantry, now.”

Him and Gloom were facing each other, now, and James was utterly silent as he opened the bag that rested on his lap. Every day for a year, its contents had remained with one single constant he refused
to leave home without. They tangled his fingers as he located them amongst other, far less significant items, and it was with an endearing lack of grace that he pulled them out at once—one for each hand. Gloom had seen them once before, of course, in a time where things made far less sense.

At the base of the gardens, Jessie jostled Meowth, wordlessly. He blinked warily back toward James and Gloom, freezing a little when he registered the scene. He’d been told, of course—but so little time had passed, and there was a protective instinct fluttering in the cat’s chest that wanted to burst forward and scratch some sense into James.

Gloom peered into the stones, then to James, the same way it had all those months ago. He met his pokémon’s sleepy eyes, taking in the recognition that glowed rather than sparked within them. In that single look, James could tell—Gloom had been thinking about this just as much as he had, just as long as he had.

“I told you that you had a choice, a while back,” James said, then asked, rhetorically—

“You remember, right?”

The grass-type nodded, its normally gaping mouth now pressed closed. White petals dotted the scene as they sat in silence for a moment, as James held both stones at equal distance from his pokémon, impartial in his stance despite the preference tugging at his heart.

“I… don’t entirely know how to articulate it,” he said. “But I… it’s as though I can hear you calling out to me. You’ve made up your mind, then?”

The pokémon took a quiet step toward him, its eyes shining with hope. Yes, yes, yes, it wanted to scream. More than anything else, it wanted to be stronger for him. But with all the time that had passed, it still felt nothing when it looked to the stones in James’ hands. No spark drove it forward, no pull showed it one over the other. Growlie said that when a stone spoke to your heart to evolve, it was as though nothing existed beyond you and the stone. As though its shine was in colour while the world around remained black and white.

Gloom felt that, absolutely. The pull to transform, the buds that rested at its temple growing heavy and wanting. It always was James who was in colour, though.

Back then, the stones bled into the grayscale of the world, insignificant in their magnitude. Now, though, they kept their shine, their colour. Gloom realized all at once it was because they rested within James’ hands.

_The stones were never meant to tell me who I was_, the pokémon took a wordless step forward. Toward the splash of colour on the universe around, the bright yellow of James’ button-down like a miniature sun against a world wrapped in grey.

Tenderly, Gloom placed its palms on the back of James’ own, folding his hands back up over the stones. Just like someone else had.

_It was always supposed to be you._

James felt a swirl of emotion rise in his throat, one that left him inarticulate and overcome. It wasn’t like before, when Gloom had nearly cowered in fear from the stones, run straight to the man’s side—this was so different. There was a serenity in its eyes that seemed to be urging it to make a move, as though the choice was his alone. He’d _thought_ about it—of course he had. What option he favoured more, what future he saw when he closed his eyes, and how those things fought and conflicted like two angry dragons, tearing his heart to ribbons.
“Gloom,” his pokémon said, a kindness in its gaze far beyond its years. “Gloom~gloom.”

Despite everything, words untranslated and meaning murky, he understood what it meant to say.

*I don’t care what I become, as long as I’m with you.*

A ray of sunlight broke through the clouds, illuminating the two of them as they sat there. With it came a breeze that loosed magnolia petals from their rest in the fields that surrounded them, blowing them toward the small distance that separated James from Gloom. They were her favourite flowers, the ones that dotted every garden in her estates, hung in her hair as the two of them walked arm-in-arm through ballrooms full of chatter too deafening to hear his own thoughts.

James steadied himself, tried with all he was not to give her the satisfaction of meeting his eyes. He could see her heel resting at the back of his pokémon’s own, her dress fluttering in the wind like the ghostly apparition of his past he knew she was.

*Go on, sugar,* he could hear her voice whisper to him.

*Run.*

She stood like a skyscraper above him as he kneeled there, intruding on a moment meant for him and Gloom alone. How many times had he kneeled like this before her? How many times had he felt it like vines around his neck, spores in his throat?

*Run away.*

Through a flurry of snowy petals, James paid her no more thoughts.

“Do you trust me?”

The question brought tears to Gloom’s eyes. It broke its heart that its trainer even had to ask.

“Gloom,” it whispered.

James steadied himself as the sunlight intensified, soaking into him and Gloom both like morphine. The clouds cradled its single beam, protective and safe, as though the universe existed only for them.

Gloom closed its eyes. The sun was shining. The redheaded wraith kept up her taunting song.

*Run, coward.*

James fluttered his own crystal greens shut and pressed the leaf stone to Gloom’s temple.

In the moment before the stone made contact, the silence that seemed to swim in both their heads was a sound unlike any they’d known. The moment before an explosion when the core ignites but the cloud hasn’t yet formed, ominous in how quiet it can truly be. Time moved slower, just for that instance—at the hillside’s base, Meowth and Jessie tore forward, unable to stay still and complacent any longer.

Light pulled James’ eyelids back open, forced them shut again almost instantly. His pokémon was glowing with a radiance he almost couldn’t look at, a supernova that had fallen to earth. He watched as the shape of it shifted and changed, feet becoming sturdier, body evening out.

Within the silver-blue light, the pokémon felt flowers bloom in its heart, through its veins. All the questions and what ifs and maybes that had been tearing it up, all the conflict and fear and worry about doing what was right—the illustrious flash had turned them all to cinders. It knew more than
ever, right then—this was who it was always meant to be.

The brilliance reached its apex, and James watched as she went with it, a hand thrown in front of her eyes as she desperately tried to keep her footing in its wake, clinging to this realm on a thread of fear and despair. The fires enveloped her, one more time, and her form fizzled to the nothing it always was.

The grass-type’s crown of buds shifted last, bursting outward in a shower of pollen and light, a finale to the fireworks. It stumbled as the petals hung there, far heavier than it had expected, far less heavy than everything else it had carried so far. They soaked in the sunlight, snow-dappled strawberry fields. Looking far too shy behind their veil, James watched as his pokémon found itself.

“Vile… plume?”

Tears welled up and spilled over the man’s eyes long before he had time to register them. The aroma wafting through the gardens was like finding a kinder home.

The rest of the team had been bolting forward, everything happening so fast they weren’t even sure what they’d see when the white-hot metamorphosis settled at James’ fingertips. Now, they were stock still on its fringes, unable to comprehend the sight.

James was staring at his vileplume—his vileplume—a shaking hand poised inches from its face. Though he couldn’t seem to steady his body, there wasn’t a trace of fear in his eyes. Nothing but boundless love, spilling over into tears he couldn’t contain. He brushed his open palm across the side of its face, taking in the shade of pink its crown had bloomed into—a tone off from what he was used to, cherry trees against red wine.

“Vile~plume?” it asked him, still looking a touch unsure. The marvel in his eyes was the farthest thing from apprehension, but after all it had known in traveling with him, he didn’t blame it for being anxious. Though the both of them were sure this is what they had wanted, the worries that fluttered somewhere within them both weren’t immune to second thoughts and worst case scenarios.

James was content to spend the rest of his life putting those worries to bed. He jolted forward all at once, leathery petals squished up against his face as he embraced the flower pokémon.

“You’re so big!” he wept, eyes shut tight in adoration as he crushed Vileplume in a hug. “And still cute as a button! Oh, Vileplume!”

Unable to keep its own composure, the pokémon let itself come similarly undone in its trainer’s arms. It had spent so much of its youth crying, felt as though all the tears within it were used up. Now, they flowed freely, far more comforting than the desert it had felt confined to for months, trying with all it was to be strong.

The sight of the two of them embracing was enough to remind James’ team who he really was deep down. He held Vileplume in his arms. Jessie tried to keep herself steady as he set her beating heart aflame, fiery wings extending like beacons from his back.

“I love you,” James told his pokémon, refusing to let go.

“Vile plume ~!” it said without hesitation, and James had to stop himself from dissolving into nothing all over again.

I love you, he heard, clear as day, a voice that spoke gently and with care, directly to his being.

I love you, too, he heard. His pokémon’s voice.
Vileplume held tight, still feeling like the child that had hatched in his arms ages ago. In some ways, it felt as though nothing had really changed—it was born knowing nothing but its love for him, and to this day, that was the one thing it would always be sure of. This was what they were always meant to be beside each other, though—their most transformed selves.

James finally felt the mind to acknowledge his teammates, who were still standing in a swirl of emotion beside the scene. Wobbuffet had started existing at some point, by far the most cheery and least conflicted of them all. Refusing to stop hugging his pokémon anytime soon, he called out to them with his head still leaning against its folded petals.

“Staring is impolite,” he channeled the voices of his past, a radical act of reclamation. “Aren’t you lot going to come introduce yourselves?”

Jessie and Meowth lost their tenseness, melting back into their typical states. The both of them had so many things they wanted to say, so many objections they wanted to raise, ones that all fell flat in the wake of their teammate’s serenity. James had more authority than anyone on this single matter, and the love shining off him now was palpable. Jessie took a hard step forward, almost immediately took three back, face twisting in disdain.

“If the stink of that thing doesn’t melt my nose off,” she commented. “How can you handle that, James?!”

He made a bitter face at her, irritated that she’d say such a thing. Where was her taste, but more importantly, where was her heart?

“Mind yourself,” he scolded her, hugging it tighter, nuzzling his pokémon like a skitty on catnip. “You’ve got a lovely aroma, don’t you, Vileplume?”

The grass-type chirped its name like a song, and Jessie just stared at the two of them, so disgustingly in love with all this human was that it had looped back around to just regular disgust. At her side, Meowth buried his face in his paw and started cracking up, and Wobbuffet gave a teary salute.

The grey of the skies was cleared, now, sunbeams pulling the mist from the grass as though it had never fallen. It had, though—growing the grass, rejuvenating the world, its hardship breeding life. The flowers thanked the skies for it as it left, tranquil in the knowledge that it would be back, as would the sun, as would the rainbow that now decorated the sky like a beacon of the future.

Jessie peered into James, one-sided conversations and ‘how do I do this’s with her mother’s photo on repeat in her head. They swirled like hurricanes, settled with James at their eye. He was beautiful in the sun’s revived glow.

With all she was, she hoped he could see it—that he had evolved today, too.

The sun was setting in Delia’s rose garden, its dusk a gentle comfort that signaled the satisfying end to a productive day. James could see his pokémon in the gardens adjacent, circling around Vileplume like excited children, interrogating it as if it were a celebrity. It didn’t seem to mind the attention, thankfully, returning their enthusiasm in kind. Their distant voices joined the harmony that existed only in twilight—when the world wasn’t entirely quiet yet, but the anticipation of it being so soon was its own sort of comfort. The former Rockets walked through the flowers, enjoying the serenity.

“It really is a marvel, James,” said Jessie, tracing a perfectly velvety rose petal with her index finger. “That green thumb of yours.”

“It’s Delia’s fault, really,” he waved her off. “That woman fosters passions in me I long thought
“Tell me about it,” Jessie rolled her eyes.

“Da two o’ yous are talkin’ about different t’i— Ack!”

Meowth stumbled a little as Jessie kicked him, wanting to snap back but far too charmed by the calm of the moment to risk ruining it.

“The night before she left I asked her how she keeps the roses so beautiful and full of life,” James said. “And I’m sure what she intended to say was ‘Oh, bloodmeal does wonders, you see!’ and instead what she did was turn to me with that wild fae smile and say ‘Blood,’ in her airy little tone.”

Jessie laughed, sharply and a little too loudly. Meowth bit his tongue, this time, wondering if James was ever going to pick up on the fact that his lady-friend was hot for their boss.

If the cat had looked a little harder, squinted just a little more, he would’ve noticed that the nervous fluidity Jessie carried herself with was a different flavour than the one she wore around Delia. When Jessie was in love it was a special sort of unbearable, hearts practically swirling above her head while she shouted every sentence and moved through the air like a flying ditto that couldn’t decide what it wanted to be. It always settled in the form of whatever would make the nearest brunette fall head over heels for her.

Despite her tendency to shift and change and adapt, she was still Jessie, now. The lovesick flush remained on her cheeks, but she kept her bite despite it, big and untethered.

A breeze shook the flowers, changing the dying sun’s heat from inconvenient to flawless. Jessie closed her eyes, unfurling a hand. Meowth was so lost in all he wasn’t quipping at her, it took him a moment to realize it was meant for him. With a quiet noise of contentment, he grabbed it with his paw, and passed the gesture onto James.

The three of them walked like that for a while, hand in hand, a hole in their silhouette Jessie was getting tired of waiting on. She cleared her throat loudly, producing no results.

“Hello?” she called to the open air, metaphorically tapping a foot.

The pokéball in her bag cracked open, letting their fourth out in a shower of light.

“Wobbu~ffet~!”

“Excuse you,” she told him, a conversation James wasn’t privy to. “The science says you’re patient. I’m far too important to be.”

“Wobb~a!” he said, and she heaved a sigh and grabbed his hand, too.

Like a line of fallen paper angels, they circled the garden at a pace all the same. Their footsteps aligned in the orange world that hung around, they took a moment to appreciate their own synchronicity. There were those who had described it as romantic, others who found it downright creepy. It ebbed and flowed, changed and transformed, but in the end always settled back to where it belonged—rhymes recited back to back, not a breath out of place, steps a comfortable stroll despite two pairs of short legs among them, hearts beating at the same exact tempo.

The scent of roses clung to the air, and Jessie shut her eyes and let it take her away. Its fragrance always seemed to swim around James, one that had made her dizzy since she’d met him all those years ago. In future lives, she’d cover herself in its embrace, rose perfume stuck to her skin in lieu of
a longing she can’t describe, keeping his soul close to hers until the day they found one another again. Wandering a thousand more gardens while she tapped her foot at the multiverse to put him back in her arms.

His hand was the only one of the group she wasn’t touching, in that instance, a fact she found herself oddly okay with. In love she was insatiable, clingy in ways she would never admit. If her heart raced for someone, she never wanted to stop touching them. Every second she wasn’t felt like agony, every moment apart a buzzing that made her nerves fray and burn. She could let go of James.

Everything about how she loved him was so different. Everything about how she fell for him contradicted the narrative she’d always woven in her head. Some dashing, strong-armed adonis was supposed to sweep her off her feet and wife her on the spot. The man who fell hardest for her would never be that, and as fate would have it, she fell, too. Hard enough to forget what her story was meant to be. Hard enough that even when she remembered, she simply didn’t care.

The thoughts flitted away, and she didn’t give them a second glance. Jessie had spent her entire life fiercely prioritizing herself as a middle finger to a world that told her she was unlovable. As she ran over words in her head, Jessie was the last person Jessie was thinking of.

She could let go of James. She could stop touching him, at times. Everything and everyone Jessie had ever lost had claw-marks in it.

*I can let go of him*, she meditated. *Because he’ll never leave.*

The sentiment hit her in a way she knew well—the kind that made her heart overflow, the kind that pushed tears up from inside her. She swallowed them, steeling herself. No. The moment was perfect, the stars were aligned, she had to. No matter how much she feared the answer, she had to.

On cue, James let a dreamy sigh leave him, one Meowth mirrored. Lawnmowers were shutting off in the distance as the stars blinked on, bringing a hush to the world as night came.

“We really shoulda swallowed our pride ‘n’ settled down soonah,” Meowth said, strolling along. “What’s so bad about a cozy niche, huh?”

“It really is a charmed life,” James said, wind rushing through his hair. “I could probably stay here forever.”

Jessie was back in her room again, the mid-morning sun shining on her mother’s portrait, now resting in a frame on her nightstand. Her and Jane were having one of their world-famous staredowns, two iron women with their hands on their hips, both unable to pierce the other. Like always, Jessie collapsed to the floor with a heavy, almost comical sigh, and told her mom everything on her mind. Jane listened—of course, she always did, that toothy smile never leaving her face—and Jessie read her silence like tea leaves, transformed it into just the advice she needed in the moment. After arguing with the woman’s still portrait for a bit, of course. That was simply a given.

Her mom’s smile was in her head, then, the cheerleader she’d always needed. Jessie took a deep breath.

“Then let’s. All of us.”

She had stopped dead in her tracks, ungracefully jostling the lot of them like an angry bungee cord. James stumbled his way toward meeting her gaze, an innocent, curious blink in Jessie’s direction. She was looking at her feet, now, strangely despondent. Even when she lowered herself, it was hard for him to read her vibe. Even as she was on one knee, fishing a small box from her bag. Wobbuffet
and Meowth were quick to register the moment, even quicker to steal away to the side and let what was happening happen. James was the last to know, and Jessie prayed his oblivious stare was truly because he was an idiot, rather than a coping mechanism sending him far away from here.

She’d tied her hair up in a single ponytail, that day, desperate to not look like someone else. James halted a moment to take in the sight of her there, to catch up with his friends where they were. Jessie watched the realization flicker in his eyes, a shock in him that made her ten times the anxious wreck she ever knew herself to be. His mouth fell open, and she spoke before he could. Eyes resolute, her opener was not traditionally romantic. Nothing about the two of them ever would be.

“‘I’ll never call it marriage a day in my life,” Jessie said, fire in her gaze. Tears strangled James, and she kept on.

“I’ll never be your fiancé,” she pledged. “I’ll never be your wife.”

It wasn’t long before the cup spilled over and he started quietly crying, a curled hand poised in front of his mouth. Her opener was not traditionally romantic, and to him, it was the most romantic thing he’d ever been told.

In the middle of it, she rose back to her feet for a brief moment, her eyes near his own. She spoke with a tenderness equal to the one she carried as she wiped his tears away, a futile task that underestimated just how much James was capable of crying. She tried regardless, holding his face in her hands.

“James, I’m a wretched liar,” Jessie said. “I keep telling myself I fell in love with you somewhere on this backward journey, after seeing you being your best and bravest self. I keep convincing myself it’s that dashing phoenix who made me fall, noble and proud.”

She studied his expression, tried not to get lost in his eyes. Had they always been that green? Her heartbeat was cacophonous, ringing in her ears.

“Do you remember our first night as real agents?” she continued. “I fell asleep in full makeup, and you washed every grain of it off while I slept like a rock.”

Pink touched his cheeks, and he gave her a shy smile. “You ordered me to never touch your art without permission again. You were furious.”

“I was. But not with you,” she said. “It was… one of the tenderest expressions of the heart anyone had ever shown me. Something so small and insignificant, but infused with so much love. You looked upon me for long enough to realize it had slipped my mind. You worried about the consequences. You weighed them against the consequences you might face. And you cherished me enough to do it anyway.”

She bit her lip, then, trying not to become equally choked up at how completely nonplussed he looked in the wake of it. As though he didn’t deserve that recognition, because to him, it was just another day.

“It’s not that you loved me fiercely, or passionately, or like no other girls existed,” Jessie told him. “It’s that you loved me recklessly, without a care for how I’d react. I was furious with myself, and I took it out on you.”

Unable to hold back any longer, she pulled him into a hug, fiercer than any of the ones they’d shared while facing down an angry pokémon out for their blood. She held tight onto him, and he returned far softer, utterly befitting of them. Jessie cried with a grace he wished he could mirror, delicate and
“You were the best friend I’d ever had,” she wept. “And I just left you back there. When I saw you in Team Rocket, I hoped you’d turned into some kind of monster, just so I could justify all I’d done. But you weren’t. You were the same sweet boy I’d always known, and though you shouldn’t have, you loved me all the same.”

James pulled apart from her, bleary greens meeting shining blues as long as they could stand.

“Of course, Jess,” he said, a hand at her cheek. “You’re easy to love.”

The words made her wince, their tenderness sending her into a romantic sensory overload she found hard not to convert to outright violence. She cried harder, shaking her head.

“I hate you!” she told him, holding onto him for dear life. “I can’t stand you, James! I want to feel this way forever.”

She dropped back to her knee, then, the least smooth creature on the entire planet as she shook with sobs, an inarticulate mess. There wasn’t a ring in the small velvet box when she opened it—just a single, rusted bottle cap, emblazoned with a capital letter that just this once, symbolized a new beginning rather than a darkened past.

“Stay with me,” Jessie whispered, haloed by the setting sun, rose petals at her feet.

“You... won’t fix me,” James protested, a nervous step forward as he said it. “All the things that broke me into the man I am, no matter how much we love one another, I’m going to walk beside them for as long as I live.”

She smiled near-flawlessly, charming through running makeup and streaming eyes. As though she’d been waiting on him to say it, word for shaking word.

“All the more reason to have someone cute around for company, eh?”

She’d said it so nonchalantly, as though it came as easy to her as breathing. Through breakdowns and nightmares and screaming matches, through every time the two of them had snapped at each other and fallen apart, the girl with the temper hotter than the sun and the self-worth of a goddess looked at him and shrugged.

“I love all of you,” Jessie said. “Just as you do me. Recklessly so.”

She repeated herself, raising the box closer to his face.

“Stay with me.”

James fell to his knees, too weak in the wake of the moment to remain any longer. There were essays he wanted to write to her name, dissertations he wanted to publish on this woman and all she was. How this absolute fire had come from nothing and grown so beautiful, fortified the emotion she felt so agonizingly into love and passion for what she held dear. Jessie never half-assed loving anything, utter dedication infused in every gesture she planned. Loving her at all was a privilege, and to be loved back was a future that seemed so good it was impossible.

“Oh, Jessie,” he held her closer than he ever had before. “Of course.”

In a perfect flurry of rose petals, the two of them embraced in the sunset’s finale, the ugly tears they wore like a badge of honour unearthed and proud. With the matter settled, Meowth and Wobbuffet
allowed themselves to join them once more, the perfect square they were always meant to be, sturdy and right. The humans welcomed them into it easily, let their grateful tears fall into one another where they belonged.

“I wouldn’t mind being married to you, Jess,” James said, wiping a final tear with a grateful smile. “In fact, I think I’d like it a lot.”

“Well, I seem to recall you saying you’d rather die,” she prodded at him, devilishly playful.

“I did, didn’t I?” he laughed, and it was only with the single quip that James realized just how much he’d grown. “I’m grateful those wounds are healing.”

In all her years, Jessie had never heard him talk with such kindness toward himself. Pride gripped her heart, squeezing tears back out of her. It was Meowth who piped up next, eager to join in the beauty of the cozy little home they’d built then and there.

“Eh, we still ain’t gotta use the f-woihd, dough,” he said. “Dat junk ain’t really yous styles, anysways.”

“You’re absolutely right, Meowth,” Jessie said, holding onto her gathered family tighter. “I’m sure we’ll find something far more elegant and befitting.”

“Partners?” James offered, and Jessie melted into its cadence, classic and symbolic and home.

“Partners.”

Sunlight filtered in through the tinted windows of Pallet House, at that pitch perfect angle that seemed to tone the whole diner in a cozy shade of sepia. The patronage was small that afternoon, summer pulling regulars from the small town and out to the water parks and adjacent regions that were far more exciting with the newfound freedom and sun. It had mostly been tourists popping in and out, their PokéNavs and the like guiding them toward hidden gems in backwater towns, stepping stones on their travels.

Jessie was physically on the clock but mentally engaged in one of her famous brain debates. Leaning on the counter, she ran over the designs in her head again—two dresses, one in the image of Moltres, the other of Articuno. As much as James and her excelled in costume design themselves, if it was their wedding, they wanted to be lazy and fork over the cash for someone else to do it, and there was a cursed incantation of a name coming to mind that neither of them wanted to acknowledge in the field of extravagant clothing modeled after pokémon.

On one hand… Jessie mused. She is excellent at this one specific thing. On the other, there’s a chance the dresses might have poison in the collars.

She was so lost in planning what she hoped would be the gaudiest ceremony ever held that she hadn’t the mind to notice the door opening, or the patron who had wandered in and out, their PokéNavs and the like guiding them toward hidden gems in backwater towns, stepping stones on their travels.

She was so lost in planning what she hoped would be the gaudiest ceremony ever held that she hadn’t the mind to notice the door opening, or the patron who had walked up to the counter. This wasn’t a big deal, as the equally distracted woman who had wandered in wasn’t paying Jessie herself much mind as she stumbled in and collapsed at the bar counter, looking sweaty and tired.

“I want the coldest drink you’ve ever made,” she said, still not looking at Jessie. “I want it to feel like Articuno itself blessed my drink from on high—”

She raised her gaze, finally, taking in the sight of who she was just short of barking these demands
to. Jessie’s attention had been wrangled just in time for the woman at the counter to give her a double take, then a triple take, green curls bobbing at her ears. Jessie wordlessly blinked at her. She wordlessly blinked at Jessie. For a moment, neither of them said anything, staring curiously into one another.

The woman started laughing. Cuteness, at first, then much louder, into her tented palm. Jessie swore she looked familiar, but couldn’t at all place her finger on how—

“Oh my god,” she said, hands excitedly on the counter. “Jessie, is that you?”

Jessie’s heart lurched a little, in the way it always did when someone she didn’t recognize recognized her. She made a nervous noise or three in an attempt to kindly navigate it, a care in her handling the other woman was oddly charmed by. She wiped a tear from her eye, making the exchange easier.

“It’s fine if you don’t remember me,” she said, and meant it. “I mean, we only hung out a few times back in—”

She stopped herself. A cursory look around, voice barely above a whisper.

“...back in Team Rocket,” she finished. “I’m Wendy. We used to train together from time to time.”

All at once, Jessie’s right mind came back to her. Wendy and her had a decently friendly repertoire going, as she seemed to be one of the few people who didn’t outright fear Jessie. They talked about inconsequential things, but they talked, something Jessie hadn’t known much of in her life. A part of her was sure Wendy was using her for something, but she never got to find out if those paranoid intrusions were true. At some point, she lost focus on the woman, all her attention in the gym dedicated to breaking the treadmill’s speed limit before Cassidy did.

“Oh, yes, I remember you!” Jessie said brightly. “You know, I did find myself wondering from time to time if you’d dropped out and flew onto better things!”

Wendy waved her off, a lot less high-strung than Jessie remembered her to be. “Nah. I was there until the end.”

Amidst all this, the boys had heard Jessie’s tone—far too interested in the world around her to be worth ignoring—and had come out of the kitchen to where she was, happily chatting away with this former colleague they didn’t recognize.

“HR? We had HR?! ” Jessie was in the middle of saying, a scream-whisper as she said the next sentence. “The mafia had HR?! ”

“I’m certain Giovanni allowed it to make the experience seem even vaguely humane,” Wendy rolled her eyes. “It’s not like we were given much funding, anyway.”

“Yes, that seems to be a running theme,” James commented.

Wendy turned to face him, then Meowth and Wobbuffet, as well.

“Your whole team is here...” she noted, her smile bittersweet.

“But of course,” Jessie said, a hand on her hip. “You don’t just come out of something like that and split up.”

“Who would you have to talk to?” James added.
“Yeah, ’n’ no one can stand us much besides each uddah!”

“Wooobb~a~!”

Wendy took them in for a moment, hardly the haggard and starving fools she’d heard them to be. They were glowing and happy, wise beyond their years. She laughed again, this time into her open palm, completely amused at everything.

“It really is a marvel running into you here,” she commented. “I feel like the entire time I’ve been traveling, the universe is just kinda… shoveling exactly the people I need to see right into my hands. I mean, I was just thinking about how bad I wanted to apologize to you, and… here you all are.”

Jessie quirked an eyebrow, feeling as though she were talking to her past self. “Apologize?”

“That’s right. You don’t know. How could you know?” Wendy said through more laughter she couldn’t quell. “I take it you remember Delibird?”

“Dat pompous little piper we was always pressed ta pay?” Meowth spat, arms crossed. “Wish I could fahget it!”

“Yeah, that thing pretty much took direct orders from me,” she told them. “I wrote every invoice it handed you.”

“Wait, wait,” Jessie said, eyes flaring to life. “That means you wrote the smoothie charge!”

Wendy utterly lost it, face buried in the crook of her arm as she laughed, fist pounding on the table. “Yes!”

“What was that?!” Jessie pried. “The first time it was weird, but every time after it started to seem downright evil.”

“This is ridiculous,” Wendy said, unable to look her in the eyes. “It was me! It was me holding a petty grudge for something you did when we were in Team Rocket. Jessie, you were this tyrant to me after we stopped talking. I tried to get you thrown out so many times.”

But Giovanni wouldn’t have it, she bit her tongue before she said it, cryptic conversations flashing in her mind where he insisted he had debts to pay.

“Eh… whatever did I do that was so nefarious?” Jessie asked, a little nervous to get the answer.

“It doesn’t matter,” Wendy said, and meant it.

“Well, you seem strangely happy to see me now, for someone who was quite the anonymous thorn in my side,” the redhead smiled.

“I am. I didn’t know if you made it out alright,” she said, genuinely grateful. “But you did, and I can finally let you know I’m sorry. I was petty and vengeful and I should’ve just let it go. Life’s already so garbage when you have to join a terrorist organization to make ends meet, there’s no point in us making it harder on each other.”

The three of them let her words sink in, a sentiment they had never entirely thought of, even with all the remorse they’d felt in the years that had passed. It was true, most of the people who ended up in Team Rocket were nothing but victims themselves, looking for a way to keep on living.

“It’s been rough, apologizing to all the people whose lives I might have affected negatively,” Wendy
continued. “But somehow, even though you guys would’ve hypothetically understood better than anyone, this was the forgiveness I was most nervous about asking.”

“Time out,” James stopped her, utterly intrigued. “What have you been… doing all this time?”

Wendy caught herself, realizing when he said it how deep she’d buried the lede. She took a deep breath, sitting upright at the counter, and began.

“Right, my mistake,” she said. “Let’s start from the beginning.”

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Wendy tore through the forest, closing her eyes in an attempt to drown out the fear that was racing through every vein in her body. On the back of her lids she saw flashing lights, heard the sirens in her head no matter how far she got from them, the snarl of growlithe at her heels. She couldn’t run far enough. They’d follow her all the way to the other side of Kanto if she let them, if she didn’t get somewhere safe.

Time moved faster, the world blurred together, she lost track of who she was on pure adrenaline alone. Never the athletic type even after years of trying to force it, it was as though some otherworldly had possessed her as she swam. She shot through the river, throwing off the canines as they followed her trail, came out the other end soaked and shivering and feeling her vision fade. How long had she been awake? How long had she been running?

There was a cabin in the distance she didn’t have time to register, signs she couldn’t read in her exhausted state. Losing consciousness, she wondered if this truly was it—cold and alone, huddled and pathetic, with no achievements to her name besides a shit office job for an organization that preyed and exploited and destroyed. It was supposed to be temporary, until she found a kinder life, a better way to make a living. Now, her life was over, and a better opportunity never came.

Wendy collapsed, freshwater clinging to her bones in the still winter air. She willed herself to rip the uniform from her body as she felt herself go, desperate to die anything other than a Rocket. Her fingers stayed clutched at her chest as she attempted, unable to get much further than a feeble half-grab at the letter staining it. At her temple, the cabin door creaked open.

Ursula was curled up in the corner of the Beach Rose green room, her flawless reputation at risk as tears threatened to spill from her eyes. Plusle on one side of her, Minun on the other, their paws awkwardly trying to navigate the situation as their trainer cried over her ripped dress, the only one she had on hand.

Opportunities to win ribbons were running out, and she pledged to herself that this time she was going to leave Sinnoh a Top Coordinator, and the region had to have its stupid strict dress code, and —

She was doomed.

Ursula was half yelling, half-crying the frustrations out to her pokémon when Harley heard them in passing, her ears fine-tuned to the sound of a brat in distress. It wasn’t her brat, of course, which was why she felt inclined to keep walking. A second impulse tugged at her feet, though, one she’d been ignoring less and less as of late.

The three idiots popped into her head again, Jessie most of all. Shining in the spotlight of the contest hall, besting Top Coordinators in battle. The stories she spun about how she got there, gag-worthy if not for the uncharacteristic elegance with which she told them. Harley pursed ever-glossy lips,
swiveling back around to the green room.

She trudged up to the younger Coordinator with her trademark domineering sashay, and Ursula registered her with a muted fear in her eyes. It was to be expected, of course—once upon a time, the redhead turned one May into a teary mess, and that was an offense that any wise Coordinator would tell you got needles pointed to your throat.

“Stop blubberin’, brat,” Harley instructed, and Ursula grit her teeth hard. Her pokémon crackled with sparks, sensing the apprehension their trainer was feeling. Unbothered, Harley kept on, grabbing the girl’s torn outfit with an strange sort of gentleness as she sewed it back together, lightning-quick.

And then, like it was nothing, she stood up and walked away.

“Is…” Ursula said as she left, examining the flawless stitching. “Is this some kind of trick?”

“Hey, believe what you want, Curly-fry,” Harley said, not facing her. “Just pay it forward, or whatever the fuck.”

Moments later, the older Coordinator was on stage, shining a little brighter than she seemed to be before.

There was a newbie in Chocovine’s Pokémon Center that looked on the verge of tears as she pulled her third burnt batch of poffins out of the communal oven. Ursula had been minding her own business making hers, and she staunchly avoided eye-contact as smoke filled the room and the indigo-haired girl dissolved into hysterics.

She looked like Dawn, a fact Ursula was trying to avoid. She couldn’t any longer, pulling off to the side to confront the girl.

Awkwardly navigating a kinder tongue, Ursula placed a hand on the table beside her own, telling her that her recipe was flawless from where the other Coordinator was standing. She pulled her own bowl of batter up to demonstrate as she let the younger girl know it needed to be constantly stirred, or the batch was doomed to fail.

Bucking up a little, the newbie followed her lead, putting together her fourth. When they came out of the oven, she didn’t have to fork test them to know they were perfectly cooked, this time, and Ursula was nowhere to be found, onto other things.

It felt like a second chance, those kind if not teary blues, and her heart felt a little lighter as she left for the contest hall.

The trainer opposite of the trees they’d set up camp beside had been wrought with nerves for a few hours now, refusing to stop training and sleep for the night. The blue-haired Coordinator heard them whispering their worries to their pokémon, about how this was their last gym badge and they had to make it to the league, but something about Wallace just seemed impossible to pass. They spoke to the stars about how it seemed the gym leader was playing a different game, and it was only when the words left them that the Coordinator finally marched over to their camp, sick of unintentionally eavesdropping.
It was with a softness in her eyes that she told them Wallace was in another realm, that where Trainer and Coordinator met. Reaching out to this kindred spirit who she saw so much of herself in—frustrated and scared—she tried to channel the energy of the kind soul who had, once upon a time, taught her without judgment how to do something she felt as though she should’ve been born knowing.

With her own pokémon, she showed the trainer how a Coordinator battled. Aerial maneuvers that looked more like poetry than fighting, turning and shifting footwork that anyone would have trouble keeping up with. And, most importantly, the art of turning someone’s attack back in on themself.

Holding the badge in their hands the next day, they regretted not ever getting her name. Still, that made the moment all the more sweet as they reflected upon it with their pokémon—leaving your mark without anyone truly knowing who you are. Whatever inspired that sort of selfless kindness, it was something they knew they wanted to carry on.

The Pokémon Center was in a state of half-pandemonium when the young trainer arrived, Joy at the counter frantically making phone calls and attempting to redirect whoever she could to the next town over. Chansey ran in and out of rooms with a permanent smile stuck on her face, betrayed by the swiftness of her movements and the nervousness in her chime of a voice. They were able to pick up the context after a few minutes of standing there, worried—a late delivery had put them far behind on supplies, leaving trainers without proper care.

The younger trainer balled a fist, and their swampert gave a low hum of its name at the subtleties of their resolve. Joy collapsed in an exasperated pile on the center floor, and it was in that exact moment that they emptied the contents of their massive bag onto the tray adjacent, a bright grin tugging at their mouth.

Joy got up from her hushed hysterics, inquiring nervously at the child. They simply shrugged their shoulders at her, informed her that while it was old fashioned, it could hopefully tide them over for a while. It was an utter wellspring, Joy noted, and the trainer commented that perhaps it was a sort of fate that a child meticulous enough to pick and re-plant every berry they encountered wandered into her pokémon center on that exact day.

She tried to protest as they trudged up to the open room, insisting they at least take some of the berries for themself. They smiled and waved her off, letting her know they were homebound anyway, hardly in need of them any longer.

The delivery arrived mere hours later, and every pokémon in the center was happy and healthy long before.

Jenny called Oldale’s Joy as a last resort, never expecting even the sweetest of angels in white to honour such a request. But with how overworked the growlithe were tracking down what was left of Team Rocket, every center within Kanto and Johto was low on specialty items, leaving her own growlithe in need. She’d insisted to Joy that she’d make the ferry trip herself, she just needed this very specific ointment for fire-types that had never been in such high demand before, and this was her last hope, and—

Joy cut her off before she could finish, sounding as though she were put on this earth to do this one thing and one thing alone. She’d make the trip to Kanto, she’d said, she’d march right up to Viridian
City PD and shove the medicine in Jenny’s face with her own two hands, mark her words.

Now, the two of them were sitting by the glow of the fire as Growlithe slept peacefully beside it, still as a rock and perfectly content. Joy refused to say outright what had possessed her to go so above and beyond for this one single deed, simply told the other woman that she knew what it was like to be in a pinch and feeling lost and powerless while the creatures in your care were in pain, wondering why you couldn’t help them. More than that, Joy said, she knew the relief of someone pulling through for you when you were becoming lost in that feeling, and she had wanted to pass it forward to someone she knew needed it.

The boy was a repeat offender, one who Jenny had a decently long history with, settling him down from public disturbances he defended on the basis of his Samurai Honor. For the most part, he had responded to her “flagrant disrespect” by staying hidden away in his cabin in the forest, she imagined probably screaming at the beedrill for buzzing off-key.

So when she saw him tear through the streets that day, she kicked up her motorcycle almost on instinct, intent to get a head start on whatever business he had there today. It wasn’t until the boy looked up at her with his injured pinsir in his arms and tears staining his eyes that she remembered what he really was—not a delinquent, but a child.

Desperate and powerless, his eyes fell into despair when he saw it was her. She revved her engine, gave him a smile that she hoped would make Joy proud, and the two of them sped off to the Pokémon Center.

In record time, of course, and maybe a few miles over the speed limit.

Samurai threw his cabin door open, taking in the sight of the green-haired woman as she lay unconscious on his step. He observed the way her breath still rose and fell in her chest, registered the letter painted across it long after. Thought of the men and women and folks who knew better with the same ugly R like warpaint at their breast, how they’d laughed as they caged his pokémon up and only stopped when he’d blasted them to nothing. Thought of Jenny’s utter disdain for him, and how his Pinsir might be gone without her.

He heaved Wendy over his shoulders and carried her inside.

“When I asked him why he helped me, he had a lot to say,” Wendy told them. “About the cruelty our kind had dealt to him and his pokémon, about how his first instinct was to throw me back in the river and let me drown.”

“Charmer,” Jessie commented.

“It was deserved,” she continued, and the lot of them gave a guilty nod in sync.

“So?” James said. “Obviously, he didn’t.”

“He didn’t,” Wendy affirmed. “He professed his hatred for me and handed me a cup of the most divine tea I’d ever tasted. And he said that the selfless kindness of someone before had inspired him in the moment to make a snap judgment and pay it forward. That when he asked her the same question, she gave him the same answer.”
The former Rockets peered into their colleague, gripped with something they couldn’t identify.

“It forced me to think. About how every good deed ripples, and how easily a chain reaction can start,” Wendy said. “Suddenly, I didn’t want to give up any longer. I thought… maybe… if I could undo a couple bad deeds, maybe if I worked hard enough, I’d eventually put more good into the world than bad.”

The woman’s sentence lingered in the air, wafting through their minds like a heady perfume, comfortable and soothing. The silence that followed could only be described as beautiful, significant, one that they’d remember long into the years that passed. Those rare moments where one realizes, all at once, that they’re living through a rare moment.

A feeling passed over the quartet, then—synchronized as always, awash and entire. Like when you duck undercover, and the thundering patter of rain that was so deafening before turns to a soporific sort of lull. Like when you’re coming home after a long trip, and the signs begin to make sense again, recognizable landmarks coming into view. An unshakable sense of relief and calm, back in a place so safe and familiar.

Jessie plopped a strawberry smoothie down on the table in front of Wendy, touching it to the countertop with a tenderness nearly unheard of coming from her. Wendy looked to the drink, then back up at Jessie, a sentimental twinge bursting in her auburn eyes. Begging the cosmos to borrow some of Delia’s maternal tenderness, the redhead placed her hands softly on top of Wendy’s, infusing her words with the voices of all the forgiving souls that brought her here, to a home she never knew existed.

“Where are you staying tonight, old friend?”

Peering into the woman she spent years of her life trying to ruin, Wendy felt a pang in her heart she was certain she’d have the words for, some beautiful day. Until then, she simply smiled up at Jessie, hoping the gratitude that overflowed deep within her would show in the gesture as it tugged irresistibly at her face.

It was the smile of someone who had known a more painful world, then a less painful world, a world that could be described even through its shortcomings as kind. A world where good and bad were cosmic quantifiers one need not trouble themselves with, lest they wrapped around one’s heart like shackles rather than wings. A world that, at its core, bore but one single truth to follow, where all lives touched other lives to create something anew and alive.

Outside the diner, the sun was shining white.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for coming along on this journey with me. when i first set out to write DTE in 2017, i did it on the tail end of the worst year of my life. i was a broken person who had just watched all her prospects shatter in front of her, and i was feeling about as lost and directionless as our protagonists were in chapter 1. in a way, writing this story was my hope for a white tomorrow, too, and over the course of the two years ven and i
I have spent writing it, I've gotten closer and closer, and I feel like I've grown alongside them.

DTE was created because of all I was frustrated with not seeing. I was frustrated with the lack of queer content, frustrated with the lack of neurodivergent content, I wanted to explore these characters as what I always saw them as—like me. Like me and so many others. And what I talked about less here was that while a lot of this story was mine and Ven's ideas, ones we crafted on our own, a lot of it also happened, a lot of it I remember vividly. If you kin parse my jist, of course. I was writing a life I knew, and along the way, I found some of the people I missed from it. I haven't found all of them, though, so if this story resonated with you in a way deeper than you're used to, look me up.

Sentimental shit aside, I don't think I would've finished DTE without the feedback I received here. Like I said, I wrote this story because I was, frankly, PISSED OFF at it living in my head for so long. I wanted it to exist outside, and I couldn't have done that without the incredible enthusiasm of my best friend in the world to help me write it, or the validation I received in every single review and comment I got. In moments where I felt discouraged and upset and like I couldn't do it, I re-read every review, constantly. I would memorize them and let them drive me forward, and now we're here.

This chapter took me a long time, because the holidays killed me and Ven both, and then Kingdom Hearts 3 killed me and Ven both, and then I agonized for so long about how much time had passed, I fell into kind of a depression wondering if anyone still even cared. But it's here now, and I hope you all still love this story as much as he and I do. I will never, ever forget this experience. I'm forever grateful that the stars aligned for it to happen.

There are some DTE related things I wanna do. Ven and I have a half-finished 8tracks mix we're gonna publish soon after, and I'll probably be drawing fanart until I die. I might write oneshots in the future based in this universe, too, wrap them all up in a nice little group and label them DTEverse. We'll see. Keep your eyes peeled ;v;

I'm Musashi @ Tumblr, and I always wanna talk. About Pokemon, mostly, but about anything, really. Thank you all for this incredible experience.

As always, I will do my best!

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https://8tracks.com/madiyasha/anew-and-alive

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!